# RURACTIVE

**Empowering rural communities for change**

# RURACTIVE Forum – Second meeting

## 17 November 2025

On 17th November 2025 RURACTIVE project held its **second RURACTIVE Forum meeting**, bringing together **53 participants**, including project partners, external stakeholders and practitioners from across Europe and beyond.

This online space is designed to **foster knowledge exchange, collaboration and meaningful discussions** on the future of rural development in Europe. The Forum builds RURACTIVE's insights, facilitating dialogue among stakeholders, project partners and policymakers. With the upcoming EU term and the preparation of the post-2027 EU Budget, this is a timely opportunity to assess and **enhance how EU policies can promote smart, inclusive and sustainable rural development**.

**ORGANISER:** aeidl

Task leader of RURACTIVE Forum and formulation of policy recommendation of the project.

📍 **Online**

👥 **53 participants from 22 countries**
*EU institutions; national, regional and local public authorities; researchers; Local Action Groups; NGOs*

📋 **Agenda, presentations and recording: here**

At the second RURACTIVE Forum meeting, participants had the opportunity to learn from the latest RURACTIVE project activities, learn from the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and the project's alignment with the proposal and exchange ideas and approaches regarding the future of rural development and innovation, especially within the proposed, new framework.

The meeting opened with a brief introduction by **Serafín Pazos-Vidal** (AEIDL), setting the stage for a dynamic interactive session and introducing the methodology used during the meeting.

**Francesco Vettore** (UNIBO), on behalf of the coordinator of RURACTIVE, then presented the **latest developments of the project**, highlighting progress over the past year and placing these achievements within the broader context of European rural development. Additionally, **Serafin Pazos-Vidal** presented the analysis carried out by AEIDL regarding the **alignment** of the RURACTIVE project within the **broader Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034** proposed by the European Commission in July 2025.

Following the initial presentations, participants engaged in a policy hackathon set up in **six breakout sessions focused on the RURACTIVE Rural Development Drivers (RDD).** These sessions provided a more granular perspective, working with pre-assigned challenge statements as per **policy hackathon methodology**. The session concluded with a plenary discussion chaired by **Janne Sinerma** (AEIDL), where designated rapporteurs from each breakout session presented their findings from the sessions and left room for Q&A from the participants. To wrap up the meeting, Serafin Pazos-Vidal summarised the session and invited participants to join the next Forum meeting in spring 2026.

# Opening

## Serafin Pazos-Vidal, *Senior Expert, Rural and Territorial Development (AEIDL)*

The session opened with **Serafin Pazos-Vidal** (AEIDL), who highlighted the high attendance and the diverse representation from different sectors, both within and outside the project. He emphasised that the <u>RURACTIVE Forum</u> serves as an interactive platform for knowledge sharing, collaboration and innovation in rural development. He also introduced briefly the methodology of policy hackathon, which was used at this Forum session. The meeting was structured into three parts: an introductory session, where the participants got updates from the RURACTIVE coordinator UNIBO and heard a presentation from AEIDL about the implications of the next MFF regarding policies around sustainable, community-led development. The second part was focused on the policy hackathon, where individuals collectively tackle specific challenges, offering a dynamic space for idea generation, learning and stakeholder engagement. After the hackathon session the Forum continued in plenary session, where rapporteurs presented their findings from the hackathon subgroup sessions.

# RURACTIVE project update presentation

## Francesco Vettore, on behalf of *RURACTIVE project coordinator (UNIBO)*

**Francesco Vettore** provided the Forum with the latest updates and state-of-the-art of the <u>RURACTIVE project</u>, offering the newcomers general presentation on the project structure, objectives, and participating partners. After that, Francesco provided the latest updates from last year.

Francesco provided a comprehensive overview of ongoing activities and strategic orientations aimed at strengthening rural development across Europe. The intervention reiterated the project's commitment to **enhancing the sustainability and resilience of rural areas**, **promoting digital and green transitions in rural economies**, and **encouraging co-creation and knowledge-sharing among stakeholders**. These priorities were positioned alongside efforts to **support innovative solutions in key rural development sectors** and **strengthen policy frameworks for rural communities**, with a specific emphasis on the role of the **12 RURACTIVE Dynamos** as central actors in this process.

During the session, Francesco presented the **RURACTIVE Conceptual Framework**, outlining its purpose as a guiding structure for the project's activities and methodologies. An update was also provided on the **Solutions Catalogue**, where the project has successfully mapped over **450 solutions** and advanced the development of its **Decision Support Tool**, designed to facilitate informed decision-making within rural ecosystems.

Further details were shared on the progress in **community-led co-development**, notably the application of a **four-step methodology** intended to empower rural communities. This methodology is currently being tested and refined in collaboration with the RURACTIVE Dynamos. In addition, Francesco reported on the **Open Call for Innovators**, which attracted **173 applications**, from which **15 innovators were selected** and whose solutions are now under implementation.

Updates were also delivered on recent Dynamo activities, including the organisation of **four local workshops** and the completion of a **stakeholder identification process**, both contributing to local engagement and capacity-building. Looking ahead, Francesco explained that the Dynamos are now transitioning into the **implementation**

**phase** of their solutions, running from **September 2025 until the end of the project**, during which they will be responsible for monitoring and delivering the actions outlined in their **Local Action Plans**.

Moreover, it was announced that the project has welcomed **nine new Additional Dynamos**, expanding the network and enabling the replication of the work initiated by the original group.

Finally, Francesco provided updates on several cross-cutting initiatives, including the development of a **Women-led innovation booklet** and the coordination of **Peer-to-Peer exchange activities**, both aimed at fostering inclusion, mutual learning and broader dissemination of good practices across rural communities.

# The implications of next MFF regarding policies around sustainable, community-led development

## Serafin Pazos-Vidal, *Senior Expert, Rural and Territorial Development (AEIDL)*

In the next session, **Serafin Pazos-Vidal** presented **AEIDL'**s recent analytical work for RURACTIVE on the emerging EU policy cycle and the **MFF proposals presented in July 2025**. The presentation moved from a broad overview of the fundamental changes introduced in the new cycle to a focused assessment of the implications of the next MFF for policies related to **sustainable, community-led development**. Particular attention was given to the potential impact on the RURACTIVE project's perspective, notably in relation to its **six Rural Development Drivers (RDD)** or policy domains.

Serafin first outlined the structure of the new MFF, situating it within key preparatory steps and political signals, including the **Letta report**, the **notion of the right to stay**, the **9th Cohesion Report**, and discussions on the **future of EU agriculture**. These elements were presented as essential context for understanding the direction and rationale of the proposed reforms.

The presentation then provided an overview of the **proposed, new, radical restructuring of the EU budget**, amounting to **two trillion euros**. The proposal aims to significantly simplify the budgetary architecture, reducing the number of EU programmes from **52 to only 16**, and introducing a more streamlined, performance-oriented approach.

In principle, the reform envisions a profound restructuring centred on **one plan per Member State**, the **National and Regional Partnership Plan**, accompanied by a **new Performance Framework**, stronger emphasis on **Structural Reforms**, and, notably, **no earmarks for LEADER or urban development**.

Further details were given on the proposed **National and Regional Partnership Plans**, which would collectively represent almost half of the proposed EU budget. These plans are designed to follow the logic of the **Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)**, being **centralised by default**, aiming to **avoid silos**, and promoting what was described as **"performative partnerships."** While the plans allow for key activities such as LEADER or urban development, these are not earmarked but remain **optional**, raising questions for community-led approaches and their future positioning within the MFF framework.

Finally, Serafin **provided a brief overview of the** implications of the new MFF proposals for the RURACTIVE six Rural Development Drivers (RDDs)**:**

**Sustainable multimodal mobility.** The proposals remain predominantly supply-driven, focusing on infrastructure and decarbonisation with limited attention to rural mobility needs. The Performance Framework overlooks key rural factors such as affordability, accessibility and low-density conditions.

**Local services, health and wellbeing.** Funding emphasises infrastructure and digital tools rather than outcomes relevant to rural populations. Accessibility, equity and wellbeing risks in ageing and depopulating areas remain insufficiently addressed.

**Sustainable agri-food systems and ecosystem management.** While supporting agroecological and digital transitions, the MFF remains fragmented across major funding instruments. Missing indicators for soil health, resource recycling and supply-chain resilience hinder holistic rural sustainability assessment.

**Energy transition and climate neutrality.** Rural areas are positioned as major sites for renewable deployment, but the framework prioritises supply-side capacity. Demand-side equity issues, such as energy poverty and affordability, are largely unmonitored.

**Culture and cultural innovation.** Cultural support includes useful participation and gender indicators, yet rural cultural ecosystems remain undervalued. Qualitative aspects like resilience, fair working conditions and income diversity are not captured.

**Nature-based and cultural tourism.** Tourism indicators continue to focus on visitor numbers and employment, risking overtourism and narrow economic framing. Broader rural impacts and sustainability dimensions are insufficiently reflected.
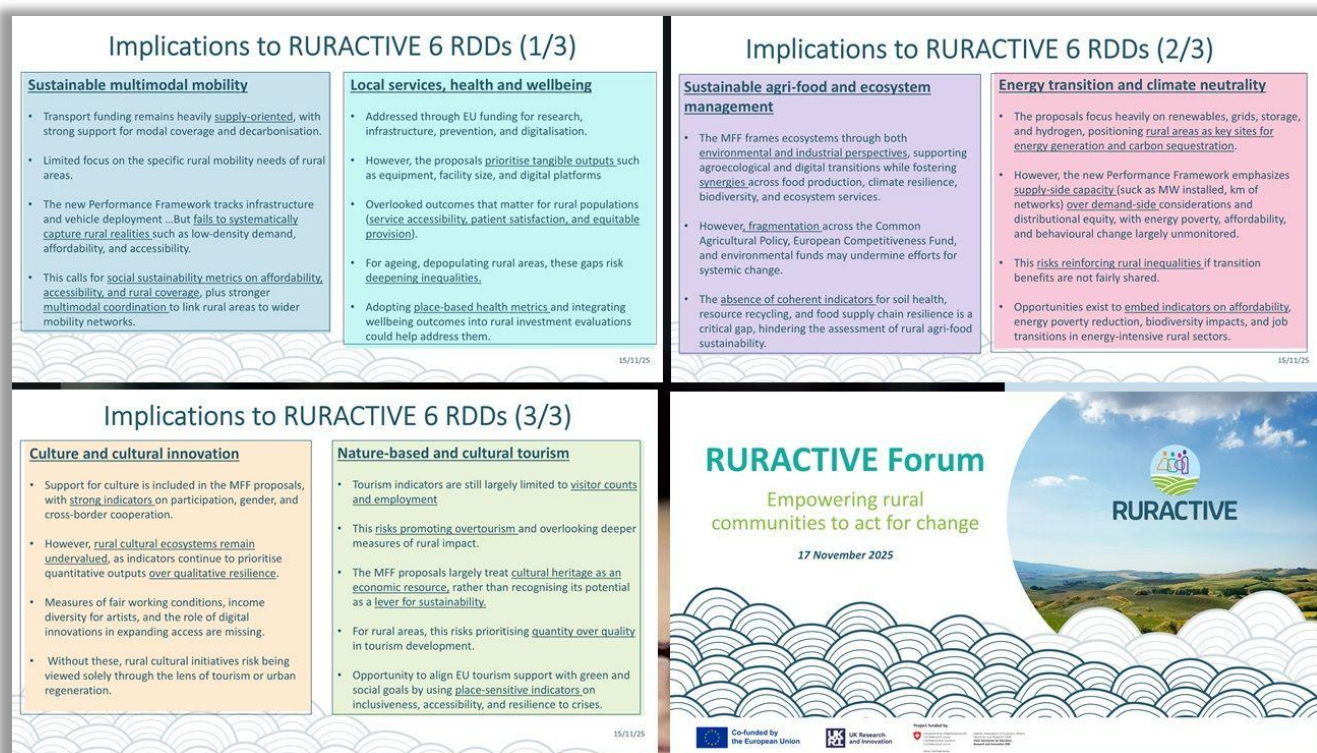


*Figure 1. Screenshots of the presentation of Serafin Pazos-Vidal (AEIDL)*

# Policy Hackathon sessions

**Janne Sinerma** (AEIDL) presented the **methodology for the policy hackathon**, explaining that the session would test initial ideas through **collaborative thinking** and **solution-focused dialogue**. The participatory format brought together individuals to jointly address specific challenges, fostering a dynamic environment for idea generation, learning and active stakeholder engagement. In each breakout session, a RURACTIVE facilitator **introduced the challenge statements and questions** (both general and MFF-focused) shared in advance with participants, who then **discussed them collectively**. Each breakout room designated rapporteurs responsible for taking notes and reporting back during the plenary discussion.

## Sustainable multimodal mobility

Serafin Pazos-Vidal (AEIDL) facilitated and reported the breakout session on the theme of **Sustainable Multimodal Mobility** where they discussed how integrated transport solutions can improve connectivity, reduce emissions and support rural development in line with EU priorities such as the Green Deal, Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy and TEN-T policy. Participants discussed challenges including limited infrastructure, high reliance on private cars, underinvestment in public transport and the uneven distribution of mobility services in low-density areas. Opportunities identified included pooled transport schemes, pilot multimodal hubs, enhanced regional planning and the mobilisation of local social capital through community-based roles such as Village Caretakers, which can also support health, social and essential service provision.

The session emphasised the need for **detailed assessments of transport demand**, including both residents and service providers, as well as untapped demand, social deprivation and local business capacities. The notion of community resilience, including aspects such as civil protection, climate and emergency preparedness and even defense is often underexplored. Discussions highlighted the potential of statutory recognition of the new concept of **Transport Poverty**, mobility as a service and the concept of **Functional Rural Areas** and measures akin to "buy local" in the forthcoming EU procurement legislation to guide policy and investment. Participants also noted gaps in the **MFF Performance Framework**, stressing the importance of integrating rural-relevant indicators, place-sensitive outcome metrics, and considerations of affordability, accessibility and perceptions to ensure inclusive and effective rural mobility solutions.

## Local services, health and wellbeing

Raquel Pastor Carretero (AEIDL) facilitated and reported the breakout session on **local services, health and wellbeing**, exploring how integrated, innovative and inclusive approaches can support rural development in line with EU priorities, including the **EU Health Strategy**, **Cohesion Policy for social infrastructure** and the **European Pillar of Social Rights**. The discussion addressed the **demographic paradox** in rural areas, where shrinking and ageing populations increase service needs and delivery costs, underscoring the importance of targeted financing and coordinated action across EU, national and regional levels. Participants emphasised that comparisons across countries require consideration of differences in infrastructure, accessibility and rural development contexts, with the EU playing a key role in leveraging these differences.

Key topics included the necessity of **robust infrastructure**, reliable electricity, internet connectivity and transport, for enabling digital and innovative solutions. The session highlighted the importance of transforming **qualitative social indicators** (such as accessibility, service satisfaction and overall wellbeing) into **quantitative metrics** for evaluation and monitoring within the MFF Performance Framework, disaggregated by age, gender

and other factors. **Artificial intelligence** was identified as a significant tool for improving rural service delivery, while **inclusive digitalisation** for ensuring accessible applications and digital literacy support, particularly for elderly populations, was stressed as critical.

Participants also examined the role of **LEADER and CLLD programmes** in fostering locally driven solutions and discussed how comprehensive approaches to rural services can advance both the **right to stay and the right to leave**, ensuring that rural residents have meaningful access to essential services, mobility and opportunities beyond simply maintaining an address in their hometown. Overall, the session emphasised the need for context-sensitive, multi-level strategies to address demographic, infrastructural, and technological challenges in rural areas.

## Sustainable agrifood systems and ecosystem management

The breakout session, facilitated by Blanca Casares (AEIDL), focused on **sustainable agrifood and ecosystem management**, examining how sustainable food systems can support rural development in line with EU priorities such as the **Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)**, **Farm to Fork Strategy** and **EU Biodiversity Strategy**. Participants discussed the potential shift in EU agrifood policy from supporting farmers to supporting sustainable rural food systems, noting that the transition is desirable economically, environmentally and socially, while also emphasising the need for inclusivity beyond strictly rural areas.

The discussion, which was reported during plenary session by **Ian Baker**, highlighted key **challenges**, including structural barriers in national implementation through the NRPPs, cultural resistance from established agri-food stakeholders and financial constraints that may limit rural development priorities. At the same time, participants identified **positive forces** driving change, such as generational renewal in farming families, growing consumer demand for local and sustainable products, digitalisation, circular economy opportunities and grassroots initiatives that promote local engagement and innovation.

Participants also stressed the importance of **tools and approaches** to enable this transition, including detailed mapping of farming types, land capability and ecosystems as well as careful stakeholder analysis to ensure rural practitioners are represented in decision-making, and clear implementation guidance for NRPPs that defines stakeholder roles, investment priorities and KPIs. The session concluded that a combination of policy support, technological adoption and community-driven action is essential to foster resilient, sustainable and inclusive rural food systems.

## Energy transition and climate neutrality

The breakout on energy transition and climate neutrality was facilitated and reported by Francesco Vettore (UNIBO). It examined how community-led renewable energy initiatives and local empowerment can support rural development in line with EU priorities such as the **EU Climate Law**, **Fit for 55 package**, **Renewable Energy Directive** and **Cohesion Policy** funding for green projects. Discussions emphasised the distinct nature of energy use in rural versus urban areas, the challenges of retrofitting older buildings and the potential for energy production to strengthen local communities, enhance budgetary independence and foster collective decision-making.

Participants highlighted best practices, including **networks of small communities and local energy communities**, which enable rural areas to implement EU renewable energy directives. **Key challenges** identified include **country-specific legislation**, **limited transmission infrastructure** for decentralised generation, **high upfront**

**funding requirements** and negotiating power with grid owners. Motivation and resilience were noted as crucial, with examples from island communities and villages that maintained energy supply during blackouts demonstrating the social and practical value of local energy solutions.

The participants also addressed gaps in the **EU Performance Framework**, which tracks capacity and infrastructure but largely **overlooks fairness, inclusion, energy poverty and rural job transitions**. Discussions underlined the need for **place-sensitive indicators** to monitor affordability, energy poverty reduction and sustainable job creation, noting that energy transitions can also provide broader incentives for rural residents to remain in their communities. Projects such as RENOVERTY were cited as innovative approaches to integrating social and technical aspects into energy planning and evaluation.

## Culture and cultural innovation

The breakout session, facilitated by Janne Sinerma (AEIDL) and focusing on **culture and cultural innovation**, explored how cultural initiatives can drive rural development in line with EU priorities such as the **Creative Europe Programme**, **New European Bauhaus initiative** and **Digital Europe Programme**. Discussions emphasised the dynamic nature of culture, recognising it as an evolving ecosystem of practices and meanings that extend beyond heritage, while highlighting the potential of EU funding to support scaling of start-ups, cross-regional collaborations and innovative cultural projects in rural areas.

**Maria João Horta Pereira** provided the feedback on the plenary discussion, where participants identified persistent challenges, including the dependency of cultural activities on fragmented funding, the dominance of traditional perspectives in rural settings and the lack of robust mechanisms to capture the **social value and impact** of cultural initiatives. The participants stressed the importance of **qualitative, co-developed indicators**, innovative methodologies and accessible funding tools, as well as the creation of a **common language with local communities** to foster experimentation, inclusivity and sustainable cultural growth. Overall, the discussion highlighted that culture and cultural innovation, when strategically supported, can serve as a powerful lever for social cohesion, economic vitality and broader rural development.

## Nature-based and cultural tourism

The breakout session on **nature-based and cultural tourism**, facilitated by Merveille Ntabuhashe, examined how tourism can support rural development in line with EU priorities such as the **EU Tourism Agenda**, **European Green Deal** and **Cultural Heritage Action Plan**. Participants discussed how EU programmes can help rural areas move beyond promoting the "authentic past" and instead foster an **authentic future** defined by local communities, ensuring that tourism reflects local culture, identity and aspirations rather than external consumer expectations.

**Ozge Ogut** (UNIBO) reported during the plenary session that key challenges identified included **seasonality, infrastructure gaps, overtourism and employment feasibility**, as well as sustainability concerns related to long-distance travel. Participants emphasised the need for **experience-based tourism**, capacity building in vulnerable areas, and enhanced **urban-rural dialogue** to align tourism development with local needs. The session concluded that EU funding and regulation can play a strategic role in stabilising rural tourism, promoting **socio-economic resilience, local empowerment and long-term, place-sensitive development**, while ensuring cultural authenticity and environmental sustainability.

# Plenary discussion

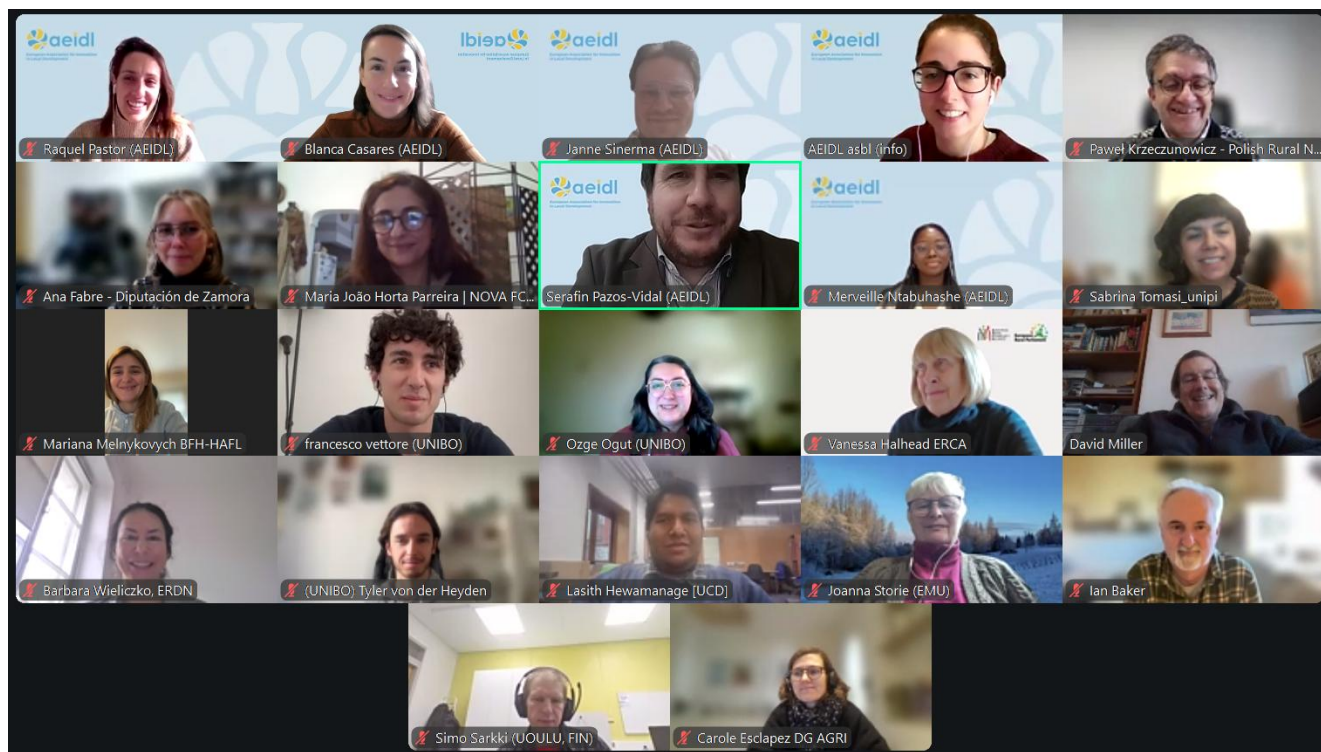## Moderated by Janne Sinerma, *Expert, Rural and Territorial Development (AEIDL)*



*Figure 2. Screenshot of the participants during the second RURACTIVE Forum meeting*

The plenary session, chaired by Janne Sinerma (AEIDL), brought together all participants to review the outcomes of the six **Policy Hackathon breakout sessions.** Pre-designated rapporteurs summarised the discussions from each breakout session (you can see above the *short summaries of each breakout sessions*), providing a coherent overview of the findings on their designated thematic areas. Following each presentation, an **open Q&A discussion** allowed participants to exchange insights, clarify points and reflect on policy and community implications.

The plenary session successfully consolidated the knowledge generated during the breakout sessions and facilitated an interactive exchange, reinforcing a shared understanding of strategic directions for **sustainable and inclusive rural development**.

To wrap up, Serafin Pazos-Vidal (AEIDL) thanked all participants for their active involvement throughout the event, acknowledging the valuable insights and contributions shared during both the breakout and plenary sessions. Participants were warmly invited to join the next **RURACTIVE Forum meeting**, scheduled for early 2026, to continue the exchange of ideas and collaborative efforts in advancing sustainable and inclusive rural development. The overall goal is that the iterative discussion over the successive meetings of the Forum will help review and strengthen the RURACTIVE Policy recommendations that will be finalised by June 2026.