European Network for Rural Development

Thematic Group Report

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ENRD Thematic Group on Rural Revitalisation

Enabling factors for rural revitalisation & a self-assessment tool for policy design

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EUROPEAN NETWORK FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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Main author: Enrique Nieto, Policy Analyst, ENRD Contact Point.

Key contributors: ENRD Thematic Group Members and Flavio Conti, Elena Di Federico, John Grieve, Veronika Korcekova, Alistair Prior, Paul Soto, Peter Toth (ENRD Contact Point).

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CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION 2

2. ENABLING FACTORS FOR RURAL REVITALISATION 3

2.1. BUILDING BLOCK 1: POLICY DESIGN, COORDINATION AND INTEGRATION 5

2.2. BUILDING BLOCK 2: LOCAL EMPOWERMENT, CAPACITY BUILDING AND INNOVATION 6

3. SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL TO SUPPORT THE DESIGN OF POLICIES FOR THE REVITALISATION OF RURAL AREAS 8

ANNEX 1: VISUAL CANVAS 15

ANNEX 2: LIST OF KEY DOCUMENTS REVIEWED 16

1. INTRODUCTION

On 30 June 2021, the European Commission put forward the long-term vision for EU's rural areas in 2040, based on a widespread consultation and a thorough diagnosis of the challenges and concerns that they are facing, as well as highlighting some of the most promising opportunities that are available. Central to the Vision is the ambition to revitalise Europe's rural areas, and mitigate the impact of negative trends, so that by 2040 they are stronger, more connected, resilient and prosperous. The Vision proposes a number of actions, flagship initiatives and tools with the ambition to drive the revitalisation of rural areas, including the set-up of a Rural Revitalisation Platform that should be a one-stop-shop to help rural communities, project holders and authorities to collaborate.

In this context, in 2021 the ENRD initiated a Thematic Group on Rural Revitalisation to identify and understand better the key enabling factors that drive rural revitalisation across and share best practice. The Thematic Group focused on the practical actions needed to boost rural development, particularly in areas lagging behind and facing issues of depopulation, ageing and lack of economic opportunities. During the first Thematic Group meeting on Rural Revitalisation on 15 December 2021, stakeholders from a wide range of countries and backgrounds explored and discussed key enabling factors for rural revitalisation. These were then fine-tuned during the second Thematic Group meeting on 31 March 2022.

This document presents the results of the work of this expert group. It builds on the main outcomes from the meetings and consultations with Thematic Group members, as well as the review of key literature, including documents produced by EU institutions and relevant organisations (studies, reports and opinions).

The document introduces the main enabling factors for rural revitalisation identified by the ENRD Thematic Group (section 2). It also presents a simple and practical self-assessment tool developed by Thematic Group members to help stakeholders (e.g. policy-makers, civil society organisations, etc.) in assessing the extent to which key factors required for successful policies and programmes to enable the revitalisation of rural areas are in place in their context, in particular for areas suffering from depopulation and economic decline (section 3). Annex 1 presents a visual canvas to help stakeholders use the self-assessment tool and Annex 2 includes a summary of the documents reviewed.

2. ENABLING FACTORS FOR RURAL REVITALISATION

The revitalisation of rural areas suffering from depopulation, aging and economic decline was at the core of the discussions of the ENRD Thematic Group. Rural revitalisation was generally understood as the process through which rural areas can move from a poor and declining situation to a better state. This is generally triggered by the support of policy interventions defined at national, regional or local levels. Revitalisation refers to improving well-being and quality of life in rural areas, taking account of economic, environmental and social conditions. The findings from the literature reviewed and the experience of the TG members highlighted several key factors featured in successful policies aiming to revitalise rural areas. These factors, if present and enhanced by policies supporting rural development, help rural areas in their transition to a better situation.

This section presents the main **enabling factors** identified by the Thematic Group to support the revitalisation of rural areas. These factors have been clustered into two principal Building Blocks:

- **Building Block 1 (Structures):** Policy design, coordination and integration (focusing on national, regional levels). This Building Block is composed of the following enabling factors:
  - **I.** Integrated strategies
  - **II.** Multilevel governance
- **Building Block 2 (People):** Local empowerment, capacity building and innovation (focus on national, regional and local levels). The enabling factors in this Block are:
  - **III.** Local capacities
  - **IV.** Territorial cooperation
  - **V.** Local innovation

The figure below illustrates the Building Blocks and the identified enabling factors. It shows that enabling factors if present in and supported by policies can help rural areas and stakeholders to address the challenges and opportunities in their context (outer part of wheel) and move from a poor situation (centre of the wheel) to a better one (outer part of the wheel) in key areas such as infrastructure/services, social inclusion, environment, basic goods, etc.

Figure 1 : Enabling factors for rural revitalisation

Source : Own elaboration

2.1. BUILDING BLOCK 1: POLICY DESIGN, COORDINATION AND INTEGRATION

There is common agreement on the multifaceted and multisectoral nature of the challenges and opportunities to be addressed in rural areas, as presented, for example, in the ENRD report Rural Voices, which collected information about needs and opportunities from more than 3 000 rural citizens from 19 EU Member States. These needs and opportunities are structured around diverse areas such as infrastructure, services, digitalisation, technology, basic goods, income, work, jobs, social inclusion, vitality, environment and climate change. Addressing the diversity of these areas requires the coordination of policy instruments and actors offering integrated support to rural areas in all relevant thematic fields (also referred to as horizontal coordination). At the same time, policy must translate EU-level and national policy ambitions to include the local level, recognising local communities as key actors of change. This requires better integration of the goals at different levels (EU, national, regional and local). The identified enabling factors within this building block are therefore particularly relevant for stakeholders involved at regional and national levels. The following enabling factors (EF) are identified:

EF1: Integrated strategic approach to rural revitalisation, which overall reflects the following features:

- **An understanding of the different rural contexts for targeting action**. Integrated policy strategies are based on a clear analysis of the different rural contexts and an identification of different types of rural areas with distinctive social, economic and environmental trends and realities (e.g. considering their remoteness or proximity to urban areas, demography and population trends and access to basic services, etc.). They also identify key needs and priorities for action for the different types of rural areas in a wide range of key thematic fields relevant for the future of rural areas (e.g. digitalisation, mobility, energy, basic services, sustainability, etc.). Such an understanding must also take into account the unintended negative effects of policies which ignore these needs.
- **A broad scope of action and intervention** is required to enable rural areas and stakeholders to implement action to address challenges and seize opportunities in a wide range of thematic fields that are key for the future of rural areas (e.g. digitalisation, mobility, energy, basic services, sustainability, etc.). Successful integrated strategies support targeted interventions that respond to the needs and aspirations of the different rural contexts and particularly those weaker areas suffering from economic, environmental and social decline (e.g. by implementing different taxation rates, investment criteria and co-financing rates, providing additional technical assistance and capacity building support, etc.).
- **Relevant measurable objectives and targets** in the most important areas of intervention that affect rural development allows to monitor the implementation. Such objectives and targets should take account of the different rural characteristics and diversity.
- **Communication and dissemination of the results achieved** in a way that changes the narrative and demonstrate the full potential of rural areas for society as a whole (including in urban areas).

EF2: Multi-level and inclusive governance structures which maximise coordination and synergies among stakeholders and institutions involved in policy design and implementation and boost stakeholder engagement, dialogue and participation. In this respect, the following features are considered important for the successful implementation of policies aiming at rural revitalisation:

- **Strong political leadership and commitment from high levels of government** for the design and implementation of the policy, with sufficient legitimacy to coordinate the different sectoral domains/departments and levels of government leading to joined-up implementation.
- **Effective and proactive coordination of all relevant public authorities** involved in the implementation of the policy(s) affecting rural areas (e.g. through regular meetings, reviews, guidelines, earmarked budgets, targets, incentives, controls etc. involving key departments such as education, mobility, energy, health, education, culture, economy, agriculture etc.).
- **Active multi-level stakeholder dialogue,** feedback and communication with key rural actors and civil society organisation about the implementation of the policy itself (including non-traditional stakeholder groups).
- **Synergies and complementarities between EU, national, regional and local policies and funds** affecting rural development (e.g. CAP, Cohesion, RIS3, Integrated Territorial Investments (ITIs), LEADER/CLLD, Urban Innovative Actions, and other policies in the country and area) – avoiding duplications.

2.2. BUILDING BLOCK 2: LOCAL EMPOWERMENT, CAPACITY BUILDING AND INNOVATION

Local actors and communities are recognised as being instrumental in the formulation, design and implementation of policies for rural areas. An important set of enabling factors concerns **empowering local communities** to take action and **providing them with the necessary capacities**. Revitalisation implies moving away from negative contexts and trends by implementing new actions and innovations that provide a new impulse to local areas and position them in a new positive development dynamic. Digital, technological and social innovations are essential for rural areas to deal with modern societal challenges. The identified enabling factors within this building block are therefore relevant for stakeholders at national, regional but also at local level, and tap into the potential of local communication to support the development of rural areas. The following enabling factors were identified:

EF3: Local capacities for action by enabling and facilitating local action, making places available for exchange and technical capacities and putting flexible and adequate funding in place, making it accessible to local actors. In particular, the following features are needed to be present:

- Sufficient resources to support **local facilitation/animation** to encourage community engagement, particularly in weaker rural areas and communities.
- Support to enhance **human and social capital[1] as well as the technical capacity** of areas lagging behind through additional resources for strategic thinking and the design of innovative ideas and projects (e.g. by providing places where ideas can be created and nurtured collectively, access to technical expertise to apply for funding, financing the preparation of projects, such as the '3rd Places' in France, etc.).
- **Fast and flexible mechanisms to support rural stakeholders** and communities in the implementation of their initiatives (e.g. through the use of simplified cost options (SCO), umbrella schemes, reduced thresholds for access to funding, investments in small scale infrastructure, technical assistance etc.).

(1) Human capital refers to intangible collective resources possessed by individuals and groups in relation to knowledge, talents, skills, abilities, experience and intelligence.
Social capital refers to the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively.

EF4: Territorial Cooperation to enable the aggregation of efforts among actors to maximise territorial synergies and complementarity, as well as learning to achieve common goals. In particular, the following features are identified under this enabling factor:

- **Cooperation** among actors (either from the same territory or different ones) (e.g. by allocating budgets and agile procedures for LEADER, Smart Villages, ITIs, Interreg, Smart Specialisation Strategies, etc.).
- **Rural-urban partnerships** and cooperation to address key common needs/opportunities on an equal basis (e.g. through instruments such as inter-municipal cooperation schemes, territorial food plans, adapted public procurement to secure purchase of local products, integrated and inclusive multi-modal mobility plans, regional cultural strategies combining rural and urban offers, etc.).

EF5: Innovation, supporting strategic partnerships and facilitating access to and sharing of knowledge, data and information. The following features are identified:

- **Local innovation ecosystems** that enable rural actors to come together to innovate in fields such as education, health, social services, digital connections, mobility, energy, climate change, and agri-food supply chains, (e.g. through Smart Villages, EIP-AGRI, living labs, fab labs, specific support for start-ups, innovation hubs or other instruments).
- Support to enable local stakeholders to **access knowledge and connect with knowledge-based institutions** such as universities and research centres, private companies, hubs, fab labs, etc. (e.g. by incentivising knowledge-based institutions to base some activities in rural areas).
- **Networking and exchange of experiences** among rural areas and actors, to build and strengthen local capital and capacity around all areas relevant for rural development.

3. SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL TO SUPPORT THE DESIGN OF POLICIES FOR THE REVITALISATION OF RURAL AREAS

The ENRD Thematic Group on Rural Revitalisation developed a **self-assessment tool** to support policy-makers and implementers and other interested stakeholders at local, regional and national levels who wish to explore how policies/ strategies can best be designed and delivered to support rural revitalisation in their own particular context.

How to use the self-assessment tool?

The self-assessment tool is designed to enable stakeholders (e.g. public sector officials, policy-makers, civil society groups, evaluators etc.) to identify positive features of public policies supporting the revitalisation of rural areas, as well as gaps or areas of improvement, with a particular attention to territories suffering from socio-economic decline.

The self-assessment tool includes a series of questions to guide a self-reflection process about the extent to which a policy or set of policies in the country, region, or local area incorporates the enabling factors for rural revitalisation that were identified by the ENRD Thematic Group (see section 2). The self-assessment tool helps stakeholders explore to which extent such enabling conditions exist in their area. In addition, it provides examples of policies and initiatives implemented across Europe, with the aim to promote mutual learning about how the enabling conditions for rural revitalisation can be strengthened in practice.

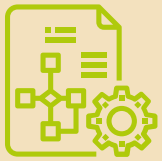
Answering the guiding questions helps stakeholders assess the extent to which a specific feature of an enabling factor is implemented in their area and whether it contributes or not to its revitalisation.

The questions can be answered by individual stakeholders or through collective and participatory methods (e.g. in workshops, focus groups, etc). In both cases, the self-assessment exercise can be implemented through two steps:

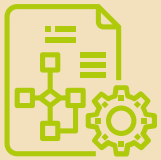
- **Step 1 – Review of the guiding questions and relevant information:** stakeholders gain a good understanding of the guiding questions, and identify and analyse relevant available information (e.g. reports, interviews, news, etc).
- **Step 2 – Answering each guiding question:** based on the information collected in step 1, stakeholders can answer each guiding question. These should help identifying the extent to which there is a poor or good implementation of a particular feature of an enabling factor (e.g. answers could be rated subjectively from 1 – poor implementation to 5 - good implementation).

Ultimately, the answers to the guiding questions can be plotted in a visual canvas, which helps visualise the situation of each enabling factor (see Annex 1).

Table 1 : Self-assessment questions of enabling factors for rural revitalisation

Enabling factor	Guiding questions
Building Block 1: Policy design, coordination and integration *(Focus on national, regional levels)*	
 **Integrated strategies**	**Understanding different rural contexts to target action** • To what extent is the policy(s)[1] based on a clear analysis of the different **rural contexts** and an identification of different types of rural areas with distinctive social, economic and environmental trends and realities (e.g. considering their remoteness or proximity to urban areas, demography and population trends and access to basic services, etc.)? • To what extent does the policy(s) identify **key needs and priorities** of these different types of rural areas in a wide range of key thematic fields relevant for the future of rural areas (e.g. digitalisation, mobility, energy, basic services, sustainability, community building, etc.)?
	Scope of action and intervention • To what extent does the policy(s) **enable rural areas and incentivise stakeholders from public and private sectors to implement action** to address challenges and seize opportunities in an integrated and area-based approach in a wide range of key thematic fields relevant for the future of rural areas (e.g. digitalisation, mobility, energy, basic services, sustainability, etc.)? • To what extent does the policy(s) include **interventions that are targeted** to respond to the needs and aspirations of the different rural contexts, such as those with favourable conditions or those areas suffering from economic, environmental and social decline (e.g. implementing different taxation rates, investment criteria and co-financing rates, additional technical assistance and capacity building support, etc.)? • To what extent does the policy(s) address the needs of the most disadvantaged rural areas and stakeholders?

(1) It refers to the policy or relevant set of policies in the country or region that put in place specific interventions and measures that aim to support rural revitalisation. Some countries/regions have one overarching and integrated policy (e.g. Ireland) while in others there are several relevant policies aiming at rural revitalisation.

Enabling factor	Guiding questions
Building Block 1: Policy design, coordination and integration *(Focus on national, regional levels)*	
 **Integrated strategies**	**Rural proofing, monitoring, evaluation** • To what extent are the policy(s) reviewed through rural lenses e.g. through a rural proofing process, including capturing unintended negative effects in different **rural contexts**? • To what extent do the policy(s) and the interventions that follow from it set sufficient and relevant **measurable objectives and targets** in the key areas that affect rural development, so as to allow monitoring of their implementation?
	Communication and building new rural narratives • To what extent are the policy(s) and results achieved communicated and disseminated in a way that changes the narrative to show the full potential of rural areas for society as a whole (including in urban areas)?
Multi-level and inclusive governance structures	**Coordination & synergies** • To what extent is the policy(s) supported by strong **political leadership from high levels of government** with sufficient legitimacy to coordinate the different sectoral domains/departments and levels of government, leading to more joined-up implementation? • To what extent does the policy(s) put governance structures and mechanisms in place to ensure the effective **coordination of the relevant public authorities** involved in the implementation of the policy(s) affecting rural areas (e.g. regular meetings, reviews, guidelines, earmarked budgets, targets, incentives, controls etc. involving key departments such as education, mobility, energy, health, education, culture, economy, agriculture etc.)? • To what extent does the policy(s) put structures and mechanisms in place **to ensure synergy and complementarity** between EU, national, regional and local policies and funds affecting rural development (e.g. CAP, Cohesion, RIS3, Integrated Territorial Investments (ITIs), LEADER/CLLD, Urban Innovative Actions, and other policies in the country and area) – avoiding duplications, contradictions and taking into account the heterogeneity of rural areas?
	Stakeholder engagement, dialogue and participation • To what extent does the policy(s) include a governance structure and other mechanisms to enable active **multi-level stakeholder dialogue**, feedback and communication with key rural actors and civil society organisations about the implementation of the policy itself (including non-traditional stakeholder groups)?

Enabling factor	Guiding questions
Building Block 1: Policy design, coordination and integration *(Focus on national, regional levels)*	
Sources of information (e.g. existing initiatives, documents, etc.)	• Law to fight Depopulation (Castilla la Mancha, Spain) (PPT, Video). More information. • Inner Area strategy (Italy) (Briefing, PPT, Video) • Our Rural Future (Ireland) (PPT). More information. • Rural agenda (France) (PPT). More information. • Rural Agenda (Catalonia) (PPT). More information. • Rural Policy Council & the National Rural Policy Programme (Finland). More information. In addition, Parliamentary working group on sparsely populated areas (Finland). More information. • Governmental resolution for multi-locality and multi-local living (Finland). More information in Finnish. • TAIEX-REGIO PEER 2 PEER: Facilitates exchanges between the national and regional bodies that manage and administer funds from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Cohesion Fund. More information. • LEADER CLLD. (EU Evaluation report, ENRD Rural Review). More information. • Economic Resilience in Sustainable Communities: Innovative Approaches in Public Spending to Maximise Local Benefits (Ireland) More Information. • Public service delivery in the Nordic Region: An exercise in collaborative governance (Report). More information. • Cohesion policy support to areas confronted to population decline in Europe – the ERDF. More information. • Our vision 2030. The vision of the cooperation in the Nordic Council of Ministers. More information. • The Nordic thematic group for green and inclusive Rural Development. More information. • How to integrate sustainability into an organisation. Agenda 2030 and SDGs at the local level (Policy Brief). More information.

Enabling factor	Guiding questions
Building Block 2: Local empowerment, capacity building and innovation *(Focus on national, regional and local levels)*	
Local capacities for action	**Enabling and facilitating local action** • To what extent does the policy(s) mobilise sufficient resources to support **local facilitation/animation** to encourage community engagement, particularly in rural areas lagging behind? • To what extent does the policy(s) enhance the **human and social capital[1] as well as technical capacity** of areas lagging behind with additional resources for strategic thinking and the design of innovative ideas and projects (e.g. by providing places where ideas can be created and nurtured collectively, access technical expertise to apply for funding, financing the preparation of projects, etc.)?
	Flexible and adequate funding • To what extent does the policy(s) offer **fast and flexible mechanisms to support to rural stakeholders** and communities to implement their initiatives (e.g. through the use of simplified cost options (SCO), umbrella schemes, reduced thresholds for access to funding, investments in small scale infrastructure, technical assistance etc.)?
Territorial cooperation	**Enabling cooperation and partnerships** • To what extent does the policy(s) enable **cooperation and rural partnerships** among actors (both from the same territory or different ones, including coastal villages) (e.g. by allocating budgets and agile procedures for LEADER, Smart Villages, ITIs, Interreg, Smart Specialisation Strategies, etc.)?
	Rural-urban linkages • To what extent does the policy(s) support **rural-urban partnerships** and cooperation to address key common needs/opportunities on an equal basis (e.g. through instruments such as intermunicipal cooperation schemes, territorial food plans, adapted public procurement to secure purchase of local products, integrated and inclusive multi-modal mobility plans, regional cultural strategies combining rural and urban offers, etc.?

(1) Human capital refers to intangible collective resources possessed by individuals and groups in relation to knowledge, talents, skills, abilities, experience and intelligence. Social capital refers to the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively.

Enabling factor	Guiding questions
Building Block 2: Local empowerment, capacity building and innovation *(Focus on national, regional and local levels)*	
Innovation	**Partnerships for innovation** • To what extent does the policy(s) encourage rural actors to come together to **innovate** in fields such as education, health, social services, digital connections, mobility, energy, climate change, and agri-food supply chains, etc. (e.g. through Smart Villages, EIP-AGRI, living labs, fab labs, specific support for start-ups, innovation hubs or other instruments)?
	Access and sharing knowledge, data and information • To what extent does the policy(s) support and facilitate and incentivise rural stakeholders to **access knowledge** and connect with knowledge-based institutions (and vice versa) such as universities and research centres, private companies, hubs, fab labs, etc. (e.g. by incentivising knowledge-based institutions to base some activities in rural areas)? • To what extent does the policy(s) support networking and the **exchange of experiences** among rural areas and actors, to build and strengthen local capital and capacity around all areas relevant for rural development?

Enabling factor	Guiding questions
	Building Block 2: Local empowerment, capacity building and innovation *(Focus on national, regional and local levels)*
Sources of information (e.g. existing initiatives, documents, etc.)	• ENRD website section on LEADER-CLLD including information on innovation, umbrella projects and good practices. • Smart Villages Portal. • Smart Rural 21 pilot project (PPT, video). More information. • Smart Rural 27 pilot project. More information. • Rural Hubs: SmartAgrihubs (H2020), Tiers Lieux (France), Rural FabLab Network (Slovenia), Digital Villages (Germany), Ludgate Hub (Ireland), ENRD factsheet on Rural Digital Hubs. • EIP AGRI Operational Groups database • SHERPA H2020 – Science-society-policy interfaces • Use of Simplified Cost Options: ENRD Training on Simplified Cost Options, ENRD Thematic Lab, Guidelines on the use of Simplified Cost Options within the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESI) • Rural-Urban synergies (H2020 ROBUST project) • Training Academy to support citizen engagement in cities and villages (The Netherlands). More information. • Association of all citizen initiatives engaging with wellbeing and care (The Netherlands). More information. • Smart Communities through Design Thinking Innovating Communities – designing our futures (Ireland). More information. • Rural research platform (Belgium). More information. • Harvestable Landscape Platform (Belgium). More information. • Flemish village association (Belgium). More information. • Centres for shared services (Czech Republic). More information. • Nordic rural service project: Service provision and access to services in Nordic rural areas – secure, trusted and for all ages. More information. • Centre for Advisory Support to Municipalities (Poland). More information. • The Small Town Academy (Germany). More information.

ANNEX 1: VISUAL CANVAS

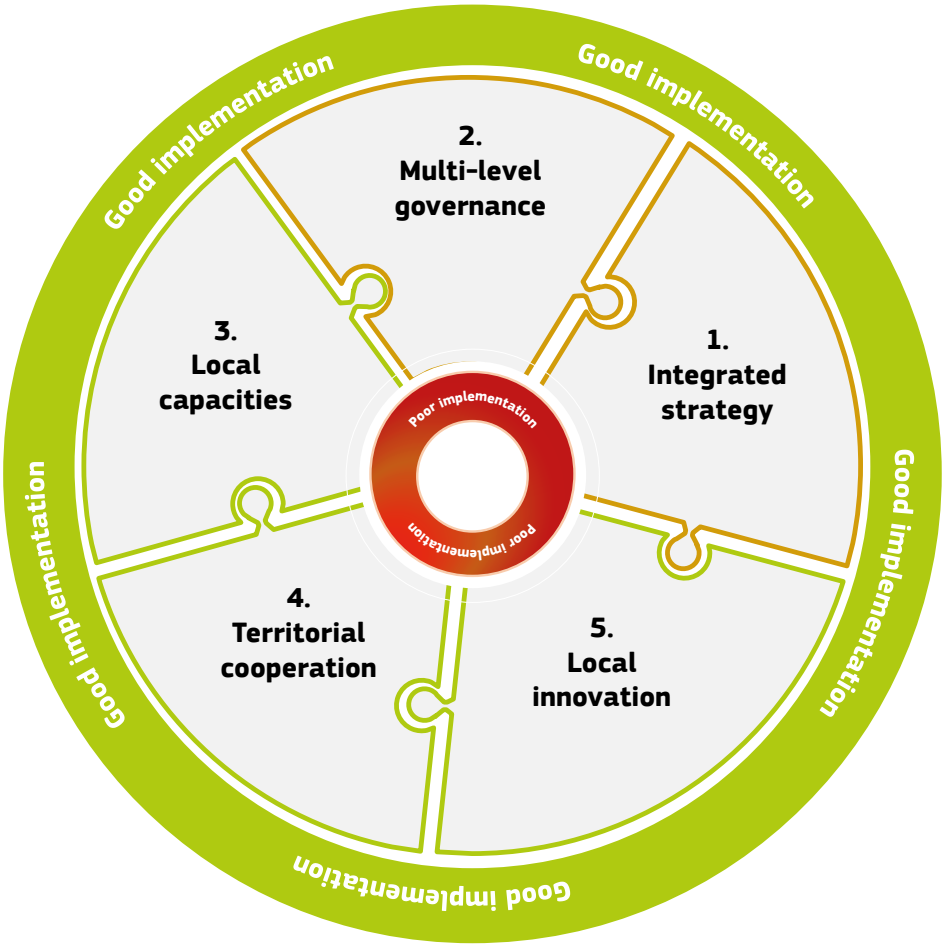
The visual canvas (see figure 2) presented below aims to help stakeholders use the self-assessment tool (see Section 3) by plotting the answers to the different guiding questions and provide an overall picture of the situation for each enabling factor in the rural area of concern.

While not essential to answer the guiding questions of the self-assessment tool, the visual canvas can complement it and can support stakeholders in the analytical processes of answering the questions. For example, the canvas could help participants of workshops and other forms of collective discussions to visualise the answers to each guiding question and get a common understanding of the extent to which a key feature of an enabling factor is being implemented in their area. Additionally, the visual canvas can support the communication of the final results of the self-assessment exercise.

How to use the visual canvas?

Answers to each guiding question will help identify the extent to which there is a poor or good implementation of a particular feature of an enabling factor (e.g. answers could be rated subjectively from 1 – poor implementation to 5 - good implementation). If there is a good implementation of a specific feature of an enabling factor, the answer should be plotted within the area of the respective enabling factor and closer to the outer part of the visual canvas (e.g. with a dot, post it, mark, etc.). If the implementation is rather poor, the feature should be plotted closer to the inner circle.

Figure 2 : Visual canvas for enabling factors for rural revitalisation



Source : Own elaboration

ANNEX 2: LIST OF KEY DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

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