

Dutch MEP: We have to close the gap between rural and urban areas

By [Kira Taylor](#) | [EURACTIV.com](#)

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Jan Huitema at European Parliament plenary session joint debate on the common agricultural policy [[Benoit Bourgeois / European Parliament](#)]

This article is part of our special report [Rural innovation](#).

Innovation in agriculture and beyond is vital to close the widening gap that leads to polarisation and tension between rural and urban areas, says Jan Huitema MEP. Rural development plans must be made with the local community and not just in Brussels offices, he argues.

Jan Huitema is a Dutch MEP with the centrist Renew Europe political group in the European Parliament. He is a member of the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety and Delegation for relations with the United States. He spoke with EURACTIV's Kira Taylor.

What are the key issues that need to be addressed in rural areas at the moment?

There is a gap between urban regions and rural regions. We have to close that. We need to because otherwise, and you see it already a little bit, there will be polarisation, some tension, and some misunderstanding.

Closing the gap is the overall goal. How to do that? First of all, it's good to have good infrastructure in a rural area and also to have some sort of an investment climate that people can start their business or that jobs are being created.

The European Union is [working on] broadband internet. That's one of the key issues that should be solved in these modern times and it's essential for a good infrastructure and a good investment climate.

How have the issues in rural areas been added to by climate change?

They see the effects of climate change. For example, farmers have big problems with drought. It has an effect on the whole rural area, a lot of jobs are directly or indirectly connected to agriculture. I think they feel the urgency to do something about it.

However, how to do it? This is something for political debate, to get the support from rural areas that we have to invest in this and it will cost money.

How can regions, which are dependent on agriculture, diversify and be able to make a living in the 21st century?

There are a lot of challenges, but also opportunities. In the European Union, we are one of the most innovative and knowledge-based agriculture sectors in the world. If there is one continent that can try to create a new solution to combat climate change, I think it's the European agricultural sector.

Do you think that some rural communities will need to move away from agriculture and into, say, renewable energies?

Sure. The rural area is not only about producing food. It has bioenergy energy production and a recreational role for a lot of people, so it's a multifunctional community. The production of sustainable and renewable energy is one of these.

The European Union has schemes like just transition and regional funds. What more do you believe is needed to support these rural areas?

There should be a clear link between actions that deliver on the reduction of CO2 emissions and some sort of payment or reward. You have a very clear one, the European emissions trading system. In rural areas, it could also be very interesting, for example, if you could use the soil as a carbon storage vehicle and that, for every tonne of carbon you store in the soil, you can get a certificate for it and increase the organic matter in the soil.

Some regions in the European Union, for example Austria, are doing that. I see clear benefits and a clear win: not only for climate, but also for example, for the farmer and the community. With healthier soil, you have better production, less pressure from the seasons and better water capacity.

Do you think more money needs to be made available from the EU in order to help projects like those?

A lot of public money is available. It's more about the rules and how to do it. And legislation that is fit for purpose, practical and workable in the field. It is sometimes a problem that plans are made in offices in Brussels, but theory and practice are sometimes different.

Enforcement is an issue across a lot of different sectors. What do you think needs to be brought in to support and enforce these policies?

The new Common Agricultural Policy is an excellent example. Of course, it's not decided yet, but the Commission proposed that greening measures should be transformed in eco-schemes. Those schemes will no longer be monitored by an administration-based approach, but a result-oriented approach.

It's no longer that Brussels states exactly what kind of measures should be implemented and those measures are the same throughout the whole European Union, so you get a one size fits nobody. Now with indicators, the European Union is measuring what are the actual results on biodiversity, on climate change, on animal welfare, on pollution.

Looking at rural communities, how can they compete with cities for keeping young people. Young people go to university, they like the idea of a big city, what can a rural place offer them?

You have to make it sexy a little bit, no? I think innovation plays a role there.

I see more and more that people are very much interested in food production and climate change. And a big chunk of really making a difference is in rural areas and not in the city. Therefore, it's so important that you have a good infrastructure in rural areas that people from universities can work and live in rural communities.

Maybe also with COVID, people are thinking, 'Okay, yeah, my life is tedious now with the lockdown and not so nice anymore. I would like to have a garden and space'.

You talk about infrastructure. How can you tackle the remoteness of these places, and bringing in the transport, digital and energy infrastructure, which is presumably going to cost a lot of money to introduce?

It also has opportunities and rewards, not only economically, but also ecologically. We really have to invest in this and don't look only to the short term, but also to the long term.

More and more it's not only the hard transport by road or by rail, or by air, but it's much more by internet. I don't know if that has a big impact on environment. I think on the contrary, if you go forward with those innovations, it can reduce the environmental impact tremendously.

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