



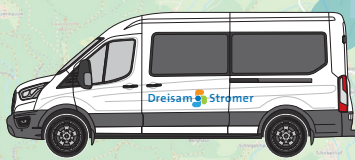
**SMARTA**  
smart rural transport areas

Sustainable shared mobility interconnected  
with public transport in European rural areas

# Policy Recommendations for Sustainable Shared Mobility and Public Transport in European rural areas



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## SMARTA

Sustainable shared mobility interconnected with public transport in European rural areas (developing the concept of 'smart rural transport areas' [SMARTA])

### Policy Recommendations for Sustainable Shared Mobility and Public Transport in European rural areas

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#### Edited by

Andrea Lorenzini, Giorgio Ambrosino and Brendan Finn  
MemEx srl

[andrea.lorenzini@memexitaly.it](mailto:andrea.lorenzini@memexitaly.it)

#### Produced by

The SMARTA Consortium

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#### Cover pictures credits

John Wallis, Claudio Disperati, Stefan Saumer

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# 1. Overview

SMARTA proposes a European-level initiative in the domain of rural mobility. This document sets out the reasons for this. First, it introduces the key challenges of mobility in Europe's rural areas from mobility, transport provision, and policy points of view. Then, it highlights why there is a need and justification for an EU action. It proposes three policy pathways that enable the EU Member States to develop comprehensive policies and frameworks for rural mobility. It also gives indications on how to ensure these are delivered at the local level throughout their territory.

# 2. Europe's rural areas

Given the strong trends of urbanisation over the past few centuries, coupled with the focus on urban areas as hubs for social and economic development, it is easy to overlook the fact that Europe is still a predominantly rural territory. The vast majority (about 75%<sup>1</sup>) of Europe's physical area is rural, with low to moderate population density, and consisting of open countryside, rural and mountain villages, and smaller towns. Even Europe's predominantly "urban" areas consist of relatively small built-up areas, surrounded by peri-urban and largely rural hinterlands of moderate population density. In terms of population, depending on how one defines "rural", between one quarter to one third of Europe's entire population lives in "rural areas"<sup>2</sup>. The apparently-small scale of the individual localities masks that collectively they are very substantial in spatial and population terms, not to mention their vital importance in Europe's food production, ecology, culture and social fabric. It is self-evident that the health and effective functioning of Europe's rural areas is vital to Europe's overall well-being. It is equally self-evident that a wide range of Europe's goals and policies cannot be properly fulfilled unless they are fully inclusive of Europe's rural areas and recognise its diversity.

Europe's rural areas are extremely diverse, which can make it particularly challenging to achieve outcomes or implement change Europe-wide. Beyond obvious factors, such as, culture, language and geography, there are influencing factors such as wealth and economic development, both within and between Member States and Regions. When working with

<sup>1</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Territorial\\_typologies#Typologies](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Territorial_typologies#Typologies)

<sup>2</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Territorial\\_typologies\\_manual\\_-\\_urban-rural\\_typology](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Territorial_typologies_manual_-_urban-rural_typology)

topics such as regional development and rural mobility, three factors of diversity must be recognised:

- Frameworks: meaning the institutional and organisational arrangements, the degree of local autonomy and self-determination, the policies and priorities for an area, the allocation of responsibilities, financing, etc.

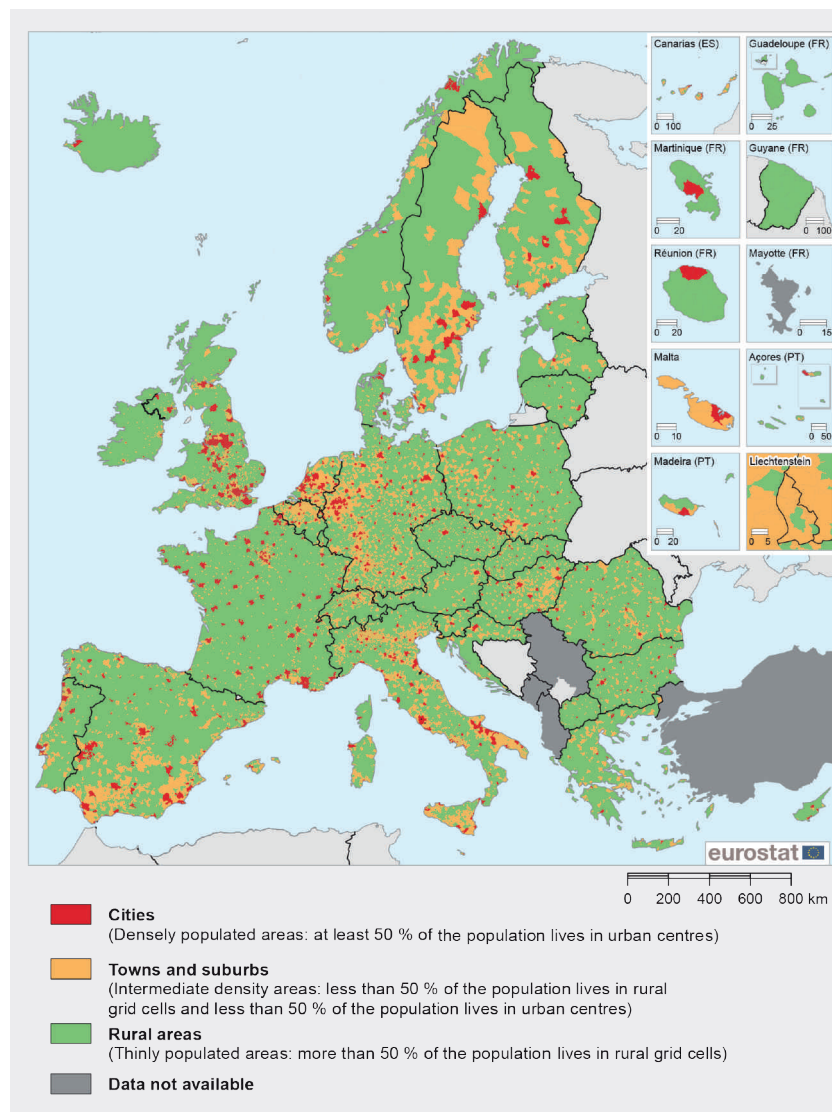


Figure 1 - Degree of urbanisation for local administrative units level 2 (LAU2). Source: Eurostat, JRC and European Commission Directorate-General for Regional Policy, August 2017



- “Trajectory”: whether an area is on an upward trajectory (e.g., benefiting from being in a metropolitan hinterland, gaining new population and investment); if it is stable and maintaining its position; if it is on a downward trajectory, experiencing loss of population, employment and services; or whether it has been depressed for a long period.
- Proximity or remoteness relative to urban centres, facilities and transport hubs.

These, alongside several other factors, will determine the needs, challenges, appropriate solutions, and feasibility for a given area.

SMARTA Project recognises and seeks to understand these issues. Rural mobility needs to be seen within the broader context of development and initiatives of the rural areas themselves. Thus, mobility is viewed not as an end in itself, but rather as a contributor to rural and regional development; to the enhancement of life, communities, and businesses in rural areas; and to the achievement of local and global goals, including combatting climate change.

### 3. The challenge of mobility in rural areas

By the initiative of the European Parliament, SMARTA set out in May 2018 to: (i) understand existing frameworks for rural mobility across Europe, and how these can be improved; (ii) to gain knowledge of the

*With good mobility, a person has access to jobs, education, health and social services, leisure amenities and social life*

mobility problems, needs, and preferences of people living in and visiting rural areas; and (iii) to understand how rural mobility Good Practices and solutions can be used to inspire enhanced rural mobility services. In essence, SMARTA looked at “**Rethinking Rural Mobility**” for an inclusive, prosperous, and sustainable Europe.

Mobility is a major cross-cutting issue addressing several aspects of human beings, and in turn of communities. Being able to get about is a basic freedom, enabling a person to fully participate in society and avail of opportunities. With good mobility, a person has access to jobs, education, health and social services, leisure amenities and social life.

However, when mobility is lacking for a person or for an area, it has substantial negative impacts on individuals, households, communities, businesses and rural development. If people cannot access what they need or wish to do, or avail of opportunities, their life is constrained to a lesser or greater degree. It is increasingly recognised as an essential need for every person to have affordable, accessible mobility that meets

their needs. It is also recognised that lack of mobility services inhibits a rural area, impacting primarily those who are already less-advantaged, and contributing to people and families leaving an area.

In recent years, transportation sector policy has rightly paid strong attention to metropolitan and urban areas. Dedicated initiatives, strategies and funding programs have been mobilised to ensure high-quality mobility, reduce traffic congestion, promote sustainable transport modes, and achieve zero-emissions cities. This shows what can be achieved, when the will is there and resources are allocated. In contrast, there has not been similar attention to mobility in rural areas. In the absence of guiding policy or structured programs to ensure sustainable mobility, the inevitable consequence has been that rural mobility is “solved” by the people themselves, relying almost entirely on personal means of transport.

*Today, rural mobility is characterised by almost total dependence on the private car*

At the **mobility level**, people in rural areas, including small towns and villages, are heavily dependent on private modes of transport for almost all of their travel, except for what they can reach on foot. Anyone without a car or other form of personal transport is dependent on the limited available public transport, on lifts from others, or on expensive means such as taxi. The low level of organised local mobility services often means that it is difficult to connect to/from longer-distance services, or that people must allow extra time to be sure to complete their journey.

When travelling to regional/county towns, there is sometimes only a short time available before the departure of the return service. In rural areas, it can often be quite difficult to get to the available transport due to distance of houses from the road/stop, the walking conditions, etc. Children throughout the regions/counties usually have reasonable access to/from school, but very few have the possibility for independent travel. This is a particular constraint for teenage children and places a large burden on parents for lift-giving. Figure 2 shows how **lack of policy and responsibilities** leads to **limited supply of mobility services**, which leads to **limited mobility for people without cars**.

At the **transport provision level**:

- European Regions and counties, when viewed at high-level, are generally well served by the national and regional networks, and they are well connected to both the capital cities and to other regional centres. The medium towns also tend to be reasonably well connected to the national network, with reasonable service levels. Regional and

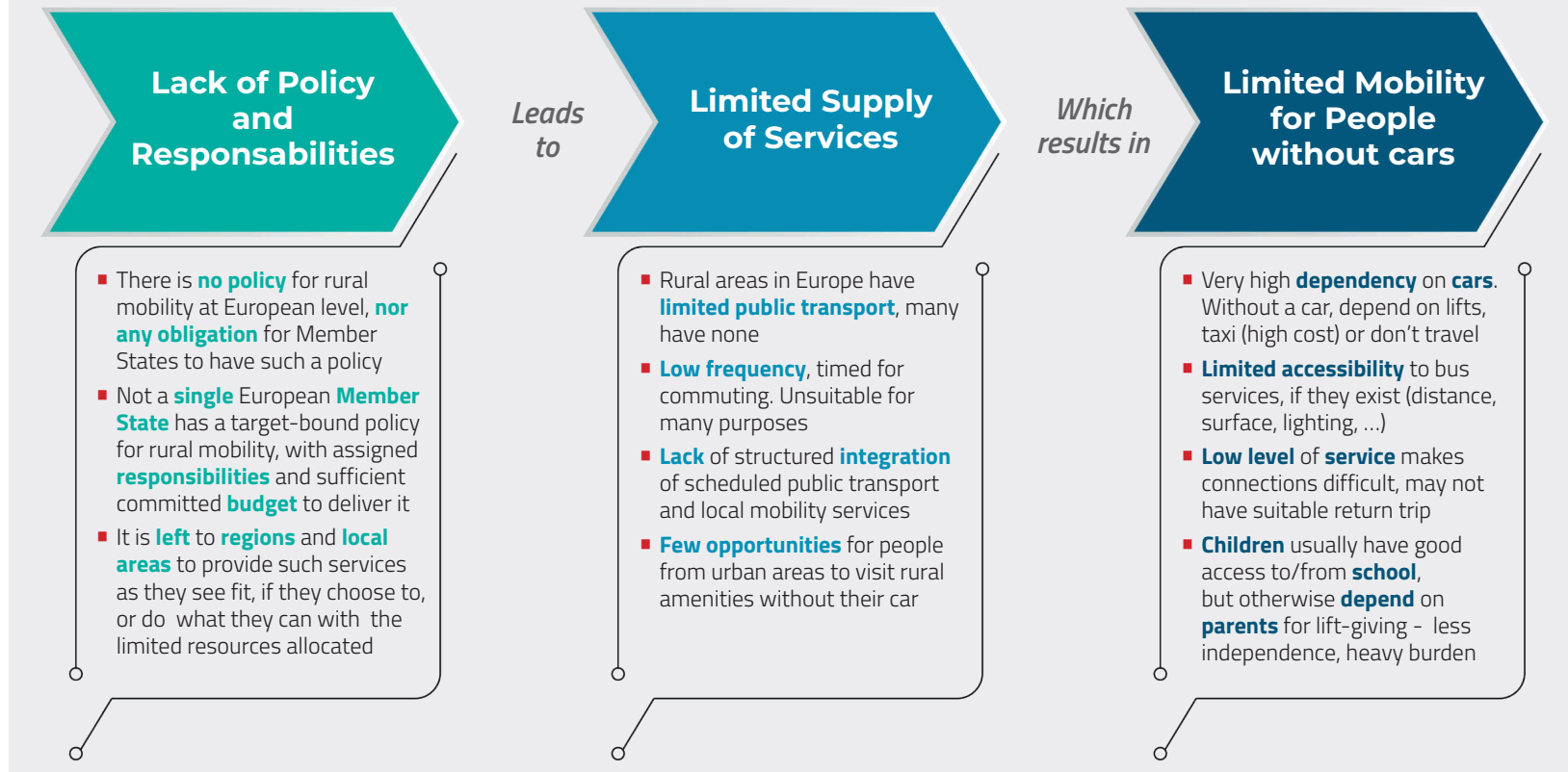


Figure 2 - Rural mobility issues in Europe

local routes provide good coverage but they tend to have lower service levels, mainly catering to commuting times.

- Towns and villages on the primary roads are served by passing routes, whereas towns and villages off the main road network invariably have less or no bus service. The challenge for residents of the smaller towns, villages and rural areas is the availability of suitable connection to/from the scheduled bus stop locations, where they exist.
- Most rural areas in Europe have limited public transport at best. Many areas have no public transport at all, except where they are fortunate to have inter-urban services passing through. However, these often have limited stopping places and may not serve many communities along their route. Where local public transport is available in rural areas, frequency is usually low. When only available at commuting times, it is impractical for daytime purposes such as attending social services, healthcare, shopping, training, etc.
- There tends to be weak or absent connectivity within the regions/

counties, either to access destinations within the county or to connect with the national/regional route network. This lack of connectivity works both ways. It also means that people in towns, especially the significant number of tourists and visitors, cannot visit locations and attractions around the county without a car.

- There is usually little structured integration of public transport services operating in or through counties and regions, neither with local mobility services nor with various forms of shared mobility services. Consequently, services are not timed or managed to ensure good connections, for example between local and national/regional routes.
- The issues at mobility and transport-level sometimes can be improved by innovative good practices in rural shared mobility, including digital solutions and intelligent services. However, technology solutions cannot overcome fundamental problems such as of lack of supply or organisational disconnects. Technology, although valuable, should be viewed as an "enhancer" of mobility, not as a solution in itself.

The deficits in rural mobility have not come about by chance. SMARTA project has examined the policy and institutional frameworks within which rural mobility sits, for each of the EU Member States<sup>3</sup>.

The key findings are:

- **In most Member States, there is no “Framework for Rural Mobility”** in the sense of a framework that specifically recognises and is designed for mobility in rural areas. Mobility in rural areas is usually within generalised frameworks, which may or may not acknowledge some aspects for rural areas.

*The policy layer currently pays little attention and makes few commitments to rural mobility*

Latvia is the only EU country that has been identified to set national targets for rural mobility and assign specific responsibility for achieving it,

but effectiveness is limited as it lacks the targeted funding allocation mechanisms required to achieve the intended mobility levels.

- Most importantly, Member States lack policies that set clear goals and targets, assign clear responsibilities and define the funding mechanisms that will enable the targets to be achieved.
- Some Member States have autonomy at the level of their constituent States/Regions (and equivalent in local terminology), such that the framework in which rural mobility sits can be quite different from one part of the Member State to another (e.g. in Belgium and in Germany). For example, **the Flanders region has developed the concept of “mobility as a right”**, so that over the past decade mobility services must be provided in direct relation to the population density. This concept is currently being revised to a concept of “Basic Accessibility”.
- Only four EU Member States have a comprehensive system of **specific-purpose units that coordinate a range of rural mobility services** in the coverage area, including those for social and healthcare-oriented target groups. Denmark has a comprehensive national scheme (FlexDenmark) which coordinates the regional units, and Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg are organised at the regional level. However, this is about coverage and coordination, and not about achieving specified levels of general mobility in rural areas.
- There is no common methodology for extending a metropolitan SUMP to its hinterland, and no methodology at all for developing a **SUMP-equivalent for a predominantly rural area**. Slovenia is the only EU Member State that is reported to have SUMP-equivalents as regular practice. At the sub-national level, Flanders (BE) has made considerable advances with many areas having SUMP-equivalents.

In summary, throughout the EU, there are structural weaknesses in the Frameworks within rural shared mobility sits. The fundamental issue is at the policy layer, which currently pays little attention and makes few commitments to rural mobility. This impacts all other aspects of the framework, leading to weak outcomes for rural mobility.

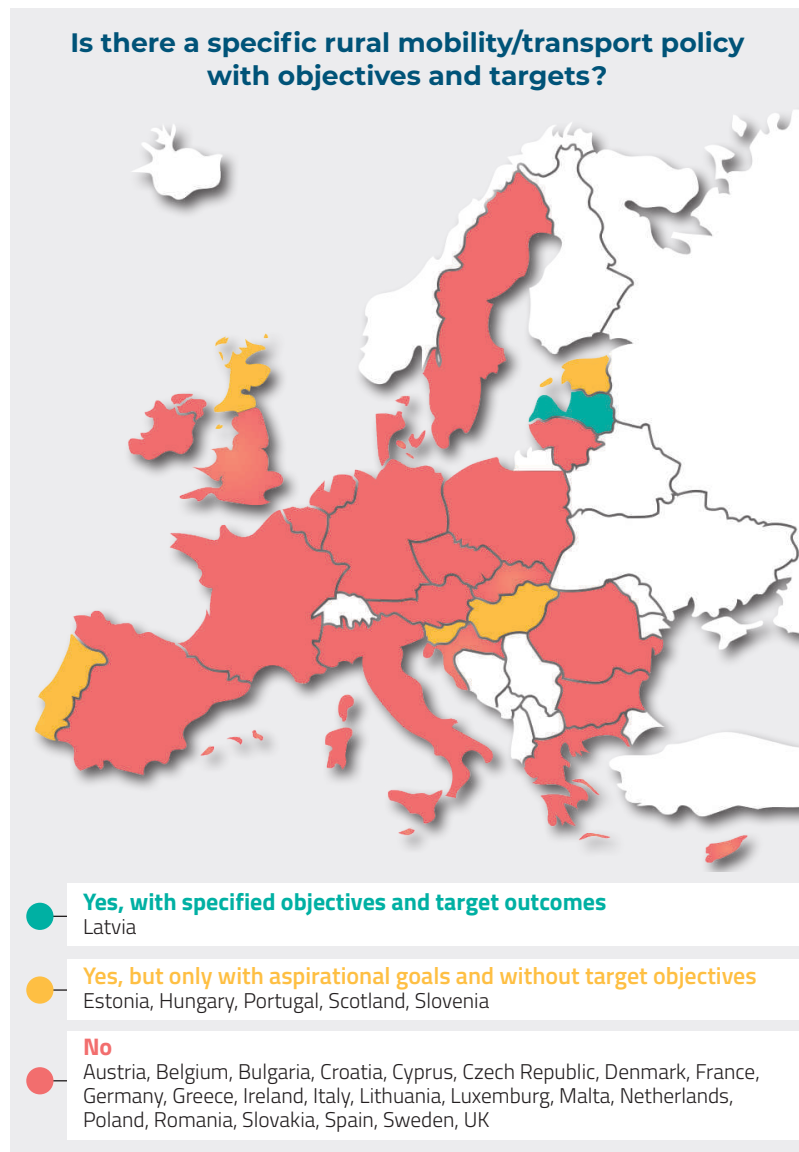


Figure 3 - Presence of specific rural mobility/transport policy with objectives and targets.  
Source: SMARTA Project elaboration

<sup>3</sup> <https://ruralsharedmobility.eu/insight-papers-page/>

## 4. The need for an EU action

Why should Europe Act on Rural Mobility? Why is this a relevant issue? 'Rural Europe' covers more than 75% of Europe's territory and comprises about 137 million people. Just over one quarter of the population of the EU-27 live in rural areas. These areas consist of highly-varied contexts, from metropolitan hinterlands to clusters of small towns and villages, active countryside and sparsely populated countryside. Over the past three decades, national and local governments have developed comprehensive policies and programs for sustainable urban mobility, have invested heavily in infrastructure and technologies for mobility and now provide substantial financial support for its day-to-day operation. In

urbanised Europe, most people have choices about how they travel. By contrast, there have been no comparable policies or programs for rural mobility and related transport services, little investment in infrastructure (other than road and rail for inter-city movements) and minimal financial support for local rural mobility.

Many of these 137 million rural residents do not have the availability of mobility solutions such as public transport and shared mobility. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the overall transportation system have further exacerbated the situation by reducing existing transport services or the maximum permitted capacity of the vehicles,

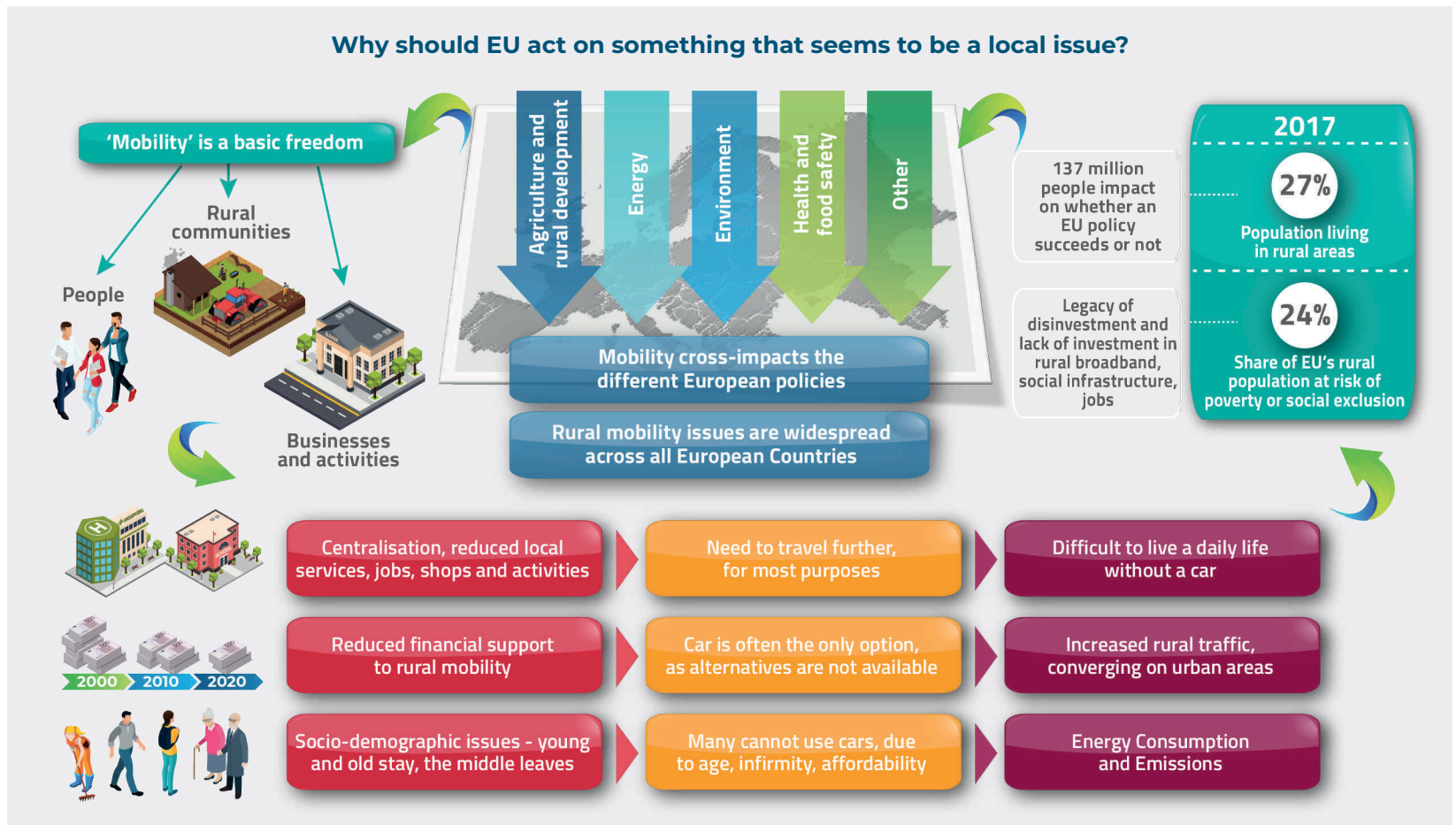


Figure 4 - The need for an EU intervention



thus increasing car-dependency even more. Various forms of traditional and innovative shared mobility such as car-pooling, organised lift-giving and e-hitchhiking have been restricted or ceased due to safe distancing requirements, reducing further the mobility options for those without a car.

Rural areas are active places, with their own specific economies and microcosms. Small towns and villages are the first-layer hub for the agricultural, industrial, extractive or leisure activities in a locality, as well

*The classic opinion is “in rural areas, everyone has a car”. Of course, this is not true.*

as providing a focal point for the community. By their nature, villages are small-scale places with a limited range of facilities. Many villages that were self-contained in previous generations are no longer so. As public and commercial services continue to be

centralised, or made virtual and withdrawn from communities, the gap widens. People must travel further and more often to access what they and their businesses need. Mobility is one of the essential enablers for keeping villages and rural areas alive, as it connects people and places. Villages, their businesses and their people need to have both physical and virtual connectivity to their needs and their opportunities.

Although there are many shared mobility options<sup>4</sup> available in the market, these are not well established or widely deployed in the rural areas of Europe. Nor are they integrated with the public transport offer, or organised in an effective manner and by suitable financial means. This situation is so pervasive across Europe (and indeed elsewhere) that it is clearly a structural issue. Solutions are available but Member States are not availing of them, despite having the legal, institutional, technical and financial capacity to do so (as evidenced by the very substantial actions in the urban mobility sphere).

The SMARTA project showed that virtually all European Member States lack any explicit policy on rural mobility that combines a vision with obligations on mobility services provision, specified targets/objectives, assignment of responsibility or the role that local actors can play. On one hand, competent authorities such as Transport Agencies and Regional Authorities have not been obliged to develop rural mobility in their areas, and have generally only made very limited efforts (noting that there are

excellent exceptions). On the other, there is no clear framework in which local actors can self-organise comprehensive mobility that meet the full needs of their communities, neither on a social or a commercial basis.

The classic opinion is “in rural areas, everyone has a car”. Of course, this is not true (but if everyone in rural areas did actually own and use cars, that would seriously worsen traffic and environmental problems). Many people cannot drive, by reason of age, condition, or affordability. When the household car(s) is in use, other household members do not have access to it. Low-/no-income households and individuals may not have a car. In the absence of good public transport or shared mobility services, many people can’t get around. This serious gap limits their participation in society, their earning potential and their contribution to the economy.

A further consideration is that households in rural areas must acquire multiple cars and bear their running costs, whether they wish to or not. This puts them under economic pressure as many rural jobs are lower-waged, seasonal or non-permanent. In addition to the human cost of limited or expensive mobility, some people or families will inevitably leave, putting pressure on the remaining facilities in a village or rural area. As well as the mobility needs of citizens, all communities, businesses and activity points need a reasonable level of connectivity to attract both local and visiting clients. This is especially important for ventures seeking to attract visitors/tourists from urban areas. Agri-business and related ventures need affordable mobility for their workers, who are typically low-waged and may be seasonal.

As already noted, rural areas are active economies with a wide variety of agricultural, industrial, extractive and leisure businesses, linked to their natural resources and the entrepreneurship traditions of the area. Thus, rural mobility can be viewed as an “enabler” or as a “multiplier” that can allow or improve outcomes and enhance value to other investments. In many cases, mobility service is a value-adding component to other economic, social, tourism or environmental projects and policies. Rural mobility needs and expectations are evolving and becoming more diverse. However, in many areas the allocated resources for rural transport have been reduced in recent decades and further again in the austerity period of the past decade. Transport justice for rural areas is how to balance transport efficiency appraisal with achieving cohesion and all of the opportunities for economic growth.

*Rural mobility can be viewed as an “enabler” or as a “multiplier” that can allow or improve outcomes and enhance value to other investments*

<sup>4</sup> ‘Shared mobility’ generally refers to modes and services that are additional to the conventional route-based public transport operated by buses. It spans demand-responsive transport (DRT), shared taxis, car-pooling, car-sharing, community/volunteer schemes, etc. The ‘shared mobility services’ include both the mobility services themselves and the supporting services including traveller information, reservations, payment and operations management.



## 5. A new mobility vision for rural areas

SMARTA proposes a European-level initiative in the domain of rural mobility, for which a new vision is required. The Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy of the European Green Deal commits to “... a roadmap towards a European mobility that is fit for a green and digital future, resilient, and that leaves nobody behind”. To achieve this, it is essential that the Green Deal and the Roadmap for Sustainable and Smart Mobility recognise the extent to which people in rural areas throughout Europe are already being left behind.

To meet these commitments, existing and emerging mobility deficits in rural areas must be addressed, in addition to any direct impacts arising from the green transition itself. This is the level of commitment required for Rural Europe. However, experience of recent decades indicates that Member States are not prioritising these needs, hence the need for some form of European intervention.

It is important to note that rural shared mobility solutions require minimal infrastructure and can be deployed rapidly, typically by local actors, using local resources. Once the framework is in place and there are obligations to act, a wide range of shared mobility services can be deployed. It is also important to appreciate that, in rural areas, social innovation may offer as much opportunity as technological innovation. The Roadmap should recognise and accommodate such potential and low-/non-technology pathways, including the key role of voluntary citizen initiatives.

### *What the European Parliament would seek and how it would act*

Rural territories require policy frameworks that improve mobility in EU regions. The ‘Time to Act’ is now, through an initiative at the European policy-making level to develop a common European framework that encompasses a shared future vision for rural mobility and at the same time takes into account the emphasis on the specificities of rural areas and their populations. Specific actions are needed that understand and respond to the rural mobility needs, recognising that the solutions for urban areas do not always fit well with the rural environment. In particular, this requires a focus not only on the necessary conventional public transport services but also on the complementary “shared mobility solutions”.

The European Parliament and Commission would put this into practice by two types of action:

- At the European Level, by establishing Europe wide policies on rural mobility, and ensuring that rural mobility is included across all policy areas.

- At the Member-State level, by guiding and supporting each Member State to establish national policies on rural mobility, that would filter down to regional and local level policy and plans.

The primary outcome of this Policy should be to have target-bound rural mobility policy and effective frameworks in place in all Member States. While decisions on matters such as mobility commitments, coverage, service level and means of delivery would always be the prerogative of the individual Member State, what cannot continue is that there are neither mandated levels of service nor assigned responsibility to ensure their provision.

Ideally, every EU Member State would have:

- by 2025, a national comprehensive rural mobility policy, further articulated at regional and local levels in line with the governance arrangements in that Member State; and
- by 2030, a deployment framework for the planning, development, management and financing of rural mobility.

The key challenge is how to motivate the EU Member States to develop comprehensive policies and frameworks for rural mobility, and to ensure these are delivered at the local level throughout their territory. This is the “key challenge” because the Member States have not done so to date, despite the visible needs of their rural citizens and communities, and already having all the needed instruments.

The SMARTA project suggests three potential “Pathways” to achieve the end-goal (these Pathways are indicative for now, just to support discussion, and doubtless have many possible variants).

Each pathway begins with the common step of a ‘Policy Debate’, which should be launched in 2021 and reach conclusion during 2022.

The Policy Debate needs to take place among the European institutions (Parliament, Commission), national and regional governments, the pan-European representatives of rural communities (e.g. ELARD, ERP, ...), and experienced programs/agencies (e.g. LEADER program, ENRD, ...). Considering the perspectives of the European, national, regional and local levels, the European stakeholders need to debate the issue of mobility in Europe’s rural areas, its links and impacts on other policy areas (rural development, environment, ageing, ...), if the current inequalities are acceptable, whether a structured intervention is required at the European-level or the current laissez faire

*Rural territories require policy frameworks that improve mobility in EU regions*

approach may continue, and if a way forward can be agreed and actioned. Assuming that European stakeholders agree that a structured intervention is required, the three potential pathways are:

- The **“Supportive Pathway”**: A structured set of supporting measures for rural mobility would be established with funding from both the EU and Member States (described below). The measures would consist of support for policy development, mobilisation and deployment grants, know-how transfer and capacity development, networking, innovation grants, evaluation and analysis, etc. It may consist of a core rural mobility program with new dedicated funding, and new/enhanced strands in existing rural development and transportation programs. The measures would be made available to all Member States and their stakeholders, but there would be no obligation to implement them or to develop a rural mobility policy or enhanced framework. The Supportive Pathway would be a set of baseline measures, also available in both of the other Pathways.
- The **“Persuasive Pathway”**: Eligibility for regional and rural development funding would be linked to the development of rural mobility policy and frameworks for that Member State and region. The rationale is that a Member State or region that has failed to develop a rural mobility policy or framework does not have the proper conditions for regional or rural development, and is effectively frustrating the purpose of such funds. It could be a desired condition for the 2021–27 program, allowing Member States to develop and deploy their rural mobility policies; and then become a firm condition for the subsequent funding programs.
- The **“Mandatory Pathway”**: By directive or other instrument of the European Union, all Member States would be required to establish national rural mobility policies, develop/enhance the rural mobility frameworks, and establish the necessary financing mechanisms. The requirement would simply be to have a policy on rural mobility and to implement it. It would remain the prerogative of each Member State to develop the specific types and levels of service, the institutional, organisational and management arrangements, etc. Given the general lack of rural mobility policies throughout Europe, it would probably be too early now for a mandatory approach, unless the Member States themselves proposed and endorsed it in the Policy Debate. It may be more effective to begin with the Supportive and Persuasive approaches, thereby making progress in multiple Member States. Towards the end of the decade, as rural mobility policy becomes more widely established in Europe (and indeed better understood and more mature), the mandatory approach could then be considered as a mechanism to formalise emerging practice and to ensure consistency.

The approach and likely outcomes are indicated in the Figure 5 (next page).

## How the European Commission could ensure implementation

The “Supportive Pathway” would comprise a structured set of supporting measures for rural mobility, to be established with funding from both the EU and Member States. These would be baseline measures, included in all other potential Pathways.

The following key actions are recommended to be led and supported by the European Union:

- 1) Initiate and support the Policy Debate
- 2) Establish a Rural Mobility Forum
- 3) Establish and support a Rural Mobility Technical Assistance Program
- 4) Conduct extended observation and evaluation of Demonstrator sites

### *Initiate and support the Policy Debate*

The European Parliament and the European Commission can launch and stimulate the Policy Debate, initially through a series of briefing papers and workshops. The Policy Debate can build on recent work done by European-funded projects on rural mobility such as SMARTA, MAMBA and LAST MILE, ongoing work at ITF such as ‘Innovative Mobility for the Periphery’ and ‘Connecting Remote Communities’, discussions at ELARD, ENRD and European Rural Parliament, EuroMontana’s ‘Move on Green’ policy recommendations, as well as national and regional initiatives and experience. It will be important to engage the European Parliament, national governments and their relevant ministries, and representative organisations of rural regions and communities. Some special events may be organised, but the debate should mostly be conducted in existing fora such as the EP Committees, conferences of Ministers, events and conferences of ELARD, ERP, ENRD, etc.

*During 2021, the Policy Debate may focus on an appreciation of the rural mobility challenge, both in how it impacts other European and national policies; examining potential solutions at both policy and practice level; and identifying whether there is the basis for consensus on structured interventions. During 2022, the Policy Debate may focus on the key features of European and national policies, implementation pathways, supporting instruments, and the appropriate form of structured intervention. Throughout, there would be extensive consultation and debate, always from the perspective of what can be achieved in practical ways in the near-term as well as in the long-term, and of what rural communities seek and can implement themselves.*

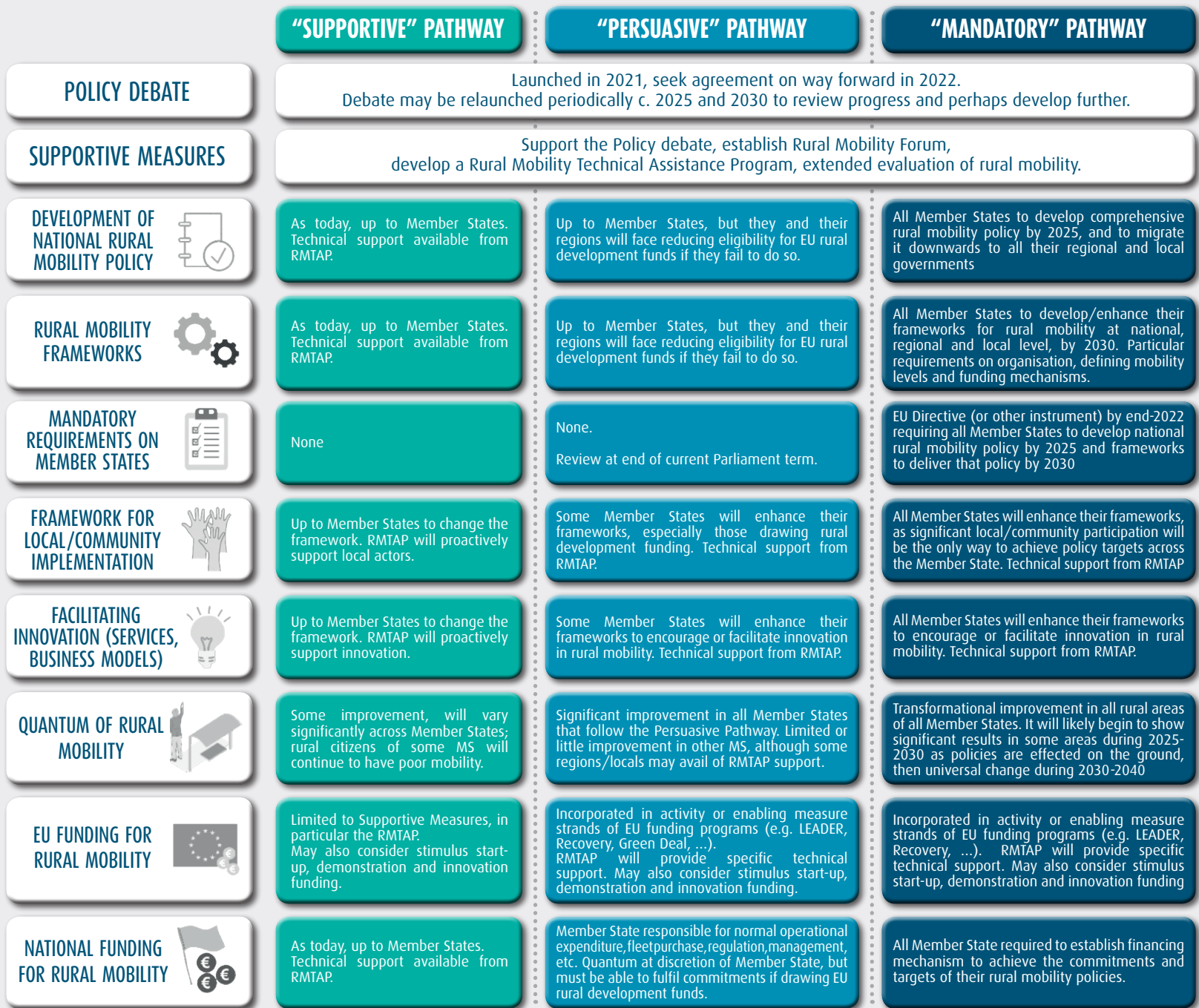


Figure 5 - The three potential pathways

An inter-DG working group could provide the overall structure and support, while the secretariat and organising could be done by a number of commissioned support actions.

### **Establish a Rural Mobility Forum**

A Rural Mobility Forum would be established, as there is currently no forum in Europe dealing with rural mobility (in contrast to the urban mobility domain, which has many active and influential fora). Initially, this would be an accompanying measure to the Policy Debate, but with the aim of becoming permanent. It would enable a much broader discussion and sharing of ideas among local stakeholders including communities, local government, agencies, health and social services, rural development programs, practitioners and providers of mobility services. It would provide a forum for “grassroots” to debate and articulate their views, and to channel their practical experience and their needs to the Policy Debate.

The Forum would then continue to provide a focal point for networking, knowledge-exchange and debate. Either from the outset or after the initial period, the Forum would require a permanent basis and secretariat. This would most naturally sit within the rural development community, for example sponsored by ELARD with ENRD providing the secretariat and organising functions. It may have linkage to the European Rural Parliament and become a strand within their activities and meetings. Among other things, this would provide a direct linkage to the emerging national rural parliaments.

### **Establish and support a Rural Mobility and Technical Assistance Program**

Most rural mobility is organised by local agencies, communities or service providers. By their nature, they have limited institutional and technical capacity, few specialists, and must ‘learn by doing’. Even national and regional institutions have limited capacity in rural mobility, as the sector has not been well developed until now. Many innovators of rural mobility solutions have limited knowledge of the practical aspects or of how to navigate the regulatory and administrative frameworks.

The Commission can establish a Rural Mobility Technical Assistance Program to bridge the know-how gap and enable local implementers and innovators to navigate an otherwise-steep learning curve. The scope of such a Program would be:

- Document and disseminate good practice
- Develop “how to” manuals and management tools, aimed at the local practitioner

- Develop capacity-building, training and knowledge transfer programs:
  - For Standard Areas, such as needs assessment, planning, operations, resource optimisation, outreach, regulatory and administrative compliance, etc.
  - For new/emerging skill areas, such as Intelligent Transport Systems (ITS), apps, data management, business models, service integration, MaaS, marketing, etc.
- Provide grants for development, deployment and evaluation of innovative rural mobility solutions
- Facilitate networking and experience exchange among agencies and practitioners in different EU Member States

Such a program would have a European component to assemble good practice, know-how and capacity-building tools; and a national/local component for local training and customisation of materials. There would be a European grant component for innovation and upscaling, plus a local component for general deployment and skilling.

The US Rural Transit Assistance Program (RTAP)<sup>5</sup> offers an interesting model, spanning the networking, capacity development and finding strands.

### **Conduct extended observation and evaluation of Demonstrator sites**

Policy-makers, implementing agencies and sponsors needs a better understanding of the longer-term impacts of rural mobility schemes. In particular, they need to be able to discern whether and under what conditions:

- Rural mobility schemes are sustainable and capable of upscaling and wide-scale deployment;
- Ridership can be grown significantly,
- There are critical mass thresholds or tipping points;
- Upscaled solutions can meet the extensive mobility needs and expectations of communities, and if this would contribute to mode shift and reduced emissions/energy consumption;
- The financial support requirements stabilise or escalate when upscaling.

Currently, evaluation of rural mobility schemes (to the extent it is done at all) deals with the immediate period during and post-implementation This can only measure such elements as technical or operational functioning,

<sup>5</sup> [www.nationalrtap.org](http://www.nationalrtap.org)



initial user attitudes, etc. A much longer time-frame is required to identify key items such as changes in mobility patterns and household car ownership, impacts on opportunities and social inclusion, acceptance by political and administrative layers and willingness to incorporate them into local policy and development plans, etc.

The Commission should establish and sponsor a framework for extended observation and evaluation of demonstration sites. This could be done as a strand of the Rural Mobility Technical Assistance Program. European funding would be provided for the monitoring and development activities, while funding for the normal operations would remain the responsibility of national/regional sponsors. The SMARTA project has developed an Evaluation Framework<sup>6</sup> suited to long-term monitoring. An extended evaluation period of 5 years would enable the impacts to be well evaluated from a cluster of selected sites.

### **Potential additional measure**

The European Commission could also enable the setup of working groups for the development of the most suitable policy for a specific country/region. These groups should comprise a mix of national and local stakeholders, with (i) the public service responsible for investing and infrastructure; and (ii) rural communities supported and given the space, empowerment and respect to develop and implement initiatives with competence and sustainability. Links should be made to related

<sup>6</sup> <https://ruralsharedmobility.eu/smarta-evaluation-framework/>

There are already more than 50 demonstration sites that have been to some extent examined under EU-sponsored projects such as SMARTA, MAMBA, LAST MILE, INCLUSION, HI-REACH, MARA, MELINDA, etc.; to which many more operational services have been identified as Good Practice. The sites could take advantage of support from the RMTAP to continue to develop their services and their capacity, so that the impacts of upscaling and service intensification can be tracked.

policy areas such as the Common Agricultural Policy, digital policy, policy for Smart Villages, the TEN-T policy, and the link between rural and urban areas as well as possible new dedicated funding within existing programmes such as Horizon Europe, Connecting Europe Facility, Invest EU and the RRF.

It should be noted that in contrast to urban areas, community-based initiatives and action have always been central to how rural areas function. The potential is great, if it can be facilitated. Communities can do things that the State could not and should not attempt to lead. Nevertheless, it often remains appropriate that top-down guidance and direction is provided. The development of frameworks that mandate, guide and enable local organisation and coordination of mobility services is one such area. This may require new and flexible thinking on how local shared mobility services interface with conventional public transport.



Photo: Tiemme Spa®

## 6. Sustainable rural mobility: the direction forward

From previous chapters, one question is clear: how can a new Vision and a new Policy for rural mobility be implemented in practice?

This needs to consider how to meet emerging mobility needs and to overcome legacy mobility deficits, considering the wide diversity of Europe's implementation contexts.

Four particular issues need to be taken into account:

- The current frameworks (including funding mechanisms) are not geared towards achieving good mobility outcomes in rural areas. That means, for the near-term at least, promoters of rural mobility schemes must find their own ways to mobilise stakeholders and finance, achieve implementation, comply with (or find workarounds) for regulatory requirements, etc., since the system is not yet set up to assist them, or in some cases to even handle their requests. People must be innovative, patient and persistent. Some things are going to require more effort, more compromise and take longer than for conventional transport or in an urban setting.
- The promoters of rural mobility schemes are often not mandated transport agencies, do not have full-time transport specialists and have limited experience of transport operations. They are either communities (including local agencies) who know what needs to be solved or they are solution innovators, and they are learning how to go about it. This can be a steep learning curve, which would be greatly eased by guidance, know-how transfer, structured methodologies and peer-to-peer support or mentoring (including from the urban sector, that has achieved transformation over recent decades).
- Mobility in rural areas is an enabler for the lives, activities and businesses of a community, and is not an end in itself. Rural mobility schemes must be based on the actual needs of the community and closely bound to the activities there. The more a rural mobility service can be related to other activities and sit within broader packages (including cross-sectoral funding, e.g. Bummelbus in Luxembourg), the better their chance of success.
- Schemes must now move to a permanent footing. The phase of Pilots/ Demonstrations has been extremely valuable in testing possibilities, seeing what is feasible and gaining experience. However, most schemes have not been set up with the long-term in mind, have not been designed for scale-up and expansion, and do not have committed long-term funding sources. Further, quite often they are limited to what can be done within the constraints of the existing framework, and thus do not fully test the possibilities.

While this cannot be achieved overnight, more attention needs to be paid to these issues in existing and emerging schemes, and eventually be provided for in the new frameworks.

There are several shared mobility solutions that can be operated in rural areas. A very wide range of such solutions have been demonstrated in multiple European projects including SMARTA, SMARTA2, LAST MILE, MAMBA, INCLUSION, MARA, MELINDA, Hi-Reach, among others. These are indicated in Figure 6.

- **Flexible Transport Services**, which operate in the style of public transport, such as route-based Demand Responsive Transport or door-to-door DRT
- **Ride Sharing Services**, in which trips are combined so that people travel together, such as shared taxi, car-pooling, volunteer lift-giving and e-hitchhiking

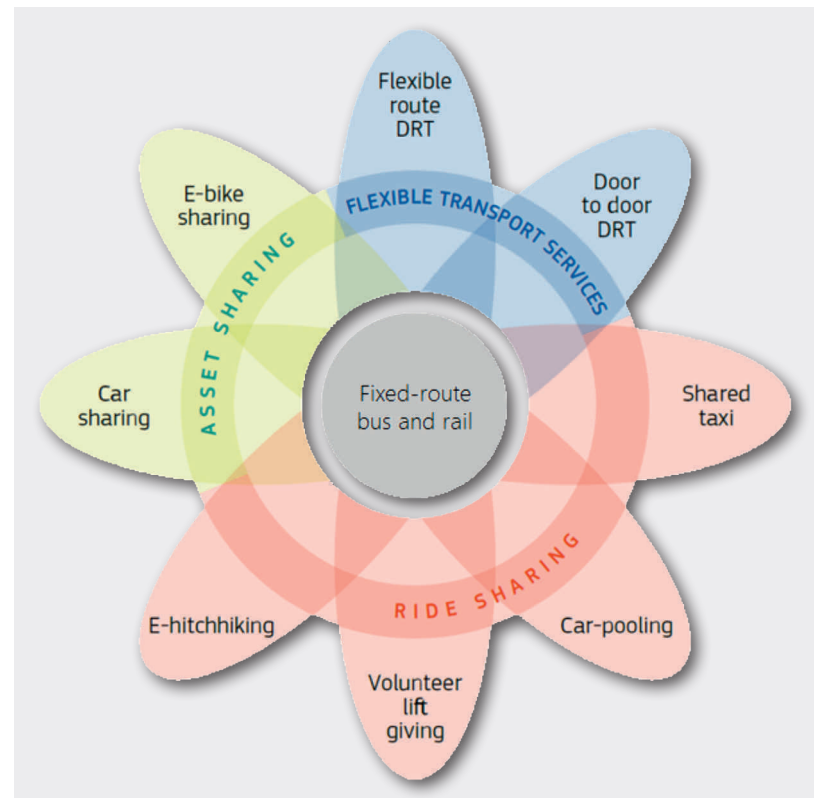


Figure 6 - Rural shared mobility solutions. Source: SMARTA

- **Asset Sharing**, in which people can have access to vehicles when they need to travel, without having to own them, such as car-sharing or bike-sharing.

These become much more effective when they are coordinated or, integrated with the fixed-route bus and rail services. They can extend the coverage of the conventional public transport network, reaching additional areas and offering higher levels of service than would be feasible or affordable with larger vehicles. These usually require minimal infrastructure and can be deployed rapidly, typically by local actors, using local resources. Once the framework is in place and there are obligations to act, a wide range of shared mobility services can be deployed.

## A Structured Approach to Implementation

The SMARTA Project proposes the following 3-phase/12-step pathway for the development of rural shared mobility solutions, whether these are asset sharing, ride sharing or community-based solutions.

The **Mobilisation** Phase can be lengthy, but it could be shared with or leverage community efforts in other rural development domains, so that rural mobility is one strand of a broader package. The **Development of Solutions** phase is usually shorter and more focussed. It could occur multiple times in a phased strategy, where a number of different initiatives are taken. The **Operations** Phase should be for the long-term and is the key to durability.

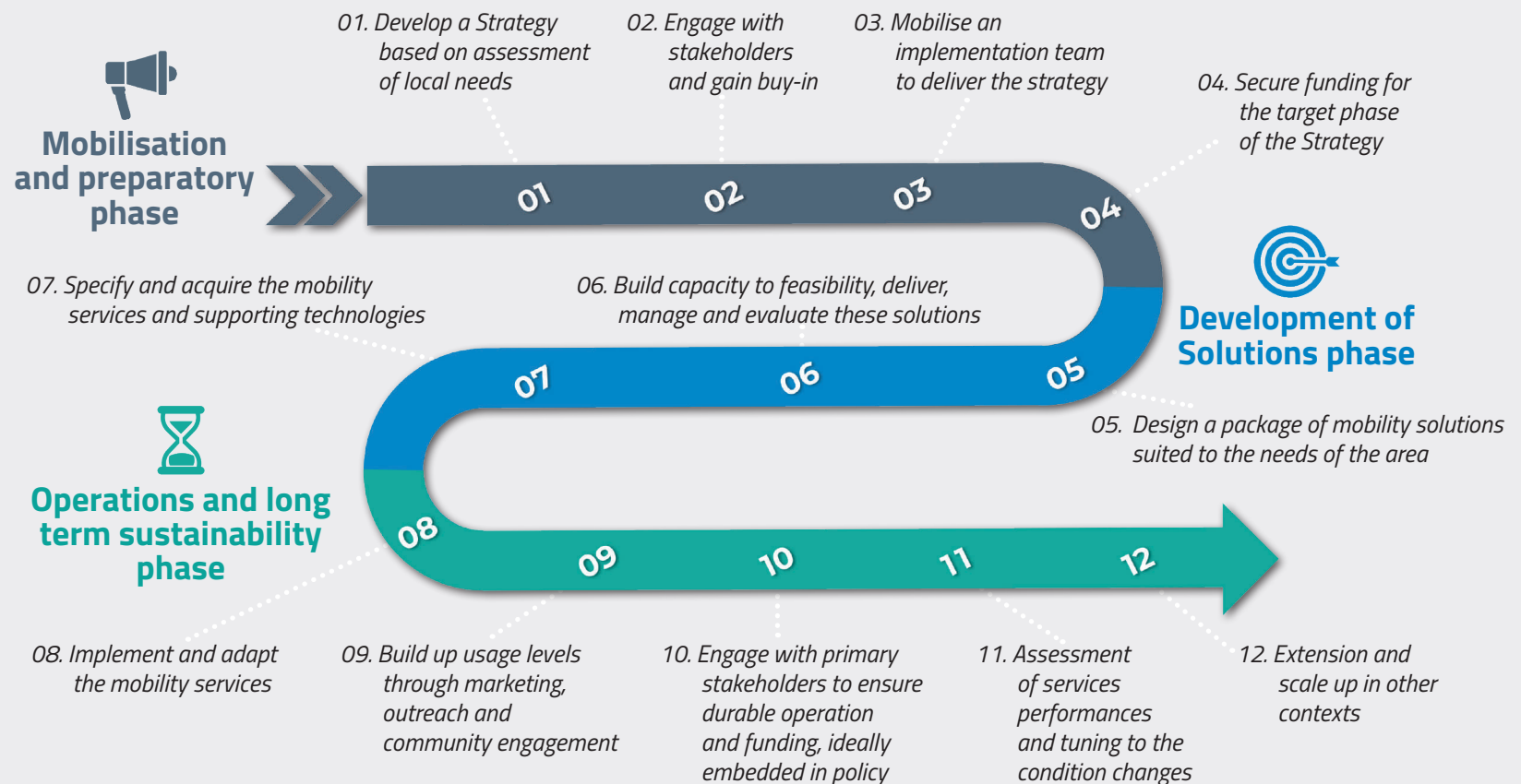


Figure 7 - Distinct phases of rural mobility schemes



## What Enablers would support widespread and rapid deployment

The package of mobility solutions to be implemented, as shown in Figure 6, should be tailored to the needs of the area. The package of measures might include: i) Some level of conventional public transport, either in the target area or nearby, that provides the structured public transport framework; ii) Some flexible mobility services, either general or dedicated DRT, shared taxi, etc.; iii) Organised lift-giving within the community; iv) Organised and informal ride-sharing, that could include car-pooling, hitchhiking, ride-sharing, etc.; v) Asset sharing (car, bicycle); and, vi) Other measures suited to the locality.

Starting from the package of measures, the key point is that the

implementing stakeholders must focus on finding a blend of formal organised and informal forms of mobility, best suited to the needs of the area, the available resources and what the community itself is willing to do.

SMARTA proposes three main enablers that could lead to smart rural transport areas in the future: Networking, Capacity and Funding.

These enablers could be incorporated in European, national and regional programs, most rationally within existing rural development frameworks (so that existing channels can be leveraged).

The National Rural Transport Assistance Program (RTAP) ([www.nationalrtap.org](http://www.nationalrtap.org)) in the USA offers an interesting model, spanning all three clusters, that Europe could consider.

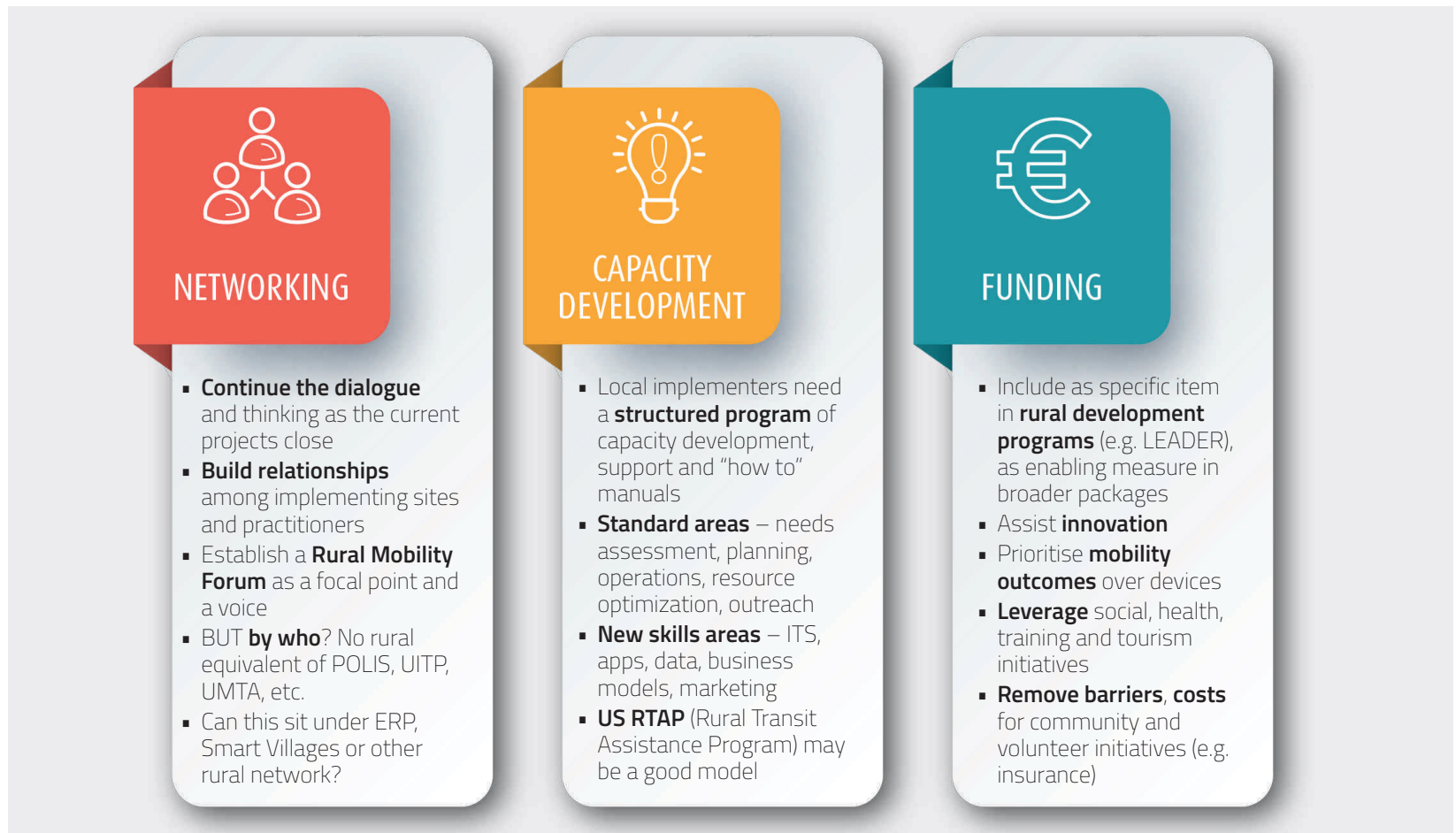


Figure 8 - Three clusters



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