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ESIRA – ENHANCING SOCIAL INNOVATION IN RURAL AREAS

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DRIVERS OF MARGINALISATION IN RURAL AREAS

Deliverable D4.1 Benchmark study on social exclusion in rural areas

WP4 – Research on drivers of rural marginalisation and the opportunities of community-led social economy initiatives for social inclusion



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List of acronyms

ACRONYM	FULL NAME
ESIRA	Enhancing social innovation in rural areas project
ES	Spain
ESPON	European Spatial Planning Observation Network
EU	European Union
FP6	Sixth Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HU	Hungary
ILO	International Labour Organisation
INC	Intermediate Close to a city
INR	Intermediate Remote
IT	Italy
LAU level	Local Administrative Unit
LT	Lithuania
MAP	Multi-Actor Platforms
NEET	Young people neither in employment nor in education and training
NO	Norway
NUTS-2	Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics level 2
NUTS-3	Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics level 3
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PL	Poland
PRC	Predominantly Rural Close to a city
PRR	Predominantly Rural Remote
PU	Predominantly Urban
RS	Serbia

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1. Introduction

The following report was written as part of the ESIRA – ENHANCING SOCIAL INNOVATION IN RURAL AREAS project, which has received funding from the European Union Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement No. 101136253. The aim of the ESIRA project, as stated in the application form, is to contribute to the development of innovative social economy initiatives for rural inclusion and development in rural areas by supporting enabling frameworks, well-interconnected policy architecture and directly piloting innovative solutions which ultimately build more inclusive, resilient and prosperous rural areas.

To reach this goal, (as stated in the Grant Agreement) the project will implement:

- the research of community-led rural innovation spaces able to connect and empower actors, reinforce the social capital and sense of community, considering the great diversity of rural areas within Europe, and eventually
- nurturing and piloting social economy initiatives that strengthen the inclusiveness and living conditions of different groups of population in vulnerable situation, from the improvement in the provision of (social) services, economic diversification, and sustainable management of the natural capital. This will enable to
- stocktake and formulate recommendations for policymakers to better support the third sector and local communities, increasing the understanding of the needs and challenges of vulnerable groups of population and social economy, and
- boost the knowledge-exchange among local actors, building up their capacities and facilitating the scale up and replication of social economy initiatives across Rural Europe.

Part of this work is a set of research called “Research on drivers of rural marginalisation and the opportunities of community-led social economy initiatives for social inclusion”. It includes T4.1 results of national contexts and the comparative study, where task leads, and partners connected to the pilot areas have conducted data gathering and analysis in order to present the situation of the ESIRA pilot areas.

The main aim of this report is to synthesise information regarding the situation of ESIRA pilot areas, and the communities established there. The analysis must reflect the situation of people living in pilot areas in the selected countries and regions, highlighting the social and economic similarities and differences in the challenges they face; to stocktake the drivers of vulnerability and social exclusion in representative rural contexts (i.e., considering particularities of different geographical areas or groups of population).

This paper is closely related to deliverable D4.2 "Multi-level analysis of social economy initiatives in rural areas and their contribution to local development".

2. About the ESIRA pilot regions

The pilot regions of ESIRA project have been selected to cover a varied range of vulnerable groups of population and rural areas. The project plans to gain an overview of the full range of social exclusion experienced in the hardest-hit rural areas in Southern Europe (Pinares Burgos-Soria (ES), Altavalsugana and Bernstol Valley Community and Vallagarina Valley Community within TRENTINO region, and the province of Chieti, and the province of L'Aquila within ABRUZZO region (IT)); Eastern and Central Europe (Cigánd (HU), Zachodniopomorskie and Leski-Bieszczadzki (PL), Jablanica and Pčinja Districts (RS)), and Northern Europe (Druskininkai (LT) and Kongsvinger (NO)).

The term pilot region is used in this report to refer to the territorial units where the ESIRA pilot projects are being implemented. These territorial units are different in size and territorial administrative levels. We must keep in mind that these pilot regions are not the statistical regions of the EU. Some of them are larger territorial units such as Abruzzo (NUTS-2), but most of them are at the level of small regions (NUTS-3) or even smaller administrative units such as micro-regions, districts or valley municipalities.

Table 1 Summary of the pilot regions

Name of the pilot region	Territorial level (if applicable)	Name of the NUTS2 region
Pinares Burgos-Soria (ES)	NUTS3	Castilla y León
Cigánd (HU)		Northern Hungary
Druskininkai (LT)	NUTS3	Vidurio ir vakarų Lietuvos
Kongsvinger (NO)		Innlandet
Gryfice district (PL)		Zachodniopomorskie
Leski-Bieszczadzki, Poland (PL)		Podkarpackie
Jablanica & Pčinja Districts (SR)		Region Juzne i Istocne Srbije
L'Aquila Province	NUTS3	Abruzzo
Chieti Province	NUTS3	Abruzzo
Altavalsugana and Bernstol Valley Community	n/a	Autonomous Province of Trento ^(a)
Vallagarina Valley Community	n/a	Autonomous Province of Trento ^(a)

The two Valley Communities are administrative units in the Autonomous Province of Trento (also called "Trentino" – NUTS2/3).

3. Methodological approach

In the first phase of the project, the partners carried out research in the proposed pilot regions, resulting in regional reports – which regional reports have become the basis of the synthesis report. A common methodological approach has been defined, with research questions to which the reports had to provide answers. These questions have been grouped into 5 main themes:

1. Overview of the territorial structure of the country, and main information on social exclusion and territorial inequalities at national level; main existing national policies to support local development and social inclusion in rural areas; social economy and social enterprises;
2. Information about the region presented in the report and main existing local policies, services and initiatives to support social inclusion and social economy in rural areas;
3. Social inequality in the region, situation of the social economy in the region;
4. Key challenges and assets in the region;
5. Conclusions and possible focus of MAP (Multi-Actor Platforms)¹.

The research questions for each topic were presented and discussed, then the topics were broken down into sub-topics followed by guiding questions and/or relevant indicators.

The research methodology followed a mixed-method approach, using qualitative and quantitative tools to provide the information required. While the proportion of each perspective varies in each report, the emphasis was on the qualitative side. The aim of the report was to go beyond the literature and statistical data available, and, together with the organisations participating in the pilots, to go deeper into the situation of the regions to identify the drivers behind the disadvantages. This is why it was important that the regional reports used locally available information and opinions. The analysis should take the social processes in the region into account, the livelihood opportunities at the municipal level and their impacts, and the points of view of the main stakeholders: local public actors, local economic and social formal and informal structures.

In order to get a picture of the regions/territories under study, the authors of the regional reports have collected indicators if available at the level of the chosen territorial area. We have also compiled a dataset of selected indicators at NUTS2/3 level from the Eurostat database. Since this data is collected according to a common methodology, it has allowed

¹ Multi-Actor Platforms are community-led spaces that play a vital role in nurturing social innovations and strengthening social economy initiatives. These spaces serve as incubators for ideas, providing a platform for individuals and groups to collaborate, share knowledge, and develop solutions to address social challenges.

comparisons between regions and also the position of territories within Europe. However, in most cases, these data are available at the level of European statistical regions (NUTS2 or NUTS3) and not at the smaller territorial units relevant for MAP interventions and the ESIRA project. For these, data collected by the national statistical authorities have been used where available. However, the availability, method of collection and content of these data are not consistent and, therefore, less comparable.

Using qualitative data gathering (expert and stakeholder in-depth interviews, and group interviews), regional reports collected information coming from the following stakeholders:

- local decisionmakers, mayors, representatives of public administrations and development agencies;
- experts or heads of institutions and services (primary and secondary schools, kindergarten, social services, health services, employment services);
- local representatives of private organizations (e.g., social economy organizations, social enterprises, for-profit enterprise);
- local civil society organizations, churches etc.;
- representatives of different groups in the region (minorities, vulnerable groups) local role models, opinion leaders;
- target group members (or potential/actual MAP members) if possible.

In the nine regional reports in seven countries, partners have conducted more than a hundred interviews among stakeholders and experts. In many cases, these interviews were conducted with MAP members, or were part of the MAP organisation efforts, which has a twofold advantage: the information for the reports were gathered via engaged actors, and this way could mitigate possible engagement fatigue from the side of the local stakeholders. The share of qualitative data collection among partner countries were the following:

- Hungary: 6 interviews with the local charity who are the MAP managers (who also shared the inputs from the initial MAP meetings), local social economy organisations, and local mayors.
- Italy: 29 interviews with stakeholders from public organisations, social economy organisations and second-level organisations of the social economy.
- Lithuania: in the first MAP meeting, there was a focus group organised among the members (local policymakers, regional institutions providing social and employment services, local (social) businesses, local CSOs), which was followed by a questionnaire based on the topic of the focus group. 18 MAP members filled out the questionnaire.

- Norway: 8 interviews with people with disabilities, local decision-makers, academics, those employed in local or regional administration, representatives of organizations or services, and members of minorities and vulnerable groups.
- Poland: 19 interviews with stakeholders from social economy organisations, Local Action Group members, public administration, research and academia.
- Serbia: 8 interviews with local policymakers, administrators, and representatives of local CSOs.
- Spain: 30 group interviews with local authorities, representatives of social services and different cultural and social entities, and enterprises, complemented with individual interviews with key informants.

The qualitative information derived from the interviews were the basis of the elaboration on the drivers of vulnerability; they had also given important information on disadvantaged groups in the pilot areas. This qualitative data was also used to collect the assets in the pilot areas.

4. Classification and conceptual grounding

In order to compare the featured territorial units, a conceptual grounding is needed to be laid out: what are the frameworks of rurality, disadvantaged regions/territories, and what can be the drivers of vulnerability in rural areas. In the following section, these notions and frameworks will be presented.

First, it is important to note that in spatial planning and comparative territorial studies, numerous categorisation systems are used to classify different territorial units. As it was mentioned in the Introduction, the pilot regions cover a smaller area than what is available in the categorisation methodology of cohesion policy, where the NUTS2 regions provide the framework for categorisation. This limitation had to be taken into consideration when the available data were presented.

4.1. Rurality

The ESIRA project targets rural areas, so the first step was to assess the extent to which the pilot areas could be considered as such. There are numerous scientific criteria for defining the rural; some area based in demographic issues such as number of population or density, while others rely on structural dimensions or the proportion of workers in agricultural sector (Stjernberg et al., 2023). The OECD typology (OECD, 1994) lists the following categories for Europe:

- 1) predominantly rural regions, where over 50% of the regional population lived in rural municipalities,
- 2) relatively rural or intermediate regions, with 15%–50% of the regional population residing in rural municipalities;
- 3) predominantly urban regions, with less than 15% of the regional population living in rural municipalities.

At the local level, the typology classified municipalities into two classes: rural municipalities with a population density below 150 inhabitants/km², and urban municipalities with a density exceeding 150 inhabitants/km. The typology has been extended in 2011 and it further classifies intermediate and rural regions into remote or close to a populated centre. The resulting classification consists of five types of regions: Predominantly Urban (PU), Intermediate Close to a city (INC), Intermediate Remote (INR), Predominantly Rural Close to a city (PRC) and Predominantly Rural Remote (PRR) (Brezzi & Dijkstra & Ruiz, 2011).

For the categorisation and classification of the EU territorial units, several territorial typologies are used by Eurostat (Eurostat, 2019): cluster types, degree of urbanisation

(LAU level), urban-rural typology (NUTS3 level), coastal areas², border regions³, and mountain regions⁴. For the topic at hand, the most closely connecting framework is the urban-rural typology.

The urban-rural typology is a classification based on the following three categories:

- predominantly urban regions (NUTS level 3): regions where more than 80% of the population live in urban clusters;
- intermediate regions (NUTS level 3): regions where more than 50% and up to 80% of the population live in urban clusters;
- predominantly rural regions (NUTS level 3): regions where at least 50% of the population live in rural grid cells.

This categorisation system is based on the territorial classification known as NUTS (Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics), which is used uniformly in the European Union. The NUTS system has undergone a number of amendments since its introduction in 2003 (Eurostat, 2024). The most recent amendment was in 2024; however, most documents and data collection use the previous, NUTS 2021 system⁵. In this system there are 3 NUTS levels, each with a minimum and maximum size of population:

- NUTS level 1: minimum population of 3,000,000; maximum population of 7,000,000;
- NUTS level 2: minimum population of 800,000; maximum population of 3,000,000;
- NUTS level 3: minimum population of 150,000; maximum population of 800,000.

In addition, the FARO project (part of the EU's FP6 programme) has developed a new typology to address emerging rural policy needs in Europe and improve upon existing typologies. This analysis led to the creation of nine divisions, grouped into three rural classes:

- peri-urban (high accessibility and economic density),
- rural (moderate accessibility and density), and

² The coastal typology is applied at the level of NUTS level 3 regions: it identifies coastal regions in the European Union (EU) as having a border with a coastline, having more than half their population within 50 km of the coastline, or having a strong maritime influence.

³ The border typology is applied at the level of NUTS level 3 regions: it identifies border regions in the European Union (EU) as those regions with a land border, or those regions where more than half of the population lives within 25 km of such a border.

⁴ The mountain typology is applied at the level of NUTS level 3 regions: it identifies mountain regions in the European Union (EU) as NUTS level 3 regions where more than half of the surface is covered by mountain areas, or in which more than half of the population lives in mountain areas.

⁵ This report, built on data collected in previous classification systems, also use the NUTS 2021 classification.

- deep rural (low or medium accessibility and economic density) (van Eupen et al., 2012).

Looking at these two main typologies, we can state that the ESIRA pilot regions are rural areas. In most cases, Eurostat classifies the whole NUTS3 territorial unit containing the pilot region rural (Pinares Burgos, Abruzzo, Altavalsugana and Bernstol Valley, Gryfice District, Leski-Bieszczadzki), while there are areas where the larger unit is considered intermediate, but the place of implementation is in a rural or deep rural area (e.g. Cigánd, Druskininkai).

Table 2 Pilot regions in different rurality typologies

Name of the pilot region	Name of the NUTS2 region	Eurostat cluster (NUTS3)	FARO Type of the pilot region
Pinares Burgos-Soria (ES)	Castilla y León	Rural	Deep rural
Cigánd (HU),	Northern Hungary	Mountain region	Deep rural
Druskininkai (LT)	Vidurio ir vakarų Lietuvos	Rural	Rural
Kongsvinger (NO)	Innlandet	Mountain region	Rural
Gryfice district (PL)	Zachodniopomorskie	Rural	Deep rural
Leski-Bieszczadzki, Poland (PL)	Podkarpackie	Intermediate	Deep rural mountainous
Jablanica & Pčinja Districts (SR)	Region Juzne i Istocne Srbije	n/a	Peri-urban
L'Aquila Province	Abruzzo	Intermediate	Deep rural
Chieti Province	Abruzzo	Intermediate	Deep rural
Altavalsugana and Bernstol Valley Community	Autonomous Province of Trento (NUTS2/3)	Intermediate	Rural
Vallagarina Valley Community	Autonomous Province of Trento (NUTS2/3)	Intermediate	Rural

4.2. Territorial cohesion

Another important territorial aspect of the ESIRA project is the territorial development aspect, which aims to implement pilot projects in peripheral disadvantaged areas. This has been defined using the EU territorial development and cohesion policy category system.

Territorial cohesion is an EU concept aimed at promoting sustainable development and competitiveness across European regions. It focuses on strengthening regional integration, ensuring that resources and opportunities are distributed evenly across regions, and aligning EU policies to support these goals. The policy emphasizes the need for balanced economic and social resource distribution while maintaining sustainable development for future generations. Achieving territorial cohesion requires integrating various EU policies. There has been general growth in GDP per capita and employment, but regional differences within EU nations remain, with considerable discrepancies between capital and non-capital areas, particularly in younger Member States (European Commission, 2024a).

The majority of cohesion policy expenditure is concentrated in less developed regions. This pertains to regions where the GDP is less than 75% of the EU average. The subsequent category comprises transition regions, where GDP per capita is situated between 75 and 90 percent of the EU average. Consequently, these regions receive less funding than less developed regions but more than more developed regions. The remaining regions are classified as developed. The regions are delimited in terms of development at NUTS level 2, with some specific data collections also available at NUTS level 3.

As it has been mentioned, the pilot regions of the ESIRA project exhibit considerable variation in size. Most of them are at NUTS3 or lower level, which represents a smaller unit of national administrative level than the EU delimitation. In other words, these territorial units cannot be fully mapped onto the Cohesion Policy categorization system, and in many cases the same data sets are not available for comparison. However, where data are scarce for the ESIRA focus area, the larger regions that contain the focus area is the basis of the available data.

The majority of ESIRA project sites are located in regions categorized as “less developed” in cohesion policy. These include the Hungarian district of Cigánd, which is located in the NUTS2 region of Northern Hungary, the Polish districts of Gryfice, Leski powiat and Bieszczadzki powiat, which are located in the Zachodniopomorskie and Podkarpackie regions and L'Aquila & Chieti Provinces in Italy are located in the Abruzzo region. The Lithuanian district of Druskininkai, which is located in the Vidurio ir vakarų Lietuvos region, which is a transition region, while the Altavalsugana and Bernstol Valley Community in Italy is located in the more developed Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol region, and Burgos and Soria in Spain are also located in the more developed Castilla y León

region. As they are not members of the European Union, the countries of Serbia and Norway are not included in the Cohesion Policy and its classification.

It is important to note that NUTS2 regions exhibit considerable internal variations in development. A significant number of regions are defined by the existence of inner peripheries, a phenomenon characterised by the formation of underdeveloped enclaves within a developed region. These enclaves often exhibit low economic potential, limited access to services of general interest and a lack of proximity to connections, which collectively contribute to their disadvantaged status (ESPON, 2017). The main drivers of inner peripherality are poor socio-economic situation, lack of access to regional centres and/or services, poor accessibility of services, and according to ESPON research, from the ESIRA pilot areas Soria (ES), Altavalsugana and Bernstol Valley Community (IT) and Kongsvinger (NO) are among them (ESPON, 2018).

Table 3 Pilot regions in cohesion policy categories

Name of the pilot region	Name of the NUTS2 region	Cohesion policy category
Pinares Burgos-Soria (ES)	Castilla y León	More developed region
Cigánd (HU),	Northern Hungary	Less developed
L'Aquila Province	Abruzzo	Less developed
Chieti Province	Abruzzo	Less developed
Altavalsugana and Bernstol Valley Community	Autonomous Province of Trento (NUTS2/3)	More developed
Vallagarina Valley Community	Autonomous Province of Trento (NUTS2/3)	More developed
Druskininkai (LT)	Vidurio ir vakarų Lietuvos	Transition
Kongsvinger (NO)	Innlandet	n/a
Gryfice district (PL)	Zachodniopomorskie	Less developed
Leski-Bieszczadzki, Poland (PL)	Podkarpackie	Less developed
Jablanica & Pčinja Districts (SR)	Region Juzne i Istocne Srbije	n/a

4.3. Regional differences

In order to facilitate a comparative analysis of ESIRA pilot sites, a statistical dataset comprising a series of key indicators was compiled for each region. In the compilation of this data, the latest available Eurostat data were primarily relied upon. However, a considerable number of intervention areas are smaller territorial units than the data collection system employed by Eurostat, where data were typically available at the NUTS levels and not below. Consequently, the data collection process was largely dependent on the data provided by the partnership members and accessible in the form of national territorial statistics. Consequently, the data comparison has been quite difficult, given that the availability and content of national statistics can vary considerably in terms of the methodology employed in their collection. Therefore, the present statistical analysis is based on data at the NUTS2/3 level and in most cases these NUTS2/3 level data does not fully represent the ESIRA pilot sites – as some of the pilots are in a remote, peripheral areas within the region containing them.

In order to facilitate a comparative analysis of the regions in question, a number of indicators were identified in four distinct areas:

- demography,
- economy,
- employment,
- access to public services.

Demography

The first area of data analysis concerns demographic indicators. The following indicators were used:

- total population (2022),
- child population share (<18) (2022),
- old age population share (65+) (2022),
- migration balance (2022),
- total population change (2020-2022).

For most of these indicators, we had data at the NUTS1/2/3 level, with the exception of the Italian regions. For comparisons between regions, data were based on the smallest territorial unit available.

The pilot regions fall into two categories. On the one hand, there are regions with an ageing population and an increasing share of elderly people in the population. These regions are also characterised by a positive migration balance, partly due to internal migration and partly due to international migration. They include the regions of Burgos-Soria (ES), Abruzzo (IT), Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol (IT), Alytaus apskritis (LT) and Innlandet (NO).

The other category includes regions with a higher proportion of children but with a negative migration balance and high outward migration. These include the regions of Cigánd (HU), Druskininkai (LT), Leski poviat (PL), Bieszczadzki poviat (PL), Jablanica & Pčinja districts (SR).

Looking at the NUTS3 level data (where it is available), it shows that in the territories where the pilot areas lay, the population change is almost always negative (one exception is the Lithuanian case), and in many cases the population loss is bigger than the regional or national level. Also, the share of older population is always at least a bit higher than the national level – on notable exception is the Hungarian pilot area, where the share of young people is higher, while the share of the elderly is lower than the regional and national data.

Table 4 Demographic statistics of pilot regions

Level	Region	Population (2022)	Child population share (<18) (2022)	Old age population share (65+) (2022)	Migration balance (2022)	Total population change (2020-2022)
	European Union – 27 countries (from 2020)	446 735 291	20.2%	23.0%	1.0%	-0.1%
NUTS1	ES	47 432 893	19.2%	22.2%	1.7%	0.2%
NUTS2	Castilla y León	2 376 687	15.9%	29.4%	1.0%	-1.0%
NUTS3	Burgos ¹	352 991	16.9%	27.6%	1.8%	-0.8%
NUTS3	Soria ¹	89 145	16.5%	29.1%	1.2%	
NUTS1	HU	9 689 010	19.6%	21.9%	-0.4%	-0.8%
NUTS2	Észak-Magyarország	1 102 064	20.7%	22.0%	-0.2%	-1.5%
NUTS3	Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén	626 477	21.5%	20.9%	0.1%	-1.7%
	Cigánd ²	16 168	25.0%	14.0%	-1.5%	-8.0%
NUTS1	IT	59 030 133	17.5%	26.2%	0.5%	-1.0%
NUTS2	Abruzzo	1 275 950	16.6%	27.6%	0.4%	-1.4%
NUTS3	L'Aquila province ³	288 956	14.19%	25.64%		-1.99%
NUTS3	Chieti province ³	373 717	14.55%	25.86%		-1.35%
NUTS2	Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol	540 958	18.9%	25.1%	0.6%	-0.8%
NUTS3	Altavalsugana and Bernstol Valley Community					
NUTS1	LT	2 805 998	19.5%	21.8%	2.6%	0.4%
NUTS2	Vidurio ir vakarų Lietuvos regionas	1 988 048	18.8%	22.9%	1.9%	0.7%
NUTS3	Alytaus apskritis	135 703	16.6%	25.0%	1.2%	1.2%
	Druskininkai ⁴	19 016	12.4% (14)	23.0%	2.6%	
NUTS1	NO	5 425 270	22.8%	19.6%	1.1%	1.1%
NUTS2	Innlandet	371 253	20.5%	24.8%	1.0%	-4.1%
	Kongsvinger ⁵	49 073	16.0%	26.0%		
NUTS1	PL	36 889 761	20.2%	20.8%	0.0%	-2.8%
NUTS2	Zachodniopomorskie	1 598 259	18.9%	21.8%	0.0%	-4.4%
NUTS2	Podkarpackie	1 968 616	21.1%	20.2%	-0.1%	-5.6%
NUTS3	Krośnieński	439 214	20.5%	21.1%	-0.2%	-6.5%
	Leski powiat ⁶	25 514	13.7% (14)	18.9%	-0.3%	
	Bieszczadzki powiat ⁶	20 702	13.7% (14)	17.5%	-0.5%	
	Gryfice district	56 961	17.7%	23.3%	-0.7%	
NUTS1	SR	6 797 105	19.5%	22.6%	-1.5%	-1.9%
NUTS2	Region Juzne i Istocne Srbije	1 440 363	18.6%	24.1%	-1.6%	-2.9%
	Jablanica & Pčinja Districts	184 502	18.5%	22.4%		

Source: Eurostat except ¹National Institute of Statistics (INE), ²KSH Statistics Hungary, ³ISTAT ⁴Statistics Lithuania, ⁵Innlandsstatistikk, ⁶GUS Statistics Poland

Economy

The state of the economy is a key determinant of a region's opportunities and prospects. The second area of data analysis concerns economic indicators. The following indicators were used:

- GDP/capita (2022), GDP rate compared to EU average,
- GDP change (2014-2022),
- number of operating enterprises (2022).

For most of the economic indicators, we had data at the NUTS2/3 level. For comparisons between regions, data were based on the smallest territorial unit available.

From an economic point of view, the ESIRA pilot regions include some economies that perform well compared to the EU average, such as Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol (IT) and Innlandet (NO), where GDP figures are above average. If we look at the pilot intervention areas within these NUTS 2 regions, we see that they are slightly worse off in terms of GDP and income than their region as a whole.

The regions with average economic performance are Castilla y León (ES) and Abruzzo (IT), while North Hungary (HU), Vidurio ir vakarų Lietuvos regionas (LT), Zachodniopomorskie (PL), Podkarpackie (PL) and Region Juzne i Istocne Srbije (SR) have below average economic indicators in terms of both GDP, income and business density.

Table 5 Economic statistics of pilot regions

Level	Region	GDP/capita (2022)	GDP change (2014-2022)	No. of enterprise/ 1,000 inhabitant (2022)
	European Union – 27 countries (from 2020)	35 400	133.1%	
NUTS1	ES	28 300	127.5%	72.0
NUTS2	Castilla y León	27 100	130.3%	65.5
NUTS3	Burgos ¹			64.8
NUTS3	Soria ¹			63.6
NUTS1	HU	17 400	161.1%	98.0
NUTS2	Észak-Magyarország	11 400	170.1%	65.2
NUTS3	Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén			61.9
	Cigánd ²			101.4
NUTS1	IT	33 000	122.2%	75.6
NUTS2	Abruzzo	27 100	113.9%	77.2
NUTS3	L'Aquila province			
NUTS3	Chieti province			
NUTS2	Autonomous Province of Trento	44 300	122.7%	77.19
n/a	Altavalsugana and Bernstol Valley Community			
n/a	Vallagarina Valley Community			
NUTS1	LT	23 800	190.4%	107.0
NUTS2	Vidurio ir vakarų Lietuvos regionas	19 000	184.5%	93.4
NUTS3	Alytaus apskritis			84.5
	Druskininkai ³	11 500		
NUTS1	NO	81 883		
NUTS2	Innlandet	48 100		
	Kongsvinger ⁴			
NUTS1	PL	17 300	163.2%	72.2
NUTS2	Zachodniopomorskie	14 200	159.6%	75.4
NUTS2	Podkarpackie	11 800	157.3%	55.8
NUTS3	Krośnieński			52.8
	Leski powiat ⁵			-
	Bieszczadzki powiat ⁵			-
	Gryfice district			152.2
NUTS1	SR	9 100	182.0%	-
NUTS2	Region Juzne i Istocne Srbije	6 500	203.1%	-
	Jablanica & Pčinja Districts			-

Source: Eurostat except ¹National Institute of Statistics (INE), ²KSH Statistics Hungary, ³Statistics Lithuania, ⁴Innlandsstatistikk, ⁵GUS Statistics Poland

Employment

The third area of data analysis concerns employment indicators. The following indicators were used:

- employment rate (2022), employment rate women (2022),
- unemployment rate (2022),
- long-term unemployment rate (2022),
- young people neither in employment nor in education and training (NEET) (2022, age group 15-24).

For most of the employment indicators, we had data at the NUTS1/2 level. For comparisons between regions, data were based on the smallest territorial unit available.

In Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol (IT), employment rates are around the EU average, while unemployment and NEET rates are below average. Several of the pilot regions can be considered as regions with average indicators, although the pilot regions in these smaller units often have worse indicators than the NUTS3 regions. In the case of Castilla y León (ES), employment rates are average, but the unemployment rate is almost twice the EU average; in Northern Hungary, employment and unemployment rates are average, but the unemployment rate in the Cigandi district, which is the pilot region, is also twice the EU average. The Lithuanian region of Vidurio ir vakarų Lietuvos has average employment and unemployment rates, but a high share of NEET young people. The NUTS 2 region of Innlandet in Norway has above average rates by European standards, but the pilot region of Kongsvinger in Norway has worse employment rates than the pilot region of Kongsvinger in Norway. The Polish regions of Podkarpackie (PL), Region Juzne i Istocne Srbije (SR), and Abruzzo (IT) typically have employment rates below the EU average.

Table 6 Employment statistics of pilot regions

Level	Region	Employment rate (2022)	Employment rate women (2022)	Unemployment rates (2022)	Long-term unemployment (2022)	NEET rate (2022)
	European Union - 27 countries (from 2020)	69.8%	64.9%	6.8%	5.8%	10.5%
NUTS1	ES	64.3%	59.2%	15.6%	5.1%	8.8%
NUTS2	Castilla y León	67.3%	62.7%	14.9%	3.7%	
NUTS3	Burgos ¹					9.9%
NUTS3	Soria ¹					
NUTS1	HU	74.4%	69.9%	3.6%	1.2%	16.4%
NUTS2	Észak-Magyarország	69.2%	62.7%	6.2%	2.3%	
NUTS3	Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén			6.7%		
	Cigánd ²			14.0%	5.2%	
NUTS1	IT	60.1%	51.1%	11.1%	7.3%	15.9%
NUTS2	Abruzzo	58.4%	47.5%	19.6%	5.0%	14.1%

NUTS3	<i>L'Aquila province⁶</i>	43.0%	33.7%	9.2%		
NUTS3	<i>Chieti province⁶</i>	42.2%	31.7% ^(a)	11.4%		
NUTS2 /3	Autonomous Province of Trento ⁶	53.3%	47.4%	3.8%	0.7%	11.1% ^(c)
n/a	<i>Altavalsugana and Bernstol Valley Community</i>	69.5%	63.5%		0.7%	8.6%
n/a	<i>Vallagarina Valley Community</i>					
NUTS1	LT	73.8%	73.6%		2.3%	9.7%
NUTS2	Vidurio ir vakarų Lietuvos regionas	71.3%	70.5%		2.6%	10.7%
NUTS3	<i>Alytaus apskritis</i>					
	<i>Druskininkai³</i>			10.7%		
NUTS1	NO	77.7%	75.4%	4.1%	0.6%	9.5%
NUTS2	Innlandet	77.7%	74.4%			9.8%
	<i>Kongsvinger⁴</i>	60.6%	57.2%	1.8%		11.1%
NUTS1	PL	71.5%	65.5%	7.4%	0.9%	8.1%
NUTS2	Zachodniopomorskie	70.4%	65.2%	6.7%		9.5%
NUTS2	Podkarpackie	63.4%	56.1%		1.6%	10.2%
NUTS3	Krośnieński					
	<i>Leski powiat⁵</i>		19.6%	19.6%	5.7%	nd
	<i>Bieszczadzki powiat⁵</i>		17.3%	17.3%	4.3%	nd
	<i>Gryfice district</i>			7.4%		
NUTS1	SR	64.5%	57.9%	8.9%	8.6%	13.0%
NUTS2	Region Juzne i Istocne Srbije	59.5%	52.1%	15.4%		16.4%
	<i>Jablanica & Pčinja Districts</i>			10.2%		

Source: Eurostat except ¹National Institute of Statistics (INE), ²KSH Statistics Hungary, ³Statistics Lithuania, ⁴Innlandsstatistikk, ⁵GUS Statistics Poland ⁶ISTAT

Access to public services

The last area of data analysis concerns access to public services indicators. The following indicators were used:

- Pupils enrolled in early childhood education (2022),
- Ratio of population that finished higher education (2022, in age group 25-64),
- Early leavers from education and training (2022),
- Number of medical doctors per 100,000 inhabitants (2022),
- Self-reported unmet needs for medical examination.

For most of the access to public services indicators, we had data at the NUTS1/2 level. For comparisons between regions, data were based on the smallest territorial unit available. However, there were many data gaps in this area and different territorial coverage in each country.

The data show that the regions least affected by difficulties in accessing public services are Vidurio ir vakarų Lietuvos regionas (LT), Innlandet (NO). The regions of Abruzzo (IT)/Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol (IT) and Zachodniopomorskie, Podkarpackie (PL) lag behind in terms of early school leaving and the share of the population with tertiary education. On the other hand, Castilla y León (ES), Észak-Magyarország (HU) and Juzne i Istocne Srbije (SR) show significant access difficulties in several areas.

Table 7 Access to services statistics of pilot regions

Level	Region	Pupils enrolled in early childhood education (2022)	Ratio of population with higher education (2022, 25-64)	Early leavers from education and training (2022)	Physicians / inhabitants (2022)	Self-reported unmet needs for medical examination
	European Union – 27 countries (from 2020)	88.8%	34.2%	9.7%		5.2%
NUTS 1	ES	95.4%	40.7%	13.9%	223	
NUTS2	Castilla y León		39.8%	10.7%	255	2.5%
NUTS3	Burgos ¹					2.5%
NUTS3	Soria ¹					
NUTS1	HU	84.6%	29.4%	12.4%	303	4.2%
NUTS2	Észak-Magyarország		19.9%	23.6%	462	
NUTS3	Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén					1.9%
	Cigánd ²					1.3%
NUTS1	IT	89.8%	20.3%	11.5%	244	3.7%
NUTS2	Abruzzo		21.6%	9.3%	226	
NUTS3	L'Aquila & Chieti Provinces					
NUTS2	Autonomous Province of Trento		21.4%	7.3%	303	3.5%
NUTS3	Altavalsugana and Bernstol Valley Community					3.2%
NUTS1	LT	94.0%	46.5%	4.8%	223	
NUTS2	Vidurio ir vakarų Lietuvos regionas		39.7%	6.1%	250	8.6%
NUTS3	Alytaus apskritis					5.1%
	Druskininkai ³					5.4%
NUTS1	NO	96.8%	47.8%	13.2%	194	4.8%
NUTS2	Innlandet		39.2%		217	5.8%
	Kongsvinger ⁴	97.5%	26.5%			
NUTS1	PL	80.2%	34.4%	4.7%	291	6.5%
NUTS2	Zachodniopomorskie		33.0%		312	
NUTS2	Podkarpackie		30.6%		374	
NUTS3	Krośnieński					

Level	Region	Pupils enrolled in early childhood education (2022)	Ratio of population with higher education (2022, 25-64)	Early leavers from education and training (2022)	Physicians / inhabitants (2022)	Self-reported unmet needs for medical examination
	<i>Leski poviat⁵</i>					
	<i>Bieszczadzki poviat⁵</i>					
	<i>Gryfice district</i>					
NUTS1	SR	60.8%	25.3%	5.0%	330	
NUTS2	Region Juzne i Istocne Srbije		20.8%	5.4%	313	
	<i>Jablanica & Pčinja Districts</i>					

Source: Eurostat except ¹National Institute of Statistics (INE), ²KSH Statistics Hungary, ³Statistics Lithuania, ⁴Innlandsstatistikk, ⁵GUS Statistics Poland

In conclusion, the regions that have designated pilot areas for the ESIRA project exhibit superior performance to the EU average in at least one area. This includes Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol (IT) and Innlandet (NO). *However, it should be noted that the majority of the data are only available at the NUTS 1-2 level, which precludes an accurate assessment of disparities within regions. In the case of these two regions, it is accurate to conclude that the intervention areas themselves can be considered as internal peripheral situations.*

Some of the ESIRA pilot regions are among the most disadvantaged in a number of areas, including Észak-Magyarország (HU), Vidurio ir vakarų Lietuvos (LT), Zachodniopomorskie (PL), Podkarpackie (PL), and Juzne i Istocne Srbije (SR). Even at the NUTS 2/3 regional level, a significant concentration of disadvantages can be observed.

Table 8 Comparison of the regional statistics

Regions/Pilot areas	Demography	Economy	Employment	Public services
Castilla-León/ Burgos-Soria (ES)	Ageing regions, with + migration balance	Average	High employment, higher NEET rate	Less developed
Észak-Magyarország (HU)/ Cigánd (HU)	Higher rate of children, - migration balance or shrinking population	Less developed	High employment, higher NEET rate	Less developed
Abruzzo/ L'Aquila & Chieti Provinces (IT)	Ageing regions, with + migration balance	Average	High employment, higher NEET rate	Average situation, lower educational levels
Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol/ Altavalsugana and Bernstol Valley Community (IT)	Ageing regions, with + migration balance	Better than average	Better than average	Average situation, lower educational levels
Vidurio ir vakarų Lietuvos regionas/ Druskininkai (LT)	Higher rate of children, - migration balance or shrinking population	Less developed	High employment, higher NEET rate	Better than average
Innlandet/ Kongsvinger (NO)	Ageing regions, with + migration balance	Better than average	High employment, higher NEET rate	Better than average
Zachodniopomorskie (PL)/ Gryfice district	Higher rate of children, - migration balance or shrinking population	Less developed	Higher unemployment, lower employment rates	Average situation, lower educational levels
Podkarpackie/ Leski- Bieszczadzki (PL)	Higher rate of children, - migration balance or shrinking population	Less developed	Higher unemployment, lower employment rates	Average situation, lower educational levels
Juzne i Istocne Srbije/ Jablanica and Pčinja Districts, SR	Higher rate of children, - migration balance or shrinking population	Less developed	Higher unemployment, lower employment rates	Less developed

The average situation is close to the EU27 average.

4.4. Drivers of rural vulnerability

There have been numerous studies and reports on social exclusion and vulnerability in rural areas in Europe, including the factors that influence the vulnerability of a rural region or a group of people living in a region (Carbone, 2018). There are many individual and structural factors identified that contribute to vulnerability and social exclusion. Individual factors include a person's unique characteristics, such as age, minority, disability or education, while structural factors can include, for example, the availability and distance of basic services or labour market opportunities (Castells, 2000; Urry, 2007; Cresswell, 2010; Chmielewska & Horváthová, 2016; Camarero & Oliva, 2019). A distinction can be made in the literature between studies that focus on vulnerability, poverty or social exclusion among those living in rural areas and those that focus on the vulnerability of an area. In their work on rural poverty in the EU, Bertolini et al. (2008) distinguish between “poverty in rural areas” and “poverty of rural areas”. While the first concept focuses on the poverty of people living in rural areas, the second concept focuses on the possible risks due to the specific vulnerability of the rural context. According to Bertolini (2019), the concept of rural poverty highlights the unique disadvantages faced by rural areas, which result in a higher or distinct risk of poverty compared to urban areas. It is based on the understanding that spatial differences have a significant impact on economic conditions, social relations, the cost of public services, levels and types of inequalities.

The focus of the present study is on geographical areas, and the drivers of rural vulnerability were approached primarily from the perspective of spatial inequalities. This means that the focus was on the drivers and risk factors of vulnerability in the rural context. While geographical location was previously regarded as the primary determinant of exclusion, contemporary discourse emphasises the significance of connections and access, including the lack of access to resources and the absence of socioeconomic and political connections (Castells, 2000; Urry, 2007; Cresswell, 2010). This also means that there is a still-present connection between the physical mobility of people and their social mobility (Camarero & Oliva, 2019), which could lead to depopulation, and negative migration balance, especially among young people. Marginalisation and vulnerability can also occur within a region, as internal peripheries can develop within a better performing region (Wiest, 2015). In rural areas, disadvantages often accumulate and can lead to further exclusion as Bock (2016) summarizes: The convergence of multiple challenges plays a key role in the marginalisation of rural areas, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of decline. Job losses and reduced access to services drive further out-migration, which in turn threatens remaining businesses and services. Marginalised rural areas face declining incomes, rising costs and a shrinking, ageing population. This demographic shift increases dependency ratios and weakens the sustainability of existing public and private services. It also places greater responsibility on fewer people to compensate for disappearing public services and to work towards reversing the downward spiral. The

critical questions are whether and how these communities can maintain their capacity for renewal, and what role governments can play in supporting these efforts.

In Europe, rural areas are characterised by elevated rates of poverty and social exclusion, diminished average living standards and heightened vulnerability (European Commission, 2008). The Ninth Cohesion Report (European Commission, 2024a) revealed that, despite the considerable efforts of cohesion policy, rural, mountainous and coastal areas continue to experience considerable economic development disparities; and that capital and economic power is more concentrated than the population. Árnason & Shucksmith & Vergunst (2009), as well as Bock & Kovacs & Shucksmith (2014) used a cross-country comparative dataset to show that increased rural poverty and rural-urban poverty gaps are particularly prevalent in poorer countries in Eastern and Southern Europe, a conclusion echoed by Copus et al. A detailed analysis of Eurostat data for the EU-28 countries by Copus et al. (2015) confirms this conclusion.

The average income in rural areas is only 87.5% of that observed in urban areas. However, non-material indicators (e.g. GDP or income) also indicate that rural areas are more vulnerable and more excluded. The study has identified a number of indicators to measure deprivation in rural areas, which consider a range of factors beyond income indicators, including employment rate, activity rate, youth employment rate, long-term unemployment rate, housing quality, demographic pressure, multi-generational households, and low education attainment.

As the previously presented analyses have demonstrated, rural areas are characterised by a distinct set of circumstances and their economic and social vulnerability follows diverse patterns. Rural areas face unique vulnerabilities driven by a combination of socio-economic, environmental, and demographic factors. Understanding these drivers is crucial for developing effective resilience and development strategies. In examining the phenomenon of social exclusion within the context of the ESIRA project regions, our primary focus is on the vulnerabilities that emerge as a consequence of the specific characteristics of the given pilot region. Thus, the analysis is not based on households, but on territories – the drivers contributing to territorial vulnerability in the aforementioned areas were examined. It is important to note that the population residing in these regions is diverse, with some individuals facing fewer challenges than others. The concept of vulnerability has been extensively studied across various disciplines, including economics, social sciences, ecology, geography, disaster management, and public health. Despite (or due to) this, there is no consensus on a single definition of vulnerability. However, there is a common understanding that vulnerability refers to an individual's or group's capacity to withstand or cope with crisis situations (UNEP, 2002; Haughton & Khandker, 2009; IFRC, 2012).

The long-term vision for the EU's rural areas (European Commission, 2024b) outlined the key challenges facing rural areas in Europe, highlighting the complex interplay between

geographical factors, isolation and other underlying factors. These include the dominance of agriculture, poor infrastructure, unfavourable demographic trends, higher unemployment and emigration (Copus et al., 2011). Bertolini (2019) highlights the following risk factors:

- Labour market: specific labour market problems in rural areas, seasonal work or the predominance of agricultural land,
- Demography: out-migration and displacement due to urbanisation trends,
- Education: lower levels of literacy among the population, poor access to education,
- Remoteness: poorer access to services, transport and access difficulties.

The comparative framework for our synthesis report is derived from an ILO (International Labour Organisation) report titled "Understanding the Drivers of Rural Vulnerability" (Lazarte, 2017). In accordance with a book by Blaikie et al. (2004), and also the aforementioned studies, the ILO report identifies factors that may influence vulnerability of a territory to environmental and natural change, and examines the drivers identified in the literature in terms of their impact on economic, labour market and social exclusion. Then the study synthesizes the most prevalent drivers and route causes that contribute to the disadvantaged circumstances of the pilot regions. Some of these drivers impact entire communities, while others affect only a particular group within a community. Accordingly, this typology was deemed the most suitable for the presentation of the areas featured in the report, given that the ESIRA project's primary focus also aligns with these dimensions.

The ILO study classifies the drivers of rural vulnerabilities into three primary clusters: socio-economic, governance and security, and environmental. In most instances, the challenges faced by regions are the result of intricate drivers that interact with one another and reinforce each other. The identified most common drivers are the following:

In socio-economic terms: drivers of vulnerability in rural areas include:

- "Lack of diversification of economic and livelihoods opportunities that make people dependent on (subsistence) agriculture and potentially vulnerable to environmental stress.
- Poor access to markets and public services, which reinforce socio-economic exclusion.
- Weakness of labour market institutions that reduces awareness of different labour opportunities and triggers migration under uncertain conditions.

- Lack of access to health care through social health protection and other social protection benefits, which lead to a lower general health that affects population's productivity.
- Lack of access to insurance schemes (e.g. social security) which provide protection in case of an adverse event threatening the household to fall into poverty and/or indebtedness.
- Insufficient access to information and knowledge on risk management, prevention and coping mechanisms.

In governance and security terms:

- Socio-political upheavals and conflicts can threaten the survival of their livelihoods and productive assets, and can also lead to an absence of the rule of law, possibly increasing abusive and dangerous work practices. These include, among others: Exclusion of rural workers from labour laws.
- Weakness or non-existence of labour inspection systems due to the lack of resources, the remoteness of the work place, the informality, the narrow technical inspector training, government interferences, etc.
- Rural areas may experience the prolonged presence of refugees and internal displaced populations, as a result of a conflict or natural disaster, stressing the labour market when the reintegration process will require new labour opportunities in a depleted economy.

In environmental terms:

- Exposure to risks/hazards such as droughts, natural disasters or extreme weather events can increase or constitute an important source of vulnerability in rural areas, where people tend to rely on climate-sensitive resources (water, arable lands, etc.)
- The remoteness and/or isolation of certain locations can also shape the conditions of the poor or absence of rule of law and government services, which affect the possibilities of certain groups of people to succeed in seizing opportunities to improve their livelihoods, employment and decent work conditions" (Lazarte, 2017:12).

5. Comparative analysis of the regional vulnerability

The comparative analysis is based on the regional reports on the ESIRA pilot regions provided by the partners⁶. As described at the beginning of the document, these reports were prepared during the first half of 2024 according to a common set of research questions and guidelines. The reports used mixed methods: indicators and quantitative data were collected at the territorial level, and qualitative tools provided valuable information to explain and analyse the idea and extent of vulnerability in each area.

First, we present the disadvantaged groups identified in the reports. Then, following the theoretical framework laid out in the previous chapter, main conclusions of the reports in terms of vulnerability drivers are explained.

5.1. Disadvantaged groups identification

The issues prevalent in the featured regions do not impact all groups uniformly. Some individuals or households may possess greater resources, enabling them to navigate the challenges more effectively (for example: they have the means to gain access to sporadically available services – can travel to the hospital, able to drive their children to a better school etc. –; or they can get employed more easily close to their home, because they do not face discrimination). Others may be constrained by a combination of persistent difficulties. As has been demonstrated in previous research, there are certain groups which are more systematically marginalised in rural areas. The existing literature on rural poverty identifies groups that are particularly vulnerable. These include young people (Alston & Kent, 2009; Culliney, 2014; Black & Scott & Shucksmith, 2019; Petrescu et al., 2024), older people (Walsh et al., 2012), women (Buller & Hoggart, 2004; Bock, 2010; Noack, 2011; Bock & Shortall, 2017), and minority groups such as the Roma people (Schwarcz, 2012; Růžička, 2012). Moreover, ESIRA regional reports identified some additional specific groups of vulnerable people as well.

The regional reports identified a significant number of disadvantaged groups, some of which were common to several regions. Youth and young people in 'not in employment, education, or training' (NEET) was identified as a disadvantaged group across all regions. The situation of women, and in particular young women, is also illustrative in many areas, with more traditional family roles and difficult access to early childhood care facilities contributing to their more challenging circumstances. In regions where the population is ageing (e.g. Abruzzo (IT), Altavalsugana and Bernstol Valley Community (IT), Druskininkai (LT) and Kongsvinger (NO)), the situation of older residents is also marked by disadvantage, often due to the difficulty of transport and the inadequate accessibility of

⁶ Available in: <https://www.esira.eu/outcomes-2/>

services as they grow older. In some of the ESIRA regions, immigrants also encounter challenges, as evidenced by the cases of Pinares Burgos-Soria (ES), Abruzzo (IT), Altavalsugana and Bernstol Valley Community (IT), and Kongsvinger (NO). While in other regions, members of minority groups (e.g. the Roma in Cigánd (HU) and Jablanica and Pcinja Districts (SR)) are among the disadvantaged groups.

Youth and youth in a NEET situation are among the most disadvantaged groups in all ESIRA regions. Qualitative data collection has consistently shown that young people in these disadvantaged regions face an even more difficult situation: they face unequal access to education, limited labour market opportunities and difficult access to leisure and community opportunities.

- Lithuanian stakeholders reported that the main gaps were in employment and leisure opportunities and other services for young people.
- The Norwegian report has stated that young people in rural areas grow up in households with, on average, less economic capital; and local communities are often characterised by dispersed populations and long distances to public and private services. The report brings the example of many primary school pupils, who have long commutes, which may become even longer when they start secondary school.
- In the Spanish region where the pilot area is placed, the highest poverty rate in 2023 was that of people under 18.
- In the Polish ESIRA regions, young people have fewer opportunities or no choice of a school with a specific profile close to where they live, and there are problems of commuting to schools with the appropriate profile. Many MAP members said that there are no prospects for young people in their area, no opportunities for development, so they are not surprised that young people want to flee.
- In the Serbian case, one of the main reasons for young people being NEET is the lack of access to quality education and training programmes. In many regions, particularly in rural or underdeveloped areas, educational facilities are either inadequate or non-existent.
- The Italian report presents a widespread lack of initiative and enthusiasm among young people, especially in rural areas. A possible explanation for this phenomenon, given by one respondent, is the lack of activities for young people outside formal education.

The situation of women and especially young women with children was highlighted in several regions. The traditional family model, less accessible childcare facilities and limited labour market opportunities make life difficult for this group.

- In Poland, one of the main factors leading to exclusion is the role of women as mothers and caregivers. The ESIRA regions have more conservative attitudes and expectations about social roles: thus, by staying at home with children, doing the housework and caring for the elderly in their or their husband's family, women become more socially and economically excluded.
- In Serbia, one of the main causes of social exclusion among young women is limited access to the labour market and rigid gender roles. In many communities, particularly in rural or underdeveloped areas, young women face discrimination in employment and limited opportunities for professional development. Traditional gender roles often impose expectations that young women take primary responsibility for household and family care, preventing them from engaging in educational and professional activities. In addition, the lack of support for reconciling work and family responsibilities, such as childcare services and flexible working hours, further contributes to the social exclusion of young women from the labour market and educational programmes.
- The inadequate transport infrastructure and the reduction of education possibilities in the Spanish pilot area affect young women substantially, especially those who have not obtained citizenship.

Older people were also identified as a disadvantaged group in several regions. The problem of access to care and services for older people is particularly significant in ESIRA regions where the population is ageing.

- In the Lithuanian pilot area, healthcare for the elderly or those in need is not easily accessible.
- The Spanish pilot has an over-ageing rate (the proportion of the older population (79 and over) for every 100 adults aged 65 and over) of more than 30%.
- As the region in Norway is considered cheap to live in, many of the newcomers to the region are nearing retirement or are retired; which means they often require more facilitated services rather than contributing to the labour force, which in turn challenges the region's ability to support older people and older newcomers.
- In the Polish regions included, if older people have mobility problems and do not have someone nearby to take them to the doctor, to a neighbour's house, to the village hall, to church or to neighbourhood meetings, they can easily become socially excluded.
- Demographic change places a significant burden on public services in the featured Italian regions, particularly the provincial health care system, as older adults tend to require more frequent medical attention and long-term care. Family and community dynamics may also be affected, as families (and especially women) are

called upon to care for elderly relatives, and communities may experience accelerated decline as younger people tend to move to urban centres.

Roma people are among the most disadvantaged groups in many Eastern European countries and in some of the ESIRA regions. They are typically disadvantaged by lower levels of education, limited labour market opportunities and discrimination.

- Roma are disadvantaged in the Hungarian region, with numerous segregated settlements, lower levels of education, long-term unemployment and extreme poverty.
- Access to education and vocational training is one of the key factors in the social inclusion of Roma in the districts of Serbia. In many Roma communities, particularly in underdeveloped or marginalised areas, there is a significant gap in educational attainment, which hinders their ability to access stable employment and participate fully in society. Cultural barriers and socio-economic disadvantages often result in lower enrolment and higher dropout rates among Roma children, limiting their opportunities for personal and professional development.

Several ESIRA target areas also have higher (than national average) numbers of immigrants and/or refugees, some of them from outside the EU (including Ukraine). Their integration is also often difficult due to language barriers, lack of recognition of qualifications and cultural differences.

- In Norway, immigrants often experience social exclusion due to language barriers – in result, some immigrants form their own networks, which further complicates their integration into the wider community.
- In Italy, immigrants in rural areas and small communities are even more vulnerable – which means there is a risk of immigrants in rural areas becoming isolated in an isolated context. It has also been reported that, especially with the younger generations of immigrants, social workers often face great difficulties in developing labour and social integration pathways for this group of disadvantaged workers. Also, interviews suggest that immigration policies do not provide sufficient incentives for immigrants to settle in the regions.
- In the analysis of the discourses in Spain, migration is referred to as a problem-obstacle, not only because of its implications in terms of broad social mobility, but also because of the "vicious circle" that could represent people who want to stay in the territory but cannot find a) conditions of habitability, b) mobility and transport, and 3) legal regularisation.

In addition, single parent/large family households and people living with disabilities have been identified as a disadvantaged group in several regions.

- In the featured Polish regions, both people with disabilities and their families are at risk of exclusion. Disability is still a taboo subject – it is almost invisible in the public space; there is a lack of appropriate day-care places, but also a lack of 24-hour care, a lack of appropriate activities, a lack of infrastructure and a systemic lack of support.
- In Italy, people with disabilities often face barriers when entering the labour market. Discrimination, lack of appropriate workplace accommodation and inadequate support services can hinder their employment opportunities. Rural areas, in particular, often lack the necessary infrastructure, making it difficult for people with disabilities to navigate their environment independently.

Table 9 Disadvantaged groups in the pilot areas

	Youth	(Young) women	Older people	Roma	Immigrants	Other
Pinares Burgos-Soria (ES)	X	X	X		X	
Cigánd (HU)	X			X		single parent/large family households
Abruzzo (IT)	X	X	X		X	people with disabilities (PWDs)
Altavalsugana and Bernstol Valley Community (IT)	X	X	X		X	people with disabilities (PWDs)
Druskininkai (LT)	X		X		X	single parent/large family households, people with disabilities
Kongsvinger (NO)	X		X		X	people with disabilities
Zachodniopomorskie (PL)	X	X				small towns belonging to the so-called post-state farm areas
Leski-Bieszczadzki (PL)	X	X	X			people with disabilities
Jablanica and Pčinja Districts (SR)	X	X				

5.2. Socio-economic drivers of rural vulnerability

One of the common challenges the pilot areas are facing is *demographic pressure*, namely ageing and/or depopulation.

- The Spanish region has suffered intense depopulation in recent times, with significant outward mobility.
- Both Italian pilot areas face ageing and depopulation.
- In the Lithuanian region, there is a restructuring in the number of inhabitants of the different types of settlements, with a moving toward bigger towns; natural population change is negative, with a growing number of elderly.
- In the Hungarian pilot area, the population is decreasing. There are more newborns than the national average in the district, but life expectancy at birth is lower; the main driving force behind the decreasing population is domestic migration.
- The Norwegian pilot site faces a slight decrease in population; the highest share of age group in the local population is the elderly.
- Both Polish pilot areas struggle with depopulation and the ageing of inhabitants, with a negative migration balance.
- In the Serbian region there is also an unfavourable age structure in the villages, combined with a lack of a younger labour force, and depopulation.

These trends sync with that of what is happening in rural areas throughout the EU: according to a Commission report on the key achievements of The long-term vision for the EU's rural areas (2024b), the over-65 population of the rural areas of the EU has increased by 1.1 percentage point between 2019 and 2022. The report states that while the population as a whole is ageing in the EU, the average age is increasing faster in rural areas.

In the case of monetary poverty and/or social exclusion, however, the picture is more layered. There are groups in all territories who face the risk of exclusion and poverty more severely and are systematically more vulnerable than others. However, there are differences not only in the scope and depth of exclusion, but in the trends as well. For example, in the featured Lithuanian region, the share of persons experiencing poverty has been consistently decreasing since 2018; meanwhile, in the Spanish case the households living in severe poverty and the percentage of households with low-intensity employment have increased. In Italy, it is the specific groups and communities in peripheral areas who are vulnerable and at risk of exclusion; in the Hungarian pilot area, there are numerous rural/Roma slums, and the share of the population with bad living conditions is estimated significantly higher than the regional average, which in itself is the among the worst regions of the country. The Norwegian project area is reported to

have lower earnings than the country average and have a higher share of people living with relatively low income; one of the Polish pilot regions (Zachodniopomorskie) have the lowest percentage of people in households who experienced deprivation compared to other regions of Poland. Meanwhile, almost half of households in the Serbian pilot region are classified as vulnerable.

On the other hand, the lack of diversification of economic and livelihood opportunities has been identified as one of the main problems in almost all pilot regions. In many territories, the employment possibilities are reduced. This is in multiple cases (Hungary, Poland, Serbia) means agriculture; other cases (Spain, Norway) forestry, or (in the Lithuanian case) tourism. High unemployment rates are an issue in many pilot areas – however, there are differences in how unemployment affects genders: as it was mentioned before, there are countries where typically it is women who have lower employment rates; however, in the case of the Norwegian pilot area, it is the men who have a bit higher unemployment rate. Several reports detail the historical background of the featured area, mentioning these as (potential) reasons why a certain area would develop this kind of monolayer economy – however, it is worth noting that agriculture and forestry can easily become vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

The importance of the first sector is also highlighted in the Commission report on the Rural Vision (2024); however, their data also show that on average, the most important sector in rural areas is also the tertiary sector.

Poor access to markets and public services was not as easily identified in the featured areas – however, around half of the reports contained information about either the insufficient access to information and knowledge, a volatile and/or unstable economy, or the poor conditions for investments and for accessing productive assets and resources:

- In the Serbian case, it has been identified that there is insufficient information at local level, and there is difficult access to advisory services. It has been revealed that there is an absence of administrative local capacities. In some cases, there is a lack of information in households on financial aid; most of the rural households have never attempted to obtain a loan too. Moreover, a larger share of the population is dependent on agricultural production income, which is under extreme market instability, due to the absence of cooperatives and chronic lack of investment funds.
- The Polish reports find that in some regions, there is a tendency for a large share of micro-enterprises to move away from full-time employment towards self-employment. Moreover, there is a shortage of employees in selected professions and specialties of particular importance for the region, primarily in construction, industry, transport, as well as in education and healthcare.
- In the Hungarian pilot area, shortage of skilled labour and low educational levels of the population makes the area unfavourable for investment.

- The Lithuanian pilot area is struggling with the lack of business enterprises, especially in the construction and industrial sectors; which means that potential investors remain companies whose development directions are directly related to the development of tourism and recreation, medical services, green and clean industry.

Lack of access to healthcare and/or social security and education was extremely common among the pilot areas. In most of the pilot areas healthcare services are not easily accessible for rural residents, being too far and/or understaffed. This situation can be especially dire for the elderly and those with limited means.

- In the Spanish pilot area, healthcare services face relevant challenges, and although telemedicine could be a partial solution, it is still limited in reach and effectiveness. Health outreach programs, while beneficial, struggle to overcome geographical barriers (isolation and inadequate infrastructure).
- The Lithuanian report reveals that healthcare for older people or those who are in need is not easily accessible; according to the residents, one of the most pressing problems is the lack of access.
- The Hungarian pilot area faces the problem that there is no hospital in the district, only a clinic; and there is a shortage in general and family practitioners.
- Both Polish pilot areas face challenges due to limited access to public services related to the daily functioning of local communities (health care, educational services, etc.).
- In the Serbian pilot region, it is reported that there is “evident” dissatisfaction with the availability and quality of rural services, especially healthcare services and cultural life in the village.

Some reports have relayed that there are accessibility issues with social services; and, connected to this, there is a lack of information in the households most in need, regarding the potential support they could be entitled to. The Spanish report states that while there are subsidies and grants, they are insufficient to address the systemic issues of unemployment and economic stagnation.

Access to (quality) education and recreational (cultural, sport, etc.) services for children and young people is another key challenge pilot areas are facing, as almost all reports have mentioned some issues related to it.

- There is no secondary school in the district of the Hungarian pilot area, so students have to take the bus to school; which can take hours at a time.
- One of the Italian locations struggles with reduced access to education and lower quality of the educational facilities and services; and also, a lack of cultural initiatives and facilities.

- In the Lithuanian pilot area, it is preschool children who have experienced deteriorating situation, as they have worse access to services than the national or regional average.
- The Norwegian report notes that while recreational activities for children and young people are available, it is challenging to recruit those who are already socially excluded.
- The Polish regions suffer from a lack of cultural and recreational activities, especially those suited to the needs of children and young people in rural communities. Moreover, there is no university level college nearby, and secondary schools can be located far from the children; and there is a lack of organised care for young children.
- In the Serbian pilot area, there is also a lack of cultural and recreational activities.

Moreover, three reports (Lithuania, Poland and Serbia) have named brain-drain as an issue the areas are struggling with.

5.3. Governance and security drivers of rural vulnerability

Most of the situations belonging to this category are not applicable to our cases, due to the fact that they are located in Europe or even in the European Union, where socio-political upheavals and conflicts are currently rare, and the countries the pilot areas are located in are states with strong political foundations. However, this does not mean that there cannot be institutional weaknesses which might affect rural communities stronger: for example, as it was detailed in the previous paragraph, healthcare and education are organised in such a way in most countries which makes them harder to access to people living in poor target areas.

In some reports there are traces of problems which can be derived from governance issues: complicated legislative framework for new enterprises, which hinders the starting new business (Lithuania); a suboptimal welfare administration system which is “rigged” for young people (Norway); demand-supply imbalance on local labour markets (Poland); excessive state control and influence over the economy (Serbia).

As it was mentioned before, these regions face depopulation (though to varying extent). The Italian pilot areas, which have a positive migration balance, reach this via inner migration; in the Norwegian and Lithuanian pilot areas there were a slight increase in population due to immigration and refugees, mostly from Ukraine; the other regions face outward migration.

5.4. Environmental drivers of rural vulnerability

Environmental drivers include natural and physical infrastructure available in that given area; the direct hazards and meteorological events; and the remoteness and isolation of areas.

Precarious/insufficient physical infrastructures are broad categories, in which numerous items can be included – and which is closely connected to another factor: remoteness and isolation. A recurring element was the situation of roads and transport – either as an issue or as an asset. The Italian, Lithuanian and Norwegian pilot areas are reported to be well-connected via roads and rail (although one of the Italian pilot areas are described to have transport problems in its most remote, mountainous area). The Polish, Hungarian and Spanish pilot sites, on the other hand, struggle with suboptimal road conditions and inadequate public transport services. The most remote, mountainous areas in Italy are also reported to struggle with limited Internet and telecommunications network coverage, but the other areas, even though they are remote, did not report serious issues in this regard.

- The Spanish pilot area contains the largest pine forest area in the country, combined with a mountain landscape; these conditions add to its isolation
- The Hungarian pilot territory is set in a peripheral location, with few nearby bigger towns, and no bigger district centre.
- Both Italian ESIRA sites can be described as mountainous territories.
- Almost two-thirds of the Lithuanian pilot territory consists of forests; the whole area is sparsely populated.
- The Norwegian pilot area is also sparsely populated and characterised by large geographical distances and numerous small-scale communities.
- The Polish pilot areas are rural, peripheral territories of the country, with smaller settlements.
- Due to the rural and mountainous nature of the area, in the Serbian pilot area there are also remote and inaccessible parts.

Most of the featured territories do not have pressing environmental hazards; in the Hungarian pilot area, flood protection (due to the proximity of rivers) is an unresolved issue, while the Abruzzo region is prone to earthquakes. The relationship between the economy and the environment, however, is contested in more areas. The Serbian report has mentioned that due to under-protection, there has been uncontrolled deforestation, which has worsened the erosion processes in the area. The Italian report also states that balancing environmental preservation with economic needs remains a challenge. Another point of view can be seen in the Lithuanian report, which reasons that there is an

overprotection of nature in the area, which highly reduces business development opportunities in the region.

5.5. Representativeness of ESIRA pilot regions in rural challenges at the EU level.

A number of issues significant in ESIRA's areas of intervention are identified in strategies relating to European rural areas. Examining the most important strategies affecting rural areas reveals a number of connections between the drivers of vulnerability identified by these strategies and those identified by the ESIRA pilot regions.

Demographic decline and ageing: with young people moving to cities and rural/peripheral areas suffering depopulation.

'A Long-Term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas' (Council of the European Union, 2021) identifies the ageing and declining rural population, alongside the exodus of young people and women, as among the most significant demographic challenges. Coupled with a lack of connectivity and infrastructure, as well as productivity challenges and limited access to public services, including education and care, these demographic trends can contribute to rural areas becoming less attractive places to live and work. This is confirmed by most strategies dealing with rural areas, including the Territorial Agenda 2030, the Green Deal (European Commission, 2019) and the Ninth Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion (European Commission, 2024a).

Most of the ESIRA pilot regions face similar demographic challenges. For example the Spanish, Italian, Hungarian and Polish regions have experienced significant outward migration and intense depopulation in recent times. In the Lithuanian pilot region, the number of inhabitants in different types of settlements is changing, with people moving towards bigger towns. In the Hungarian pilot area, the population is decreasing. The Norwegian pilot region is experiencing a slight population decline, with the largest age group in the local population being the elderly.

Economic marginalisation: many rural areas are located far from value chains, resulting in weak competitiveness and investment capacity.

Many EU strategies highlight that, while higher growth has enabled the gap to narrow since 2000, the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in rural regions is still considerably lower than the EU average. Economic catch-up did not reach remote rural regions. Conversely, the lack of diversification of economic and livelihood opportunities has been identified as one of the main issues in almost all pilot regions. In many territories, employment opportunities are limited (Council of the European Union, 2021). Rural areas

are vulnerable to economic polarisation between dynamic metropolitan centres and peripheral regions, as well as broader transformations such as climate change, the green and digital transitions, and demographic decline (European Commission, 2024a; Territorial Agenda).

This is true for many of the ESIRA pilot regions. The lack of economic and livelihood diversification has been identified as one of the main problems in almost all of them. In many areas, employment opportunities are limited. In many cases, this means agriculture (Hungary, Poland and Serbia), forestry (Spain and Norway) or tourism (Lithuania). High unemployment rates are an issue in many pilot areas; however, there are differences in the way unemployment affects different genders. As mentioned previously, in some countries it is typically women who have lower employment rates. However, in the Norwegian pilot area it is men who have slightly higher unemployment rates.

In terms of share of population that is at risk of poverty or social exclusion, the figures in 2019 are higher in rural areas. There are groups in rural territories who face the risk of exclusion and poverty more severely and are systematically more vulnerable than others (Council of the European Union, 2021; European Commission, 2024a). Poverty is present in all of the ESIRA regions; however, there are differences not only in the scope and depth of it, but in the trends as well. For example, in the Lithuanian region, the share of persons experiencing poverty has been consistently decreasing since 2018; meanwhile, in the Spanish case the households living in severe poverty and the percentage of households with low-intensity employment have increased. In Italy, it is the specific groups and communities in peripheral areas who are vulnerable and at risk of exclusion; in the Hungarian pilot area, there are numerous rural/Roma slums, and the share of the population with bad living conditions is estimated significantly higher than the regional average, which in itself is the among the worst regions of the country. The Norwegian project area is reported to have lower earnings than the country average and have a higher share of people living with relatively low income. Meanwhile, almost half of households in the Serbian pilot region are classified as vulnerable.

Limited access to public services: education, and labour markets, especially in remote and sparsely populated territories

Access to public services and infrastructure is influenced by the density and proximity of people, which differs between rural areas across Member States and between rural areas close to a city and remote rural areas. The 9th Cohesion report also highlights the lower access to services, which create development traps (European Commission, 2024a; Territorial agenda). Around half of the ESIRA pilot regions reported either the insufficient access to information and knowledge, a volatile and/or unstable economy, or the poor conditions for investments and for accessing productive assets and resources. Lack of access to healthcare and/or social security and education was extremely common among

the pilot areas. In most of the pilot areas healthcare services are not easily accessible for rural residents, being too far and/or understaffed. This situation can be especially dire for the elderly and those with limited means. Some reports have relayed that there are accessibility issues with social services; and, connected to this, there is a lack of information in the households most in need, regarding the potential support they could be entitled to.

Digital divides: rural areas, mountainous regions, and islands are at higher risk of being excluded from digitalisation and the 4th industrial revolution

Businesses and services, including e-services and mobile service solutions, depend crucially on the level of digital skills, the availability and affordability of adequate digital infrastructure, and the capacity to deploy digital technologies effectively, such as digital service platforms. Internet connectivity is the key prerequisite for digital transformation (European Commission, 2024a; Territorial Agenda). Some of the ESIRA pilot regions experience problems with digital connectivity. For instance, remote mountainous areas in Italy and remote Hungarian villages are reported to struggle with limited internet and telecommunications network coverage.

Climate change vulnerability: impacts like droughts, floods, forest fires, and biodiversity loss disproportionately affect rural and peripheral regions

Rural communities may also face higher costs due to the climate transition. Longer travel distances to essential services such as hospitals, schools and shops, coupled with greater reliance on private cars due to limited public transport, lead to higher travel costs. Sectors such as farming and forestry are more vulnerable than urban economic activities to frequent adverse climate events, such as storms, floods and droughts. These sectors are among the first to experience the consequences of climate change, which greatly affects rural communities that depend on them. This issue has been highlighted in many EU strategies (European Commission, 2024a; Territorial Agenda; Council of the European Union 2021; European Commission, 2019).

Most of the featured territories do not face any significant environmental hazards. However, flood protection is an unresolved issue in the Hungarian pilot area due to its proximity to rivers, while the Abruzzo region is prone to earthquakes. The relationship between the economy and the environment is also a contested issue in more pilot regions. The Serbian report mentions that the economy is highly dependent on agriculture and forestry, both of which have been severely affected by drought in recent years (Hungary, Poland). The Serbian report mentions that under-protection has led to uncontrolled

deforestation, worsening erosion processes in the area. The Italian report also states that balancing environmental preservation with economic needs remains challenging.

6. Summary

European rural areas are highly diverse, however there are vulnerability drivers that are common to many of these areas, although their accumulation and depth of impact vary. The proposal planned to select pilot regions of ESIRA project to cover a varied sample of vulnerable groups of population and rural areas, exhibiting processes of shrinking population, to gain an overview of the full range of social exclusion experienced in the hardest hit rural areas in Southern Europe (Pinares Burgos-Soria – ES, Altavalsugana and Bernstol Valley Community and Vallagarina Valley Community within TRENINO region, and the province of Chieti, and the province of L'Aquila within ABRUZZO region – IT); Eastern and Central Europe (Cigánd – HU, Zachodniopomorskie and Leski-Bieszczadzki – PL, Jablanica and Pčinja Districts – RS, and Northern Europe (Druskininkai – LT and Kongsvinger – NO). The diversity of the Member States means that the regions can represent the Union's variety of administrative structures, legal systems, ecosystems and cultural traditions.

The baseline study showed that, although the challenges faced by the ESIRA pilot regions are similar to those experienced in rural areas across Europe, they manifest differently in terms of their dynamics, depth and accumulation. Some drivers are present in all ESIRA regions, for example demographic challenges, depopulation and poverty, as well as societal barriers, stigmatisation and discrimination. Remoteness and isolation are also typical of these areas. Most of the regions are characterised by the dominance of agriculture and forestry and a lack of diversification of economic and livelihood opportunities, although Pinares Burgos-Soria (ES) and the Altavalsugana and Bernstol Valley Community (IT) provide more opportunities in this area. Access to services such as social services, healthcare and education varies, with some regions performing better than others. Migration and external conflicts are present in some regions, such as Druskininkai (LT), Kongsvinger (NO) and Zachodniopomorskie (PL), but not in others. The effects of climate change, extreme weather events and environmental degradation affect these regions differently: severe droughts or floods pose a serious threat in some regions (Pinares Burgos-Soria (ES), Cigánd (HU), for example), while other areas are less affected.

In summary, the selected ESIRA regions represent both the most significant challenges facing rural areas in Europe and the continent's diversity. This is because a variety of challenges, resource opportunities, ecosystems and cultural traditions are represented.

However, rural development is a fundamental element of the European Union's policy agenda. In the early stages of European integration, the concept of rural development was predominantly influenced by modernisation theories and an exogenous approach. According to this approach, the models and technological solutions of more developed regions can be transferred to less developed rural areas. In the 1980s, a substantial theoretical transformation occurred, and the endogenous development model emerged,

portraying rural communities as active agents of their own development (Van der Ploeg et al., 2000). In the 2000s, a new approach to rural development theory emerged in the form of the neo-endogenous development model, which balances local initiatives with external support and networked governance (Ray, 2006). The latest policy development emphasises sustainability and social resilience in rural development. Mounting challenges such as depopulation, limited service availability, climate change, and biodiversity loss have led to strategies firmly rooted in eco-economic thinking and the concept of resilient rural areas (Dax & Copus, 2022). In this paradigm, sustainable rural development is conceptualised as striking a balance between ecological integrity, economic viability and social inclusion. Contemporary European Union policy frameworks encompass concepts such as territorial resilience, social innovation, and inclusive governance (European Commission, 2024a; European Commission, 2024b; Council of the European Union, 2021; Territorial Agenda, 2023; European Commission, 2019). These concepts also play an important role in the EU's Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (2021–2040).

In line with current European policy guidelines, the ESIRA project adheres to a neo-endogenous local development model. ESIRA intends to take a multi-actor approach, involving different local stakeholders such as inhabitants (especially vulnerable groups), policymakers, for-profit companies and existing social economy organisations/initiatives, to co-create and run place-based innovation ecosystems. These ecosystems will address local problems effectively and directly, while promoting participation, representativeness, sustainability and institutional support. During the project, these innovation ecosystems will be known as Multi-Actor Platforms (MAPs), embodying the project's multi-actor approach and vision for community-led spaces. The MAPs will strengthen the applicability and impact of the solutions and other project findings, providing the knowledge to create a bridge between practitioners and science, co-generating the innovations produced by the project and focusing on the usability of the results. This will facilitate replication and rollout, as well as the co-development of practical knowledge. The situation and ecosystems of the ESIRA regions reflect the diversity of rural areas in Europe. The ESIRA model builds on local communities and resources and can serve as a pilot for how these areas can identify and utilise the inherent potential and resources of the community. From the perspective of European cohesion, it is essential that local communities find solutions that are unique to and committed to that particular community and ecosystem. In this way, the pilot regions' solutions serve as adaptable examples for local development, resilience, and security solutions.

7. Assets of the pilot regions

In the regional reports not only the vulnerabilities and challenges were identified, but the combination of tangible and intangible assets of the ESIRA pilot regions – through interviews/discussions with local stakeholders and group discussions or MAP meetings.

For the more structured overview, three groups were created from the results of the reports, similarly to the vulnerability drivers:

- socio-economic assets,
- governance and local community assets,
- environmental and territorial assets.

Some of the socio-economic assets identified are the following:

- The assets related to the local population: the repopulation of the rural environment is a strategic priority for Pinares Burgos-Soria (ES). The population of Druskininkai (LT) has increased as a result of migration, due to the town's attractiveness as a place to live.
- In terms of employment and human resources, the regions boast a number of assets. To illustrate, in the provinces of L'Aquila and Chieti (IT), the region's universities and research centres serve as a foundation for innovation and human capital development. In Kongsvinger (NO), an innovative strategy to mitigate vulnerability is the municipality's provision of subsidies for summer employment opportunities for primary school-aged children.
- Economic cooperation or social economy can also be an asset. The existence of associations and the development of social capital in Pinares Burgos-Soria (ES) serve to illustrate the presence of a significant social fabric and relationships, despite the depopulation and remoteness of these areas. In the Italian provinces of L'Aquila and Chieti, social economy organisations (SEOs) are a ubiquitous and instrumental force in addressing social and economic challenges. The Altavalsugana and Bernstol Valley (IT) has a long history of cooperative movements, which have been pivotal in promoting local development, social inclusion, and economic resilience. This exemplifies a model of community-driven economic development. In Cigánd (HU), the team already has experience in social enterprises. In Zachodniopomorskie (PL) there are a number of different social economy entities operating.
- The agricultural traditions of the regions have many assets. The region of Pinares Burgos-Soria (ES) has a longstanding tradition of forestry and sustainable forest management, which presents significant potential for the development of the forest bioeconomy, ecosystem services and biomass. The provinces of L'Aquila and Chieti (IT) are renowned for the quality and tradition of their agricultural

products, which offer significant potential for niche market development and agritourism. In Zachodniopomorskie (PL) the natural values of rural areas provide an optimal environment for the development of organic farming. A total of 53 organic agricultural producers and farms are currently operational within the region. The Jablanica and Pčinja Districts (SR) present promising opportunities for the advancement of agribusiness through the establishment and encouragement of existing small and medium-sized enterprises.

- Some of the regions' historical and cultural traditions provide a foundation which to be built upon. The provinces of L'Aquila and Chieti in Italy are distinguished by a rich historical and cultural heritage, which offers promising prospects for the development of cultural tourism and the preservation of traditional crafts. Additionally, the Jablanica and Pčinja Districts (SR) are endowed with a plethora of heterogeneous natural and cultural endowments.
- The majority of the pilot regions possess untapped potential in the field of tourism. Cigánd (HU) is planning to capitalise its potential for active rural tourism and biking. Druskininkai's (LT) regional economy is based on the service sector. Local businesses are strongly oriented towards tourism, and most tourists can be classified as health tourists seeking treatment or wellness services. In Jablanica and Pčinja Districts (SR), the enhancement and restoration of airports in Niš and Leskovac are also considered crucial for attracting investors.
- The municipality of Kongsvinger (NO) has developed a long-term strategy with the objective of becoming a national leader in green growth and sustainability.
- The emergence of the so-called sharing (or gig) economy, characterised by platform-based organisation of work, has opened up new avenues for the development of social businesses in the municipality of Druskininkai (LT).

There have also been assets of governance and local community listed in the reports.

- Some regions demonstrated a robust foundation of community cohesion. For instance, in the L'Aquila and Chieti Provinces of Italy, a robust community bond and a culture of social cooperation foster resilience and facilitate the potential for community-led initiatives. In the Pinares Burgos-Soria region (ES), a pronounced sense of rootedness and belonging to the local communities was observed.
- The existence of pre-existing local cooperative arrangements represents a significant asset for many regions. In Cigánd (HU) the local mayors have established a collaborative framework, which has facilitated the formulation of a regional vision for development. This vision is perceived as a potential source of inspiration for the generation of new ideas. The Local Action Group (LAG) in Druskininkai (LT) has been operational within the municipality since 2007, with nine village communities and the Druskininkai Municipal Council acting as its founding members. Kongsvinger (NO) also has the potential for collaboration

across municipalities, and it would be advantageous to pursue further regional cooperation. Leski-Bieszczadzki (PL) exemplifies the value of inter-sectoral collaboration, with each municipality in the area implementing a programme for cooperation with NGOs.

- In addition, the presence of a robust NGO sector and active citizens' associations are frequently cited as beneficial drivers in numerous regions. To illustrate, the citizens' associations in the Jablanica and Pčinja Districts (SR) are numerous in this regard, yet it is evident that enhanced communication with local governments and joint activity planning are essential. The Leski-Bieszczadzki region (PL) benefits from a considerable reservoir of social capital and a readiness to engage in a range of grassroots initiatives. In Zachodniopomorskie (PL), the number of NGO entities has been growing year on year. In Kongsvinger (NO), several voluntary organisations and social innovations have emerged.
- A significant number of the regions' stakeholders identified potential in accessing EU funds. In Cigánd (HU), there is a robust project application and organisational capacity within the district, which can be leveraged to develop a comprehensive strategy encompassing multiple interrelated projects. The Druskininkai (LT) region's development potential is also shaped by the local population's capacity to attract EU and other funds to the area. A substantial portion of EU funding is allocated to fostering social economy.

Some of the recognized environmental and territorial assets are the following:

- Many regions could benefit from their remote and rural location: Cigánd (HU) has a (yet untapped) touristic potential, according to our inquiries. The natural environment offers a panoramic view, freshwater, mountainous areas which are hilly enough to bike on them – and a living connection to the Slovakian part of the Bodroghöz area. L'Aquila & Chieti Provinces' (IT) diverse landscape, including national parks and protected areas, offers potential for sustainable tourism and eco-friendly economic activities. As well as Altavalsugana and Bernstol Valley Communities' (IT) rich and thriving nature of the territory, which contributes to the citizens' sense of well-being. The geographical, touristic and cultural values of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship (PL), including the Gryfice district, are an excellent opportunity for its development.
- Pinares Burgos-Soria (ES) is a dominant forest area which plays a potential role in coping with climate change.
- Although being located near the border can be a disadvantage, the Jablanica and Pčinja Districts (SR) can use their position for cooperation with neighbouring countries (Bulgaria and Macedonia), making various sources of financial support (cross-border cooperation) available for this purpose.

8. Conclusions

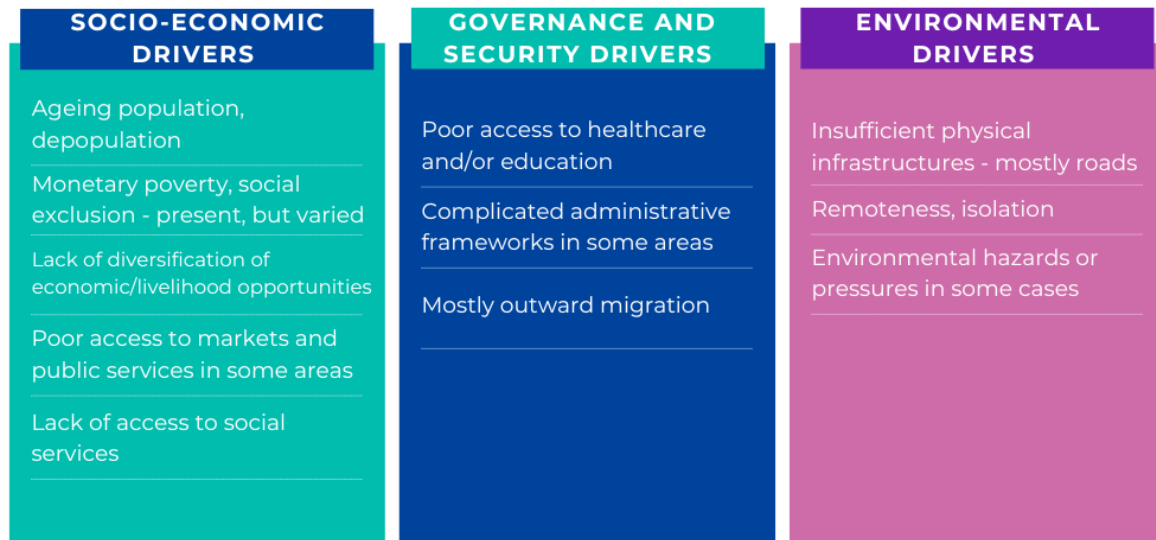
The aim of this synthesis report was to stocktake the different characteristics of the ESIRA pilot areas: demographic, economic, labour market and services statistics, and their main challenges and assets; and to present the latter in the framework of the ILO's drivers of rural vulnerability. This framework has been chosen because of its comprehensiveness – since this typology accumulates many different drivers which can enhance inequalities in rural areas. Also, this framework has been applied to territories which bear similarities to the ESIRA pilot areas.

The pilot regions of ESIRA project have been selected to cover a varied range of vulnerable groups of population and rural areas in Southern, Eastern and Central, and Northern Europe. However, while in this report the term pilot region is used, these territorial units are different in size and territorial administrative levels – most of them are not regions as per the EU territorial nomenclature: most of them are at the level of small regions or even smaller administrative units such as micro-regions, districts or valley municipalities.

The ILO framework divides vulnerability drivers into three broader categories: socio-economic drivers, governance and security drivers, and environmental drivers. Most drivers which can be identified in the featured areas can be classified as socio-economic; however, remoteness and environmental challenges are also present in most pilot areas. A summary of the drivers can be found in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Drivers of rural vulnerability in the ESIRA pilot areas – summary

DRIVERS OF RURAL VULNERABILITY ESIRA Pilot areas



The drivers of rural vulnerability in the ESIRA pilot areas were grouped into three main categories: socio-economic drivers, governance and security drivers, and environmental drivers.

From a socio-economic perspective, pilot areas face challenges such as an ageing population and ongoing depopulation. Poverty and social exclusion are widespread, though their intensity varies across regions. Many territories lack diversified economic opportunities, reducing resilience, and people often have limited access to markets, public services and social support systems.

In terms of governance and security, poor access to healthcare and education remains a persistent barrier. In some regions, complicated administrative frameworks hinder effective governance, while outward migration further weakens local capacities and reduces the potential for sustainable development.

Finally, environmental factors also contribute to rural vulnerability. Many communities suffer from inadequate physical infrastructure, particularly poor road networks, which increases their remoteness and isolation. In some cases, environmental hazards and pressures further undermine the stability and resilience of rural livelihoods.

These drivers of vulnerability are common and representative of rural areas' main challenges across Europe. Together, these drivers create a complex web of vulnerabilities that limits opportunities and reinforces disadvantages in rural areas, highlighting the need for place-based, tailored policy responses.

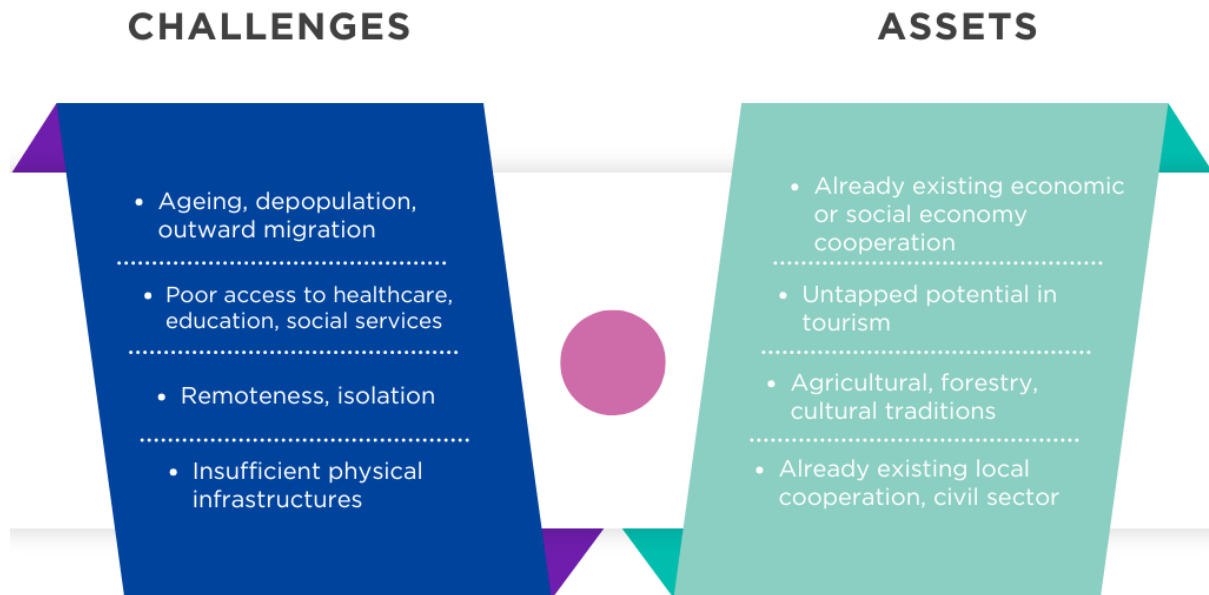
The issues prevalent in the featured regions do not impact all demographic groups similarly: there are certain groups which are more systematically marginalised in rural areas than others. In all of the pilot regions, young people are identified as one of the disadvantaged groups; moreover, half of the pilot areas identified women, the elderly, and immigrants as disadvantaged. Roma people as a vulnerable group, on the other hand, is only present in one pilot area. A notable other group that has been mentioned in many reports are disabled people.

Figure 2 Vulnerable groups in the ESIRA pilot areas – summary



In the regional reports not only the vulnerabilities and challenges were identified, but the combination of tangible and intangible assets of the ESIRA pilot regions, which were grouped similarly to the vulnerability drivers into socio-economic; governance and local community; and environmental and territorial assets. As the challenges concentrated around socio-economic drivers, assets as well in the pilot areas; but some local community and territorial-based assets also been identified. Figure 3 is summarising the main challenges and assets in the ESIRA pilot regions.

Figure 3 Challenges and assets in the ESIRA pilot areas – summary



The regional reports have shown that these areas have struggling with issues which are mostly common challenges throughout rural Europe: depopulation, suboptimal access to services, remoteness. These are factors which are not easy to combat, and to reverse adverse trends. However, these areas are also equipped with traits, networks, potentials and/or active citizens, all of which hold the possibility of creating valuable new products, services or communities, with the adequate guidance and help.

The regional reports identified three categories of assets in the ESIRA policy regions: socio-economic; governance and community; and environmental/territorial. Socio-economic assets include population renewal in areas such as Druskininkai (LT), employment support and human capital from universities, and subsidies in Italy and Norway. Other assets include strong traditions of social economy and cooperatives in Spain, Italy, Hungary and Poland, as well as agricultural, forestry and cultural heritage, which support the bioeconomy, agritourism and niche markets. Many regions also demonstrate untapped tourism potential and innovative approaches to sustainability and social enterprise. Governance and community assets are reflected in strong community cohesion and rootedness, local cooperative arrangements, active NGOs and experience in mobilising EU funds. These assets enhance local resilience and capacity for collective action. Environmental and territorial assets include rich landscapes, forests, biodiversity

and cultural values, providing opportunities for ecotourism, climate resilience and cross-border cooperation. Together, these assets demonstrate that, despite their vulnerabilities, rural regions possess significant strengths in terms of their people, culture, natural resources and collaborative capacity, which can underpin sustainable and inclusive development.

Regional reports highlight a series of structural and social conditions that necessitate intervention. Pilot regions present vulnerable populations, such as the elderly, young people who have emigrated, NEET youth, women and migrants, who experience social exclusion. As analysed in this report, the drivers of rural marginalisation are socio-economic, governance and security, and environmental-related. Additionally, ESIRA regional reports reveal shortcomings in the local social economy. These issues are not confined to the pilot regions of the ESIRA project; several significant problems identified in ESIRA's areas of intervention are also present in other regions and included in strategies for European rural areas. Therefore, the approach of the ESIRA project is particularly important in the pilot regions, since supporting social innovation initiatives developed with community involvement can provide a variety of responses to different local issues. And the solutions arising from ESIRA's interventions will be transferable to other European rural regions and will lead to policy recommendations with an impact at the European level.

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10. Partners

