

Comprehensive Synthesis Report: Online Expert Roundtable

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WP8. Euro Harvest Summit

Filiala Asociației SE POATE,

Online Conference

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Total Registered Audience: 112 Active Participants

Moderator & Host: Filiala ASP (FASP)

1. Executive Panel & Institutional Profiles

The roundtable convened a cross-sector panel of six regional specialists, policymakers, and civic leaders from six European Union member states. The experts were selected to bring diverse operational perspectives ranging from local government to non-formal education and academic economics:

- **Adelina Sfât (Romania):** County Councilor in Teleorman with extensive background in local public administration and public communication within the Romanian Presidential Administration.
- **Alberto Lorente Saiz (Spain):** European cooperation expert with over 14 years of specialization in the URBACT program, focusing on localized integrated action plans and cross-border cooperation.
- **Christiana Kazandzhieva (Bulgaria):** Social entrepreneur, management consultant, and co-founder of the Bionetwork Association, specializing in non-formal education and EU project design for youth.
- **Mantas Švažas (Lithuania):** Senior researcher and economist at the Agricultural Academy of Vytautas Magnus University, focusing on sustainable energy, regional economics, and bioeconomy.
- **Silvia Di Passio (Italy):** Territorial policy expert and community manager working with the Italian National Agency for Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps.
- **Paweł Prochasek (Poland):** Non-formal education trainer, social activist, Vice President of the Foundation of European Initiatives in Silesia, and political assistant.

2. Opening Position: Joint Policy Declaration Evaluation

Prior to addressing specific thematic panels, the experts provided a macro-level evaluation of the newly unveiled **Joint Policy Declaration**, assessing its relevance to their respective national realities:

- **The Demographic Reality (Romania & Bulgaria):** Panelists underscored that abstract European policy concepts must be grounded in immediate local realities. In regions like Teleorman (Romania) or small municipalities like Biala (Bulgaria, population ~3,000), severe depopulation and a lack of baseline infrastructure mean that policies must offer tangible, daily life improvements rather than detached bureaucratic jargon.
- **The Funding Paradigm (Italy & Spain):** The panel criticized historical EU funding biases that favor large urban agglomerations or immediate urban peripheries. They praised the declaration for demanding a structural pivot toward true rural landscapes, presenting them not as "left-behind" zones, but as viable, modern hubs for personal and professional development.

- **The Execution Bottleneck (Lithuania & Poland):** Panelists identified a major disconnect between policy creation and local implementation. Empirical research presented from Lithuania showed that over 50% of rural municipalities fail to achieve socio-economic progress due to low administrative capability or political inertia among local officials. The declaration was welcomed as a framework to mandate capacity-building and active co-creation of policy with local youth.

3. Detailed Thematic Session Breakdown

Section 1: Trust & EU Engagement

- **Core Question:** *Why do rural citizens exhibit lower trust in centralized European institutions compared to local/national governments, and how can institutional messaging be corrected?*
- **The Institutional Trust Gap:** The debate established that rural communities often perceive European institutions as distant, overly complex, and indifferent to localized struggles. This alienation leaves populations vulnerable to euroskeptical rhetoric.
- **Corrective Messaging Strategies:**
 - **Tangibility Over Rhetoric:** Trust cannot be bought with glossy promotional leaflets or high-level economic data. It is earned exclusively when citizens visually connect EU funding to immediate quality-of-life upgrades (e.g., modernized local schools, upgraded community medical centers, rehabilitated agricultural roads).
 - **Simplification & Transparency:** Communication regarding EU regulations and funding allocations must be stripped of institutional jargon. It should clearly outline the long-term structural benefits of compliance, addressing local anxieties openly.
- **The Role of Local Messengers:** The panel concluded that central EU officials are ineffective messengers in rural landscapes. Instead, information must flow through trusted local proxies: grassroots NGOs, local civic leaders, small-business associations, and proactive municipal employees. These actors possess the cultural context necessary to translate European initiatives into authentic, relatable community terms.

Section 2: Participation

- **Core Question:** *How can rural dialogue formats move past superficial, tokenistic "checkbox" exercises to ensure historically silent demographics shape actual policy?*
- **Deconstructing the "Token Box" Dilemma:** Too often, public consultations are designed as rigid, urban-centric public hearings or online surveys that are inaccessible or alienating to rural demographics. This reinforces the belief that decisions are predetermined and citizen input is merely a bureaucratic requirement.
- **Structural Recommendations for Authentic Engagement:**
 - **Inverted Consultation Models:** Rather than expecting rural citizens to navigate complex institutional spaces, policymakers and regional organizers

must embed dialogue formats directly into the physical community (e.g., local town halls, cultural centers, agricultural cooperatives).

- **Targeted Outreach for Marginalized Voices:** To engage historically quiet demographics—such as low-income agricultural workers, elderly populations, or marginalized minorities—consultations must utilize interactive, non-threatening methodologies (e.g., small-group focus circles, facilitated workshops using tools like Wooclap or Mentimeter).
- **Accountability Loops:** To restore civic faith, every consultation must feature a mandatory, transparent feedback loop. When rural citizens dedicate time to offer input, institutions must explicitly publish how that feedback was used to alter, refine, or expand the final policy framework.

Section 3: Young People

- **Core Question:** *What physical infrastructure, local support networks, and digital tools are required to incentivize young people to remain in or return to rural zones post-graduation?*
- **The "Youth Retention Ecosystem":** Combating severe youth depopulation requires moving away from isolated, one-off youth projects. Instead, regions must establish a comprehensive ecosystem that balances economic viability with social fulfillment.
- **Strategic Interventions:**
 - **Co-Working & Hybrid Hubs:** Capitalizing on the rise of remote and hybrid work, rural municipalities must invest in high-speed digital connectivity and community co-working spaces. This allows young professionals to secure high-paying urban/international employment while living affordably in rural areas.
 - **Social & Civic Baselines:** Economic opportunities fail if the social environment is vacant. Experts highlighted successful models where local sports associations or youth cultural clubs were leveraged as initial spaces for community gathering, which naturally evolved into hubs for civic volunteering, local activism, and leadership.
 - **Digital Leadership Tools:** While physical presence and face-to-face community building remain irreplaceable, social media and digital engagement platforms should be structurally utilized. These tools empower rural youth to organize, broadcast localized challenges, and collectively lobby municipal governments without relying on slow, traditional political ladders.

Section 4: Green Deal & Rural Transition

- **Core Question:** *How do rural and agricultural communities perceive the European Green Deal, and what support mechanisms can alleviate economic anxiety during ecological transitions?*

- **The Friction of Ecological Mandates:** Agricultural workers frequently perceive sweeping ecological directives, such as the Green Deal, as punitive measures imposed by urban policymakers who do not understand the thin profit margins of modern farming. This misalignment breeds fear, financial anxiety, and resistance.
- **Mechanisms for a Just Transition:**
 - **Predictable Financial & Logistical Subsidies:** Environmental compliance cannot become an operational penalty. Farmers require direct, streamlined access to funding for sustainable equipment upgrades, regenerative agriculture training, and organic certification processes.
 - **Localized Short Supply Chains:** Transition strategies should emphasize the establishment of local food systems. By reducing reliance on long, complex global shipping chains and connecting farmers directly to regional consumer markets, ecological footprint reduction is paired with increased profit margins for the producer.
 - **The Bioeconomy and Renewable Energy:** Experts from Lithuania highlighted that rural zones sit on vast, underutilized resources (e.g., agricultural biomass, sustainable timber residue). By investing in localized, community-owned renewable energy systems, rural areas can transition from energy-dependent peripheries into self-sustaining, clean energy exporters, generating local green jobs.

Section 5: Local Identity and Cultural Heritage

- **Core Question:** *How can regional traditions, crafts, historical identity, and gastronomy be leveraged as practical economic tools that foster local pride while deepening European integration?*
- **Culture as an Economic Driver:** Cultural heritage must not be treated as a static historical archive preserved only in local museums. Instead, it must be integrated dynamically into modern entrepreneurship, ecotourism, and circular economy strategies.
- **Actionable Implementation:**
 - **Niche Gastronomy & Artisanal Branding:** Traditional food production methods and regional crafts can be upscaled through strict quality certification and targeted digital branding. This transforms local traditions into high-value, unique market goods capable of competing internationally.
 - **Experiential and Eco-Tourism:** Developing localized cultural festivals, heritage trails, and agro-tourism initiatives draws sustainable revenue directly into rural micro-enterprises (e.g., family-owned guesthouses, local restaurants, artisanal workshops).
 - **Dual Identity Integration:** Cultivating deep pride in local roots does not conflict with European integration. The panel proved that when young people are given the tools to celebrate their regional identity on an international stage, it builds a sense of unique contribution to the broader European landscape. It

- reframes the EU not as a homogenizing force, but as a diverse mosaic that values and protects local heritage.

4. Consolidated Summary of Recommendations & Next Steps

The expert panel aligned on a final set of operational priorities to guide future European cross-border initiatives:

1. **Transition to Flexible Micro-Funding:** Lobby European funding bodies to design small-scale, highly flexible financial instruments and micro-grants. These should target grassroots NGOs and family-owned rural enterprises that lack the administrative capacity to manage traditional, heavily bureaucratic EU funding.
2. **Mandate Municipal Capacity Building:** Introduce mandatory training and peer-mentoring programs for rural local government staff to eliminate administrative inertia and maximize the absorption of national and European development funds.
3. **Adopt Dynamic Territorial Definitions:** Advocate for public policy criteria to move past basic population counts. Frameworks should mirror advanced models (such as Italy's *Aree Interne*) that classify targeted funding territories based on their physical distance from essential services like emergency healthcare, high-speed rail, and higher education.
4. **Launch the Centralized Partnership Database:** Utilize the contact networks and organizational capability logs compiled from the 112 event participants to kickstart immediate consortium building for upcoming cross-border project bids and regional development frameworks.