

The ECONNECTING

manifesto for Urban-Rural Linkages in
European Proximity Territories



URBACT



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The Need for Demographically Stable Villages and Hubs in Zero Carbon City Regions

Cities and Regions are undergoing major transformation. The pressures of climate change, demographic change, and rapid digitalisation are reshaping urban and rural areas profoundly. In light of these developments, the regions involved in ECONNECTING must first and foremost address population loss and its visible impact on technical and social infrastructures, particularly in less populated areas. At the same time, regions must also aim to achieve zero carbon emissions due to climate change, which means rethinking the entire regional mobility network, for instance.

These challenges require joint, long-term solutions that build on cooperation across the urban-rural spectrum. In this context, urban-rural linkages are central to forward-looking regional development. Both the New Leipzig Charter and the EU Territorial Agenda 2030 emphasize the importance of strengthening connections between cities, towns, and the countryside through integrated, place-based, and multilevel governance approaches. Mutual support, innovation, and a shared identity between urban and rural areas can be enhanced through strategic, equitable development that prioritizes urban-rural linkages, making both cities and their surrounding regions more resilient and future-proof. These policy frameworks underline that inclusive and sustainable regional development depends on coordinated planning and cooperation between the urban and surrounding rural territories at all governance levels, ensuring that all places can realize their unique potential.

Strategies for Successful Implementation

Good governance is rooted in local, bottom-up support groups involving NGOs, NPOs, residents, and municipal actors. It relies on transparent, responsive, and collaborative structures that adapt to local contexts. Participation must go beyond consultation to real co-creation. Tools like town halls meetings, surveys, participatory budgets, and creative formats, e.g. gamification, placemaking, competitions among other tools foster

local engagement. Governance must be context-sensitive and inclusive, addressing local needs, conflicts, and opportunities. Inclusive processes — like involving youth, elderly and migrants in planning — build trust and policy relevance. Training and public-private partnerships strengthen capacity, while long-term strategies ensure lasting, democratic development.

The ECONNECTING vision

To guide this development approach, the URBACT ECONNECTING network has developed four thematic pillars for integrated urban-rural development:

- **30-Minute Territories** as a vision for proximity and sustainable mobility;
- **Green Communities** that regenerate environments and social life;
- **Accessible and Welcoming Cities** that serve all generations and backgrounds;
- **Good Governance**, rooted in participation, transparency, and cooperation across sectors and levels.

In order to develop thriving villages and regional hubs, we must take a coordinated, people-centred approach to territorial development. Strategic regional planning lays the groundwork for polycentric, sustainable regional development by promoting compact, well-connected settlements that encourage proximity and reduce urban sprawl. A modern, inclusive mobility system links people to opportunities via flexible, multimodal



networks, making every day journeys, especially those to and from remote areas, easier and more climate friendly. Striving for vibrant town centres across the region brings essential services closer to people, strengthens local identity and enables all generations to thrive locally. Expanding digital infrastructure and services ensures equitable access to information, opportunities and participation, thereby bridging the urban-rural divide. Strong decision-making partnerships engage citizens and institutions in shaping their futures, empowering local voices and building governance models that are based on cooperation and trust. Tapping into local economic potential by supporting local businesses, welcoming newcomers, and aligning investments with regional needs ensures that economic development is tailored to local requirements. Together, these principles provide a blueprint for creating inclusive, resilient and future-ready European regions with strong urban-rural linkages.

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Six principles for the creation of sustainable urban-rural linkages



Based on the ECONNECTING network's sustainable mobility solutions and urban regeneration solutions that are following the Integrated Action Plans (IAP), this manifesto outlines six key principles for thriving villages and regional hubs with strong urban-rural linkages.





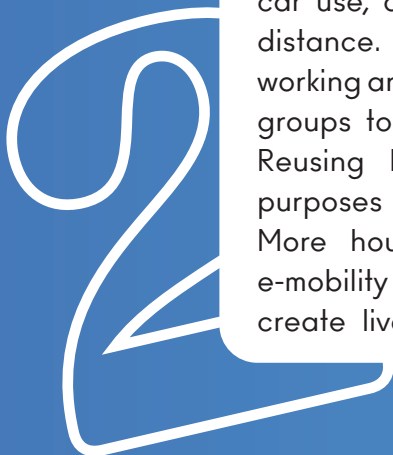
Modern and Inclusive Mobility as a Backbone of Territorial Cohesion

A smart regional transport network is key for future-proof, 30-minute territories. To replace outdated, car-dependent systems, mobility must be flexible, intermodal, and accessible. Outlying settlements should act as mobility hubs linking public transport with services like **Demand Response Transport** (DRT), car and bike sharing, and community taxis. Digital tools — unified ticketing, real-time info — make mobility more inclusive. Safe cycle and pedestrian paths support active mobility. Behavior change is vital, supported by awareness campaigns and gender — and disability — sensitive design. Affordable, reliable public transport, electric buses, and e-bike charging help meet climate goals. Amenities for cyclists further enhance sustainable mobility.



Intact Centres as Catalysts for Liveable Villages, Towns and Cities

Community hubs are vital for vibrant villages and town centres, especially in areas facing demographic and infrastructure challenges. They bring services closer to residents, reduce car use, and support daily needs within walking or cycling distance. As **multi-purpose spaces**, they can include co-working areas, libraries, cultural venues, and spaces for all age groups to foster inclusion and intergenerational exchange. Reusing historic or underused buildings for community purposes preserves heritage and activates town centres. More housing, walkable design, local business support, e-mobility infrastructure, and renewable energy use help create lively, connected, and climate-friendly communities.





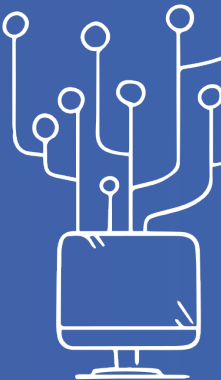
Strategic Regional Planning for Compact and Polycentric Development

Strategic regional planning is key to addressing population loss and the climate crisis. It must focus on compact, polycentric development, reduce sprawl, respect settlement borders, and strengthen urban-rural linkages. **Transit-Oriented Development** (TOD) provides a framework, integrating living, working, and leisure with public transport. Rural areas must be connected to urban networks, with mobility and community hubs supporting 30-minute territories. TOD principles should guide regional plans, limiting growth to existing settlements, protecting open land, and enabling local services. Circular economy, mixed-use development, biodiversity, and energy communities strengthen resilience. Planning must be long-term, place-based, and rooted in local identity.



Digital Connectivity as a Key to Inclusive Regions

Digital transformation can bridge the urban-rural divide by connecting remote areas through strong digital infrastructure. Fast, reliable internet is essential for equal access to work, education, and services. Remote work and digital public services, like e-government and telemedicine, make rural areas more attractive and resilient. In mobility, app-based ticketing, real-time info, and on-demand services improve accessibility and promote sustainable transport. Tools like digital twins and data analysis support smarter planning. Community hubs can offer **digital access and training for all**, ensuring no one is left behind. Digitalisation must support inclusion, cohesion, and long-term regional resilience.





Resources and Needs as Drivers of Local Economic Development

Strengthening local economies means supporting local businesses and creating attractive conditions for residents. Incentives like welcome packages or start-up incubators boost vitality, while jobs and integration support for immigrants help address labour shortages. Economic development should reflect local needs and use local resources sustainably, keeping value in the community. New jobs should focus on sustainable sectors such as active mobility, local tourism, and healthy lifestyles. **Rural hubs can become economic engines** through tourism and culture. Projects must counter population loss and build long-term prospects rooted in sustainability, innovation, and local identity. Agreements with local businesses, eg. with “Bike-to-Work” programs improve smart and active mobility to access the working-places.



Strengthening Decision-Making and Governance Structures Through New Regional Partnerships

Good governance builds on bottom-up local groups of NGOs, NPOs, residents, and municipalities, ensuring transparent, responsive collaboration adapted to local contexts. **Participation means co-creation**, not consultation, with tools like town hall meetings, (online) surveys, participatory budgets, open calls, or creative formats involving youth and the elderly. Context-sensitive communication will avoid one-size-fits-all, addressing specific challenges and potentials for all gender groups. Inclusive processes — engaging children, elderly, and diverse groups — strengthen trust, legitimacy, and capacity. Co-creation with civic groups and citizens including innovative formats like “reverse consultation” — where public services actively seek out citizens — makes governance more inclusive and dynamic. Above all, governance must move beyond short-term politics toward long-term visions and policies for sustainable local and regional development.



Call to action

This manifesto is a collective declaration of purpose, grounded in our shared values of social inclusion, environmental responsibility, and local empowerment. It is a call to municipalities, regions, communities, and partners facing similar challenges: to join forces, reconnect territories, and shape resilient rural futures. By clearly stating our ambitions and the principles that guide us, we offer a **model of action** that inspires cooperation, political support, and long-term commitment. It is a reminder that **change begins locally** — with people and places — and grows stronger through regional and national collaboration.

We believe that **rural areas deserve a strong and unified voice** in the pursuit of sustainable development. This manifesto is both a tool and a testimony: it communicates our vision, showcases our collective achievements, and supports the creation of funding proposals and partnership strategies. It is designed to connect those who care deeply about their communities — from local leaders and citizens to institutional stakeholders — and to act as a beacon for other regions navigating similar paths. Together, we can reinforce intra-municipal collaboration, amplify our impact, and inspire the systemic change rural areas urgently need.



Audience for this Manifesto

This manifesto addresses a diverse and interconnected audience shaping the future of our cities and regions. Locally, it speaks to municipalities, planners, technical departments, and social and mobility experts working toward sustainable, inclusive urban strategies. Community leaders, young citizens, businesses, and social services are equally crucial, contributing innovation and lived experience. Regional and national authorities — government bodies, infrastructure agencies, and funding institutions — ensure long-term coordination. International partners like URBACT

networks and National URBACT Points (NUP) support knowledge exchange and cooperation. We also call on changemakers across all levels: EU programs (Interreg, LEADER), private investors, and community funders. Politicians, from local councils to the European Parliament, can anchor these goals in policy. Schools, heritage groups, and community organisations sustain local ownership. Lastly, NGOs, academics, and European institutions like the URBACT Secretariat and European Commission drive advocacy, research, and systemic change.

Who made this Manifesto

The ECONNECTING Manifesto for Urban-Rural Linkages was developed by a consortium of eight partners from eight European countries, each representing distinct urban-rural contexts and challenges. These partners include **Berane** (Montenegro), **RRC Ormož** (Slovenia), **Unione della Romagna Faentina** (Italy), **CIM Viseu Dão Lafões** (Portugal), **Clare County Council** (Ireland), **West Mani** (Greece), **Tori Vald** (Estonia) and **Nagykálló** (Hungary). Together, they reflect a wide

spectrum of territorial realities, from remote rural settlements to regions bordering metropolitan areas. Despite their differences in population size, geographic spread, and infrastructure, they are united by a shared commitment to a sustainable and inclusive future of urban and regional development. The Manifesto embodies their joint ambition to strengthen urban-rural mobility linkages through community building, integrated planning, and the development of future-proof mobility systems.



Tori vald



