

# Strengthening access to funding for migrant and refugee integration and inclusion in rural areas

December 2022

This Share policy brief is the result of the collaboration between the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) Regional Office for the European Economic Area, the European Union and NATO, and the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) Europe/the Share Network within the framework of the Share SIRA project. In this brief, we look at available funding mechanisms to support the implementation of actions facilitating inclusion and social cohesion in rural areas.

This Share policy brief:

- Reflects the discussions, reflections and resources shared at the third meeting of the [Share SIRA Expert Group on Orientation and Integration in Rural Areas](#) held on 29 March 2022, and refers to the results of the Share Network online survey on access to EU funds for integration actions in rural areas conducted in February 2022;
- Provides an overview of EU funding instruments relevant for the integration and inclusion of migrants and refugees in rural areas;
- Explores some prevalent challenges for local actors to access available EU funding mechanisms; and
- Identifies recommendations to improve access to EU funding for integration in rural areas.

---

## What is the Share SIRA project?

The project [Share SIRA: Strengthening and Expanding Social Orientation & Integration for Newcomers in Rural Areas](#) is a two-year project co-funded by the European Union's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), led by ICMC Europe in partnership with IOM, the Development Agency of Karditsa, Fundación Cepaim, and Entraide Pierre Valdo. The project is implemented in ten rural areas across France, Greece, Poland and Spain, and builds innovative and effective approaches to engaging local communities in actions to improve the social orientation of newcomers in rural territories across Europe. It creates positive early integration outcomes, engages new stakeholders, pilots new approaches and builds positive relationships, social networks and mutual understanding between newcomers and local community members.

The project has three main objectives:

1. **Create and facilitate regional multi-stakeholder cooperation platforms** to assess, implement and strengthen inclusive territorial approaches for integration.
2. **Pilot and evaluate new approaches** to support the social orientation of newly arrived migrants and refugees, involving local communities and the participation of newcomers.
3. Facilitate the **exchange of best practices on integration** among local, regional, national and European stakeholders through transnational exchange, capacity-building, and the production of tools and resources.

## Introduction

Migration has become an increasingly important feature of European societies. Although urban centres tend to host large shares of migrants and refugees<sup>1</sup>, many rural territories also welcome newcomers and provide them critical support and services enabling their participation. Rural areas play an important role from the early reception of migrants and refugees to the provision of essential services such as housing, health care, childcare and education, to the development of local solutions and innovative integration practices.

Many European Union (EU) rural areas face structural challenges, including population ageing, depopulation, labour force shrinking, poverty, social exclusion, and limited growth, productivity, connectivity, and digitalization<sup>2</sup>. For many of these territories, migration has become an opportunity, in some cases contributing to reversing negative demographic trends, ensuring the maintenance of service provision, and fostering local economic development<sup>3</sup>. Yet, external shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the welcoming of persons fleeing Ukraine have created additional pressure for rural areas to respond to emerging integration needs, while building resilience for the future<sup>4</sup>.

The role of rural territories in promoting inclusion and social cohesion has been recognized in the [EU Action Plan for Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027](#), which highlights the importance of multi-stakeholder and multilevel governance approaches to integration. Moreover, the [Long-term Vision for the EU's rural areas](#) places rural areas' development at the core of the EU's future prosperity. Nevertheless, many rural territories require resources and support to address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of migrants and refugees and promote and enhance these groups' capabilities while ensuring equal opportunities for all.

Integration is a multidimensional, multidirectional, context-specific process, that concerns the whole of society. For some rural territories accessing critical funding and capacity building opportunities to implement place-based approaches, develop forward looking policies, and enhance structured multistakeholder local integration systems remains challenging. In this context, the [Share SIRA project](#), has facilitated regional multistakeholder platforms, piloted innovative evidence-based approaches, and supported transnational exchange, capacity-building, and the development of tools and resources to foster integration and social cohesion in rural areas.

As part of such tools, this briefing aims at providing **an overview of existing EU funding mechanisms that can be further leveraged to support rural territories' integration efforts**. Following a brief overview of the EU policy and funding instruments related to integration, the **briefing explores some challenges for rural territories to access integration funding and provides recommendations to enhance EU rural territories' position as critical integration stakeholders**.

## I. EU policy and funding opportunities for integration in rural areas

### *Integration in rural areas: policy considerations*

European societies have become increasingly diverse, welcoming first-, second- and third-generation migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, migrant workers and their family members, and international students. Migrants contribute to the revitalization of rural areas bringing knowledge and skills, supporting the preservation of traditional knowledge and practices, sometimes contributing to reversing negative socioeconomic trends, including depopulation and

---

<sup>1</sup> In the European Union migrants represent only 5.5 percent of the total population living in rural areas, compared to 14.5 percent living in cities, and 10.2 per cent living in towns. Italy and Spain have the largest absolute populations of migrants living in rural areas. Natale, F., Kalantaryan, S., Scipioni, M., Alessandrini, A. and Pasa, A. 2019. [Migration in EU Rural Areas](#). Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union doi:10.2760/544298 (online), JRC116919.

<sup>2</sup> Kab S., Georgieva N. and Fonseca L., Research for REGI Committee, [EU Cohesion Policy in non-urban areas](#), European Parliament, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, Brussels.

<sup>3</sup> Gruber, M., J. Pöcher, K. Zupan eds. 2022. Enhancing migrants' social and economic inclusion and local development in European rural and mountain areas. [Booklet with MATILDE policy recommendations](#). Villach: MATILDE.

<sup>4</sup> OECD, 2020. "[Policy implications of Coronavirus crisis for rural development](#)." Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19), 16 June, accessed 29.12.2022. European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). [Resolution. The war in Ukraine and its economic, social and environmental impact](#). Rapporteurs: Stefano Mallia, Oliver Röpke, Séamus Boland, adopted 24/03/2022.

demographic decline, boosting productivity, and ensuring the maintenance of service provision<sup>5</sup>. However, migration's positive impacts are largely dependent on the existence of enabling conditions for migrants to participate in and contribute to society. While many rural territories have promoted measures to foster such conditions, their scope and outcomes are often conditioned by political will, shifting policy priorities, and the availability of resources (material, human, financial). More recently, rural territories have been confronted with increasing pressure to provide inclusive services and build resilience, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which heightened the vulnerabilities migrants are exposed to, and following the arrival of persons fleeing Ukraine in rural territories as well.

There is scope to further seize the opportunities that migration can bring to the sustainable development of rural territories. As highlighted during the 20<sup>th</sup> EU Regions Weeks in October 2022, the **synergies between existing policy frameworks on inclusion and integration and rural development could be further leveraged**<sup>6</sup>.

Recognizing the positive contributions of migration, the European Commission's [Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027](#) outlines a holistic approach that clearly recognizes the role that local and regional authorities play in fostering integration and social cohesion. In particular, the Action Plan underlines the importance of multi-stakeholder partnerships across all sectors and levels of governance, including the partnership with rural regions embedded in the Long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas. The Action Plan also recognizes that integration and inclusion are society-wide efforts, and that these processes touch upon key sectors such as education and training, employment, health care and housing. The Commission's holistic approach to integration and inclusion is further reflected in the scope of the Action Plan, which targets newcomers as well as EU citizens with a migratory background. The Plan also emphasizes that while integration is often centrally planned, the implementation of integration measures by local and regional authorities, including rural areas, is critical and should involve civil society and migrants themselves.

The implementation of the Action Plan envisages stronger synergies across different **EU funding instruments**<sup>7</sup>: the Asylum Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), the European Regional Development Fund, and other instruments, such as Erasmus+, the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), InvestEU, the Technical Support Instrument (TSI), and the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme. Furthermore, the Action Plan promotes the expansion of access to targeted funding, capacity building, and enhanced dialogue with key integration stakeholders, as well as the engagement with local and regional authorities to facilitate the inclusion of migrants in rural areas<sup>8</sup>.

Alongside the Action Plan for Integration and Inclusion, the [Long Term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas](#) sets out a vision for rural areas in 2040, considering the views of rural communities. It identifies key priorities for "*stronger, connected, more resilient and prosperous rural areas*"<sup>9</sup>, including a Rural Action Plan and a Rural Pact to achieve its objectives. Importantly, the Vision highlights migrants' participation as a factor contributing to the long-term prosperity of rural areas. It also states the need to ensure fair green and digital transitions that consider the needs of disadvantaged groups, including persons with a migratory background. Moreover, the Vision recognizes the need to provide equal opportunities for all in terms of access to training, education and skills upgrading, good quality jobs and employment. The Vision further calls on enhancing participation in decision making at national, regional and local levels to strengthen social resilience<sup>10</sup>, in line with the broader inclusion and integration priorities.

In addition, the [Rural Pact](#) facilitates collaboration between public authorities, civil society, businesses, universities and citizens concerned with rural territorial development at European, national, regional and local levels to support the

---

<sup>5</sup> Gruber, M., J. Pöcher, K. Zupan eds. 2022, op cit.

<sup>6</sup> For more information visit: European Commission [20th EU Regions Week: Exploring partnerships on the inclusion and integration of migrants and refugees in rural areas | European Website on Integration \(europa.eu\)](#) accessed on 09.11.22.

<sup>7</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, [Toolkit on the use of EU funds for the integration of people with a migrant background](#), Publications Office, 2021, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2776/319860>

<sup>8</sup> COM(2020) 758 final, op cit.

<sup>9</sup> The four areas of action identified include "Stronger rural areas", "connected rural areas", "more resilient rural areas that foster well-being", and "prosperous rural areas." For more information visit: [Long-term vision for rural areas: for stronger, connected, resilient, prosperous EU rural areas](#) accessed on 21.09.22.

<sup>10</sup> European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, [A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas – Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040](#), COM(2021) 345 final, 30 June 2021.

realization of the Long Term Vision for the EU's rural areas. At the Rural Pact conference held on 15-16 June 2022, participants representing European, national and regional policy makers, local authorities and social and economic actors identified more than 40 commitments to address the key priorities of rural communities and areas<sup>11</sup>. The Rural Pact provides a framework for the delivery of the common objectives of the Vision, including the aspiration that by 2040 rural communities become *"inclusive communities of intergenerational solidarity, equity and renewal, open to newcomers and promoting equal opportunities for all"*<sup>12</sup>. Furthermore, the European Commission will continue strengthening stakeholders' capacity to access EU funding, both within and beyond the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Cohesion Policy<sup>13</sup>, and will closely monitor the use of EU funds to support the development of rural areas between 2023 and 2027<sup>14</sup>.

As such, synergies and complementarities across different policy frameworks are being strengthened which will contribute to supporting both integration and rural development priorities.

The following section describes some of the main EU funding instruments supporting integration and inclusion priorities, as well as rural development measures. Altogether, these instruments are likely to have positive impacts for rural communities, including locals and migrants. This policy brief does not aim at providing an exhaustive description of such funding mechanisms, but at highlighting the opportunities to leverage on different resources to further support migrants' and refugees' integration and inclusion and social cohesion in rural territories.

### ***Integration in rural areas: funding opportunities***

The Multiannual Financial framework (MFF) defines the implementation of the European Union's budget over seven-year periods. The [2021-2027 MFF](#) supports the realization of the priorities set out in the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027, namely through the Asylum Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), and other instruments such as the Erasmus+ and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). These instruments are briefly introduced in the textboxes that follow.

The [Common Provisions Regulation \(CPR\) 2021-2027](#) set out a harmonized approach to the implementation of the Union Funds strengthening their complementarity. **Article 8** of the CPR explicitly includes the **"partnership principle"** for the programming and implementation of Cohesion Policy and rural development. This principle requires Member States to consult with local and regional authorities, economic partners and civil society in all stages of the programming process -namely design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation- of funds that are under shared management by the European commission and Member States, such as AMIF, ESF+, ERDF, and EAFRD<sup>15</sup>. The partnership principle is also promoted through a multi-level governance approach to integration initiatives.

**AMIF** aims to strengthen the common European asylum policy, focusing on legal migration that responds to the EU Member States' socioeconomic needs, and supporting the early phases of third-country nationals' integration. The largest share of funds is allocated to national programmes; funding can also be allocated to local and regional authorities implementing integration measures.

---

<sup>11</sup> The commitments relate mainly to improved infrastructure, connectivity and service provision.

<sup>12</sup> COM(2021) 345 final, op cit., p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> European Commission, *A vision for rural areas towards 2040*, [Long-term vision for rural areas \(europa.eu\)](#), accessed on 07.11.22.

<sup>14</sup> European Commission, [Rural Pact: European momentum to support the EU's rural areas](#), 17.06.22, accessed on 07.11.22.

<sup>15</sup> EU funding is managed through direct management by the Commission, indirect management delegated to external entities including international organizations, decentralized EU agencies or public-private partnerships, and shared management by the Commission and Member States. Most funding falls under shared management and supports the priorities identified in national programmes under the different EU funds.

## Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF)

**Budget:** 9.88 billion euros.

**Integration-related objectives:** To support legal migration to the Member States and contribute to the integration of third-country nationals.

**Relevant actions:**

- Development and implementation of policies promoting *legal migration* (e.g., mobility schemes, awareness raising of legal migration avenues);
- Integration measures for third-country nationals and *early integration programmes* with a focus on education, language, and other training (e.g., civic orientation, professional guidance);
- *Infrastructure for the reception* of third country nationals.

**Beneficiaries:** State and federal authorities, local public bodies, non-governmental organizations, humanitarian organizations, private and public law companies, education and research organizations.

**Management mode:** Direct, indirect, and shared management. At least **five percent** of the direct managed thematic facility are **earmarked for local and regional integration activities**.

For more information on the AMIF visit the following [website](#).

The **European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)** is dedicated to financing medium- and long-term integration initiatives, supporting the implementation of the [European Pillar for Social Rights](#) through actions in the areas of employment, education and skills and social inclusion.

## European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)

**Budget:** 99.3 billion euros.

**Integration-related objectives:** To contribute to the EU's employment, social, education and skill policies, including structural reforms in these areas.

**Relevant actions:**

- *Social inclusion:* Socio-economic integration of third-country nationals and marginalized communities, equal access to quality services and modernizing social protection systems, social integration of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion, addressing material deprivation.
- *Education and skills:* better education and training systems at all levels; equal access to quality education and training; upskilling, reskilling, and lifelong learning for all.
- *Employment:* access to quality employment for all, including youth employment; gender-balanced labour market participation; adaptation of workers, enterprises, and entrepreneurs to change.

**Beneficiaries:** EU public and private organizations, non-governmental organizations, EU citizens, young people and children, people from vulnerable groups, etc.

**Management mode:** Shared and indirect management. Under the ESF+, EU Member States are required to allocate at least **25 percent** of their resources to promoting **social inclusion**.

For more information on the ESF+ visit the following [website](#).

**Erasmus+** is the EU programme for education, training, youth and sport. It supports the objectives of the European Education Area, the [Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027](#), the [EU Youth Strategy](#), and the [EU Work Plan for Sport \(2021-24\)](#). The programme also emphasizes the importance of reaching out to migrants, as well as EU citizens living in remote areas or facing socio-economic difficulties.

## Erasmus+

**Budget:** 26.2 billion euros.

**Integration-related objectives:** promote learning mobility of individuals and groups; promote non-formal and informal learning mobility and active participation among young people; promote learning mobility of sport staff.

**Inclusion and diversity-sensitive approaches** are fundamental to the design of projects and activities. The Programme counts on a [Framework on inclusion measures](#), and an [Inclusion and Diversity Strategy](#) covering all programme fields, which aim at facilitating *access to funding for a wider range of organisations*, and reaching out to more participants with fewer opportunities.

The Erasmus+ programme further supports the *recognition of competences, skills and qualifications*, with a view to enhancing the comparability and portability of skills, competences and qualifications across borders.

**Relevant actions:**

- Mobility projects for learners and staff in *higher education, vocational education and training (VET)*, school education, adult education and youth;
- *Youth participation*, virtual exchanges in higher education and youth;
- Partnerships for Cooperation, Partnerships for Excellence, Partnerships for Innovation;
- Capacity building in the field of higher education, vocational education and training, youth and sport, among others.

**Beneficiaries:** Students, researchers, and academics, universities and other organizations working in the field of higher education in the EU.

**Management mode:** Direct and indirect management.

For more information on the Erasmus+ visit the following [website](#) and the [Erasmus+ Programme Guide](#)

Some funding instruments dedicated to support rural development, while not explicitly addressing migration issues, may contribute to fostering inclusion in territorial approaches. These instruments include the **European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development** and the **European Regional Development Fund**.

The **European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)** supports the implementation of the [Common Agricultural Policy](#) (CAP) by strengthening rural economies and communities, especially remote and sparsely populated rural areas. The EAFRD has also supported actions in favour of migrants' and refugees' integration. Such actions focus on fostering mutual awareness and understanding between newcomers and host communities, improving migrants' and refugees' skills development and labour market integration, and strengthening local coordination mechanisms for integration<sup>16</sup>.

## European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)

**Budget:** 95.51 billion euros.

**Integration-related objectives:** To support the transition towards a fully sustainable agricultural sector and the development of vibrant rural areas.

**Relevant actions:** The EAFRD finances the Common Agricultural Policy's (CAP) objectives on rural development, including: improving agricultural competitiveness, encouraging the sustainable management of natural resources and climate action, and achieving a balanced socioeconomic development of rural areas including through employment creation.

The EAFRD can support community-led local development via the *LEADER method*, where Local Action Groups (LAGs) are involved in decision-making concerning local development projects. Although LEADER is an approach embedded in the EAFRD, a single action carried out by a LAG can now be supported under several EU Funds (ESF+ and ERDF) simultaneously through the concept of multi-funded Community-Led Local Development (CLLD).

**Beneficiaries:** EU farmers and rural stakeholders.

**Management mode:** Shared management.

For more information on the EAFRD visit the following [website](#).

<sup>16</sup> Bray E., Eldridge, J., Raath, L., Papakonstantinou, A., Angiolini, S., Hydén, J., Thorpe, E., Ledan, A., 2016, [The European Agricultural Fund for rural Development. Migrant and refugee integration](#), European Network for Rural Development, accessed on 07.11.22.

The **European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)** supports effective and inclusive employment, education, skills development, social inclusion, and equal access to healthcare through dedicated national or regional programmes. It aims at reducing economic, social, and territorial disparities across Europe's regions.

### European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)

**Budget:** 226.05 billion euros.

**Integration-related objectives:** To strengthen economic, social and territorial cohesion in the European Union by reducing economic, social and territorial disparities between its regions, and supporting the full integration of less-developed regions within the EU's internal market.

**Relevant actions:**

- Promoting innovation and research, the digital transition, small and medium-size enterprises, the environment, and the net-zero-carbon economy.
- Addressing economic, environmental, and social challenges in urban areas, with a special focus on sustainable urban development.
- Fostering cooperation between regions among different Member States.

**Relevant to actions:** Development of infrastructure, equipment, and access to services in education, employment, housing, social, health and childcare.

**Beneficiaries:** Regional public and private entities, with special attention to disadvantaged regions and areas, notably rural areas and areas suffering from natural or demographic challenges and outermost regions; and indirectly, EU citizens, public or private organizations, and businesses.

**Management mode:** Shared management.

For more information the ERDF visit the following [website](#).

Rural territories have access to these funding instruments to support their efforts in the field of integration. However, many rural territories face challenges in accessing funding. Also, the implementation of the *partnership principle* is yet to be systematically applied to enable rural territories' participation in the programming of integration funds. The European Commission has thus implemented measures to raise awareness of potential beneficiaries about funding opportunities and to provide further guidance on EU funds for integration (e.g. through the publication of a [Toolkit on the Use of EU Funds for the Integration of People with a Migrant Background](#)).

It is worth highlighting that European Commission has also taken immediate action to **mobilize financial support** to Member States, including local territories, hosting those fleeing **Ukraine**. In 2022, the European Commission adopted a series of measures, namely the [Cohesion's Action for Refugees in Europe](#) (CARE) and the [FAST \(Flexible Assistance for Territories\)-CARE](#), which introduced flexibility in the Cohesion Policy to support Member States and regions to provide emergency support, allowing the **reallocation of the remaining 2014-2020 Cohesion Policy funds to support people fleeing Ukraine**. These measures complement the support already provided via the AMIF and other EU funding sources. For instance, the implementation deadline for the previous AMIF 2014-2020 funds was extended by one year, allowing for the repurposing of unspent earmarked funds. Overall, the Cohesion Policy has supported Member States with food, basic material assistance, accommodation, transport, healthcare, information, translation services, or training for displaced people. Also, the Cohesion Policy allows the possibility of full co-financing to address migratory challenges, also for 2021-2027 programmes when measures aim at promoting the socio-economic integration of third country nationals<sup>17</sup>. The FAST-CARE, in addition to providing full **flexibility in the implementation of all Cohesion funds**, as well as flexibility in the implementation of projects delayed by shortage of raw materials and workforce, provides pre-financing opportunities and foresees that **30 percent of funding is granted to local authorities and civil society organisations**<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> For more information visit: European Commission, EU regional and urban development, "[Cohesion policy is a key pillar supporting regions to tackle the consequences of the war in Ukraine](#)", 14 December 2022, accessed 12.02.2023.

<sup>18</sup> European Commission, EU regional and urban development, "[FAST-CARE enters into force tomorrow: new flexibility in using Cohesion Policy funding](#)", 25 October 2022, accessed 12.02.2023.

## II. Challenges in accessing funding for integration in rural areas

For some rural territories it is critical to strengthen their capacity to implement place-based approaches and enhance local multi-stakeholder partnerships for integration. The Share SIRA project has mapped **current gaps, needs and potential solutions** in access to funding for integration in rural areas through an **online survey** conducted in February 2022. The survey was disseminated via the [Share Network](#) and its partners, targeting local and regional actors. The survey collected the insights of **77 respondents** from **nine countries** (Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom). Half of the respondents worked for civil society organizations (including rural development associations), while one in three respondents worked for local authorities, and some for regional authorities.

The results of the Share Network survey were presented and informed discussions at the third Share SIRA [Expert Group Meeting on EU funding for integration in rural areas](#) held on 29 March 2022, which gathered **37 experts** from a diverse range of organizations and institutions across the EU<sup>19</sup>. The results of the survey revealed that the main source of funding for local integration initiatives reported by respondents is the State. EU funds remain an important source of funding: the EU was identified as the most important source of funding by 21 respondents. The survey also showed that private sources of funding (foundations, businesses, crowdsourcing) are less mobilised for integration actions in rural areas compared to other sources of funding. The survey also confirmed the **important role of EU funding**, as well as the need for increased EU funding for integration in rural areas. Only 10 per cent of the respondents reported to count on sufficient alternative sources of funding (national, regional, local) to EU funds.

Moreover, the survey inquired into respondents' **knowledge and awareness of EU funds** and their perceived accessibility by integration stakeholders in rural areas. The ESF+ was the best-known funding instrument (61% of respondents declared to be familiar with it), followed by AMIF (44%). The ERDF (35%), and EARDF (44%), respectively, were only known to a third of the respondents. About a fifth of respondents (17) were aware of other EU and non-EU relevant funding instruments available at national, or local level to support newcomers' integration in rural areas<sup>20</sup>. Finally, only half of the respondents had previously accessed or applied to EU funds, namely AMIF.

Both the survey and the insights gathered at the Expert Group Meeting highlighted that local actors in rural areas face a **number of challenges** in accessing available EU funds for integration. **Bureaucratic obstacles** were amongst the most important barriers to accessing EU funds for half of the respondents. In particular, the participants pointed to the complexity of EU funding instruments and the diversity of requirements and contractual conditions, cumbersome and long application procedures. This challenge is compounded by the **limited capacity** of local civil society organisations and practitioners in rural areas to apply for EU funds due to insufficient human resources and lack of technical expertise. Specific and tailored capacity building in proposal design, grant management and reporting was identified as crucial.

**The low flexibility of EU funding programmes** was also identified as a major obstacle to access funding by practitioners. Survey respondents pointed to difficulties linked to the fragmentation of funding programmes, the narrow definition of target groups and timeframes, which are not always compatible with the reality of project implementation on the ground. Another common challenge identified concerned the **lack of clear information flows** on EU funding programmes available at both EU and national level (affecting at least a quarter of the respondents). Finally, **co-financing requirements** were also perceived as a constraint as some respondents reported to have insufficient alternative sources of funding (at national, regional, local, and private).

Participants in the **Expert Group on Orientation and Integration in Rural Areas** further called for an enhanced involvement of local and regional authorities in programming, in line with the *partnership principle*, and for strengthened linkages and dialogue between managing authorities (at regional, national and EU level) and potential beneficiaries. This was especially important for smaller organizations which do not always perceive themselves as being

<sup>19</sup> More information about the results can be found in the [report](#) of the meeting.

<sup>20</sup> Other instruments mentioned by respondents included Erasmus+; EaSi; DIGITAL Europe (2021-2027); URBACT or Urban Innovative Actions (programmes for sustainable urban development under EARDF and ERDF respectively); Council of Europe Development Bank; French Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Inclusion; Banque des territoires; BAMF; Spanish Ministry of Social Inclusion and Social Security; Ciudadanos, Igualdad Derechos y Valores.



sufficiently informed or consulted. Indeed, participants highlighted the added value that more formal consultation processes launched by managing authorities across European countries could bring, if such consultations deliberately promote rural territories' participation. Finally, the participants of the Expert Group Meeting underlined the importance of the complementarity between different funds, as well as the need to further enhance the capacity of regional and local rural authorities to design or co-create integration projects that also benefit local development. Finally, participants in the Expert Group meeting stressed that **monitoring and evaluation**, as well as **systematic data collection and dissemination** on existing projects, should be ensured in order to design better funding programmes and integration interventions.

### III. The way forward: considerations for enhancing access to funding to foster integration and inclusion in rural areas

The role of rural territories in fostering migrants' and refugees' integration is widely recognized, as is the need to enhance the implementation of the *partnership principle* to enable the participation of local stakeholders at all stages of the planning, implementation, and monitoring of integration initiatives. Building on the insights gathered through the online survey and the Expert Group Meeting carried out under the Share SIRA project, IOM and ICMC Europe/the Share Network have identified four key recommendations to the European Commission, the European Union Member States and managing authorities to improve the accessibility of funding opportunities to support rural territories' integration and social cohesion efforts.

#### 1. Strengthen the operationalization of the partnership principle.

The partnership principle enables more **inclusive programming of EU funds** as it provides for consultation with local and regional authorities, civil society and economic partners in the design and implementation of EU funds. At present, the implementation of this principle is uneven across different funds and Member States, depending on specific management practices defined by national authorities. Most respondents to the Share SIRA online survey declared an interest in participating in this type of consultation, although only one in five had been involved in the programming process of EU funds. To strengthen the implementation of this principle, it is recommended that **consultations** with the representatives of local and regional authorities and civil society groups **be systematically undertaken**, and that **mechanisms for participation** of local actors be further clarified and streamlined. The participation of civil society and local authorities in the assessment of funding needs and programmes at national and European level is likely to contribute to capitalizing on rural and local stakeholders' knowledge of local realities and needs, optimizing programming and ensuring that key priorities and needs are addressed to strengthen inclusion and social cohesion in rural territories.

#### 2. Mainstream migration into rural development.

The synergies between policy frameworks and funding instruments addressing rural development, social inclusion and integration can be further strengthened to seize the opportunities that migration can bring to rural sustainable development. For instance, the EAFRD tackles specifically social inclusion in rural areas<sup>21</sup>. Building on this experience, it is recommended to **further mainstream rural development priorities into integration policy and funding sources**, and at the same time, further **consider integration and social cohesion in rural development policy and funding mechanisms**. This approach could help strengthening the complementarity of different funding instruments and enhance the mutual positive impacts of rural development on integration and *vice versa*. Overall, policy coherence could be further strengthened ensuring that rural development policies are more sensitive to migration, integration, inclusion and social cohesion dynamics, while migration policy could be more sensitive to sustainable rural development goals.

#### 3. Improve access to information on EU funds for rural integration.

It is recommended to enhance the accessibility of EU funding to rural territories, civil society and grassroots organizations by **investing further in information provision** on EU funding opportunities, including on application procedures,

---

<sup>21</sup> Martinez Juan A., European Parliamentary Research Service, [Briefing – EU rural development policy and the integration of Migrants](#), February 2017, accessed 12.02.2023.

regulations, requirements, and the scope of different funding opportunities. **Bottom-up, participatory approaches to programming** may increase the opportunities for smaller structures with limited resources to follow the application processes of different funding instruments. A good practice in this respect is the [LEADER](#) bottom-up local development method, which aims at promoting the active engagement of local actors in decision-making, resource allocation and the design and delivery of rural development strategies. The LEADER approach entails the participation of Local Action Groups (LAGs), which bring together different local actors, to jointly define local development strategies and related expenditures. This approach has the potential to encourage greater participation in programming by capitalizing on the knowledge and expertise of different local actors. The LEADER approach is embedded in the EAFRD and has been extended under the designation “Community-Led Local Development (CLLD)” to the ERDF and the ESF+. Another good practice is to encourage ‘**umbrella organisations’ or incubators** that provide small grants and act as multipliers and support smaller organisations in accessing EU funds.

#### 4. Invest further in capacity building of rural territories to foster inclusion and social cohesion.

Besides strengthening participatory approaches to fund programming, local and regional authorities could be further empowered through **targeted capacity building** to enhance their role in the design, management, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of inclusion and social cohesion initiatives. Several actions have been implemented in this regard, including the development of specific tools (e.g. the *Toolkit on the Use of EU Funds for the Integration of People with a Migrant Background: 2021–2027 Programming Period*). More targeted measures could include **improved impact analyses, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms** in rural areas. These measures are likely to offer further insights on the capacity needs of rural territories to enable the development of relevant support measures and tools, while producing further evidence for future inclusion and social cohesion programming at the local level.

## Conclusion

This policy brief aimed at providing a narrow overview of the existing EU policy frameworks and complementary funding mechanisms that can be leveraged to support integration, inclusion and social cohesion in the EU’s rural areas. Three conclusions can be drawn from the arguments presented in this brief. Firstly, EU policy frameworks addressing both inclusion and rural development recognize the critical **role the local governments and rural areas** play in welcoming newcomers and fostering integration and inclusion. Therefore, there is an opportunity to further strengthen the synergies and complementarities between these frameworks to seize the opportunities migration brings to rural areas’ revitalization, prosperity, and sustainable development. Secondly, as revealed by the insights gathered through an online survey among the SHARE Network and the discussions of the Share SIRA Expert Group on EU funds, there is a need to **strengthen local governments’ and local actors’ participation** in the planning and programming of EU funds, especially rural territories’ participation. Further measures to facilitate rural actors’ access to relevant sources of EU funding to support inclusion and integration in rural areas include wider information provision, streamlining procedures, and targeted capacity building opportunities. Finally, **efforts to address such identified needs are already in place and could be maintained and scaled up**. These efforts include promoting multi-stakeholder approaches to integration and inclusion, fostering synergies between different funding instruments, developing information tools and providing further guidance on funding possibilities and their specificities. As such, the **full implementation of the partnership principle** and the provision of **capacity building opportunities for local actors** remain critical to facilitate access to funding and enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of integration and inclusion efforts in rural areas.

## Bibliography

Beirens, H., Ahad, A.

2019 [Money Wise: Improving how EU funds support migration and integration policy objectives](#). Migration Policy Institute (MPI), Policy Brief, March.

Bray, E., Eldridge, J., Raath, L., Papakonstantinou, A., Angiolini, S., Hydén, J., Thorpe, E., Ledan, A.

2016 [The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. Migrant and refugee integration](#), European Network for Rural Development, accessed on 07.11.22.

(CEMR) The Council of European Municipalities and Regions

2018 EU Funds in the area of migration. Local and Regional Governments perspective  
[CEMR views on the future of “EU funds in the area of migration” ahead of the post-2020 MFF negotiations and programming](#).

European Commission

2020 [Action plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027](#)

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, COM(2020), 758 final, Brussels 24.11.2020.

2021a [A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas - Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040](#), Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, COM(2021) 345 final, Brussels, 30.6.2021.

2021b [A vision for rural areas towards 2040](#), accessed on 08.11.22.

2021c [EU funds for migrant integration 2021-2027](#), accessed on 07.11.22.

2021d [The EU's 2021-2027 long-term budget and Next Generation EU: facts and figures](#), Directorate-General for Budget, Publications Office of the European Union, 2021.

2021e [Toolkit on the use of EU funds for the integration of people with a migrant background: 2021–2027 programming period](#), Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, Publications Office, 2021.

2022a [Multiannual financial framework 2021-2027](#), accessed on 08.11.22.

2022b [Rural Pact: European momentum to support the EU's rural areas](#), 17.06.22, accessed on 07.11.22

European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)

2021 [EU Long-term vision for rural areas](#) Reference: NAT/839-EESC-2021

European Commission, Joint Research Centre

2019 [Migration in EU rural areas](#), JRC Science Hub, ISBN 978-92-76-08600-0 ISSN 1831-9424 doi:10.2760/544298

Kah, S., Georgieva, N., Fonseca, L.,

2020 [EU Cohesion Policy in non-urban areas](#), Research for REGI Committee European Parliament, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, Brussels. Directorate-General for Internal Policies.

Martinez Juan, A.

2017 [EU rural development policy and the integration of migrants](#), European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS). Briefing February 2017.

- Natale, F., Kalantaryan, S., Scipioni, M., Alessandrini, A. and Pasa, A.,  
2019 [Migration in EU Rural Areas](#), EUR 29779 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2019, ISBN 978-92-76-08600-0 (online), doi:10.2760/544298 (online), JRC116919.
- Westerby, R.
- 2018a [The way forward. A reflection paper on the new proposals for EU Funds on Asylum, Migration and Integration 2021-2027](#), European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) and UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).
- 2018b [Follow the Money. Assessing the use of EU Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund \(AMIF\) funding at the national level](#), European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) and UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).
- 2019 [Follow the Money II. Assessing the use of EU Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund \(AMIF\) funding at the national level 2014-2018](#), European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) and UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).
- Zobel, M., Krabbe, J.
- 2021 [The New EU Budget: More access to migration and integration funding for cities or a missed opportunity?](#) HUMBOLDT-VIADRINA Governance Platform. Municipal Integration and Development Initiative (MIDI).

## Authors

Paola Alvarez, IOM  
Marine Sabria, IOM

## Disclaimers & Copyright

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout the publication do not imply expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of IOM concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area, or of its authorities, or concerning its frontiers or boundaries.

IOM is committed to the principle that humane and orderly migration benefits migrants and society. As an intergovernmental organization, IOM acts with its partners in the international community to: assist in meeting the operational challenges of migration; advance understanding of migration issues; encourage social and economic development through migration; and uphold the human dignity and well-being of migrants.

This policy brief was made possible through support provided by the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) Europe under the terms of Share SIRA project "Expanding Social Orientation & Integration for Newcomers in Rural Areas in Europe". ICMC Europe established the [Share Network](#) in 2012, which is an inclusive network of local communities and actors engaged in the welcoming and inclusion of newcomers in Europe. Share promotes and fosters safe pathways to Europe for migrants and refugees as well as their integration. It supports and connects local initiatives, share best practice, and raise the voice to communities to inspire action and policy change.

This policy brief has been produced with the funding of the European Union's Asylum, Migration and Integrations Fund. The content of this publication represents the views of the authors only and is their sole responsibility. The European Commission does not accept any responsibility for use that may be made of the information it contains.

Publisher: International Organization for Migration  
Regional Office for the European Economic Area (EEA), the European Union (EU), and NATO  
Rue Montoyer 40  
1000 Brussels  
Belgium  
Tel.: +32 (0)2 287 7000  
Email: [ROBrussels@iom.int](mailto:ROBrussels@iom.int)  
Website: <https://eea.iom.int/>

This publication was issued without formal editing by IOM.

This publication has been issued without IOM Publications Unit (PUB) approval for adherence to IOM's brand and style standards.

This publication was issued without IOM Research Unit (RES) endorsement.

---

© IOM 2022



Some rights reserved. This work is made available under the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 IGO License](#) (CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 IGO).<sup>\*</sup>For further specifications please see the [Copyright and Terms of Use](#).

This publication should not be used, published or redistributed for purposes primarily intended for or directed towards commercial advantage or monetary compensation, with the exception of educational purposes, e.g. to be included in textbooks.

Permissions: Requests for commercial use or further rights and licensing should be submitted to [publications@iom.int](mailto:publications@iom.int).  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/igo/legalcode>



Co-funded by the European Union's  
Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund.