

ADDRESSING THE CROSS-SECTORAL STRATEGY GAP IN SLOVAK RURAL DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Rural development in Slovakia faces significant challenges due to the absence of a comprehensive, cross-sectoral strategy that integrates efforts across various governmental and local entities. This case study explores the impacts of this strategic gap, drawing on recent data and stakeholder insights from Slovakia's involvement in the EU Rural Pact and the PoliRuralPlus project. Analysis shows that the fragmentation of responsibilities among ministries and local agencies hinders Slovakia's ability to implement cohesive policies for rural revitalization. Key challenges include inefficient resource allocation, lack of stakeholder coordination, and missed opportunities for economic development. This paper presents an assessment of the barriers to cross-sectoral coordination, proposes a framework for integrated rural policy, and discusses how a structured strategy could foster sustainable rural development. The proposed framework includes the establishment of an Inter-Ministerial Rural Development Council, a Joint Rural Development Fund, and enhanced community-led development mechanisms. Findings suggest that implementing these measures could significantly improve policy coherence, optimize resource use, and enhance rural resilience. The study concludes with recommendations for policy integration, future research directions, and best practices for fostering long-term rural sustainability.

Key words: rural development, economic revitalization, PoliRuralPlus project, Common Agricultural Policy, sustainability, governance

INTRODUCTION

Slovakia, a landlocked country in Central Europe, is predominantly rural, with approximately 40% of its population residing in rural areas (European Commission, 2023) [4].

These regions are primarily shaped by agriculture, forestry, and tourism, while small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a crucial role in sustaining local economies (Mura, Kljucnikov, 2018) [10]. However, rural Slovakia faces significant socio-economic challenges, including an aging population, youth outmigration, and limited access to modern infrastructure and public services (OECD, 2022) [12].

Figure 1 shows the decline of the rural population in Slovakia from 2000 to 2024. This trend highlights the demographic challenges facing rural areas, including depopulation and aging populations (International Monetary Fund, IMF, 2024) [4].

Despite the importance of rural areas to Slovakia's overall development, there is a notable absence of a horizontal, cross-sectoral approach from state authorities regarding rural policy.

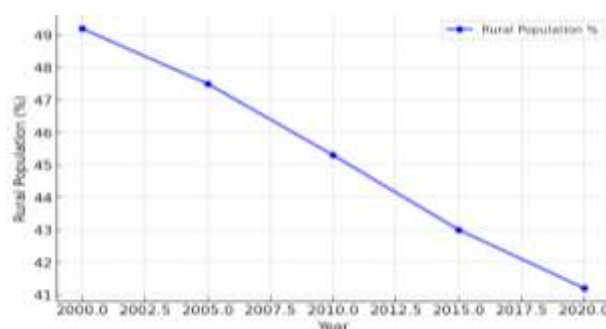


Fig. 4. Rural population Decline in Slovakia
Source: IMF, 2024 [7].

Slovakia's rural development policy operates under the framework of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), yet strategic integration across sectors remains insufficient. This disconnection limits the potential of CAP

Pillar II interventions to foster resilient rural territories.

There is no strategic document specifically focusing on rural areas. Therefore, rural development remains fragmented, with different ministries and agencies addressing specific issues in isolation (Ministerstvodopravy a výstavby SR, 2016) [8]. This lack of coordination results in overlapping efforts, inefficiencies, and missed opportunities to create synergies (Ministerstvodopravy a výstavby SR, 2016) [9].

Effective rural policies require a holistic approach that integrates economic, social, environmental, and cultural dimensions across all levels of government (OECD, 2022) [11]. Establishing mechanisms for horizontal cooperation between ministries and vertical alignment between national, regional, and local levels is crucial to achieving sustainable and comprehensive rural development. Integrating environmental goals, such as biodiversity conservation and climate adaptation, into rural economic planning remains a systemic challenge in Slovakia.

While various policies exist across different sectors, rural areas form a single, interconnected entity requiring an integrated and strategic approach. The need for a well-coordinated framework that aligns resources, priorities, and governance structures is imperative to address the pressing challenges and unlock new opportunities for a sustainable rural future in Slovakia.

The purpose of this paper is to present a case study which reflects the challenges due to the absence of a comprehensive, cross-sectoral strategy that integrates efforts across various governmental and local entities in Slovakia, drawing on recent data and stakeholder involvement in the EU Rural Pact and the PoliRuralPlus project.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a mixed-method approach, incorporating qualitative and quantitative data from policy documents, stakeholder interviews, and case studies (Creswell, Plano Clark, 2018) [1]. Data were collected through

the PoliRuralPlus project and EU Rural Pact initiatives, including several conferences organized in the years 2003-2005 (PoliRuralPlus, 2023; European Commission, 2022) [13, 2]. The methodology includes a policy analysis framework to evaluate governance structures and resource allocation efficiency (Howlett, et.al., 2020) [6]. Additionally, interviews with policymakers, local government and municipalities and cities representatives, and rural stakeholders provide insights into the practical challenges of rural development coordination.

A key component of this study involved consultations with various ministries, including the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Ministry of Environment, the Ministry of Economy, the Ministry of Transport, the Ministry of Interior and the Office of the Government. These consultations highlighted the need for a more structured and integrated approach to rural development, leading to the proposal for a cross-sectoral working group under the leadership of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Furthermore, a series of conferences were organized jointly with the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Association of Municipalities and Cities of Slovakia, various civil society organizations (CSOs), and governmental institutions. These conferences facilitated stakeholder engagement, enabling representatives from diverse sectors to discuss challenges, share best practices, and contribute to the development of an inclusive rural policy framework (Reed, 2008) [14].

The study also leveraged input from regional development agencies and EU-funded rural initiatives to inform policy recommendations. By integrating insights from these multi-level consultations, this research provides a robust foundation for proposing mechanisms to enhance cross-sectoral cooperation and policy coherence in Slovakia's rural development landscape.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results of this study emphasize several key findings related to the fragmentation and inefficiencies in rural development policy in Slovakia. The primary observation is the significant lack of coordination among ministries and local actors, which impedes the effective implementation of rural development strategies. This institutional fragmentation undermines Slovakia's ability to fully capitalize on the EU's CAP instruments for sustainable rural transformation.

This fragmentation is evident in several ways:

Inefficient Resource Allocation: A major consequence of the sectoral approach is the inefficiency in resource distribution. Funding from different government sources often overlaps, leading to misallocation of financial resources that could otherwise be used more effectively (OECD, 2020) [11]. For example, agricultural subsidies provided by the Ministry of Agriculture do not always align with the environmental goals set by the Ministry of Environment, resulting in missed opportunities for more sustainable rural growth.

Fig. 5 illustrates the sectoral budget allocation for rural development in Slovakia for 2024. The data shows that agriculture receives the highest share (40%), followed by infrastructure (25%), while other critical sectors such as education, environment, and digitalization receive significantly less funding (European Commission, 2023) [3].

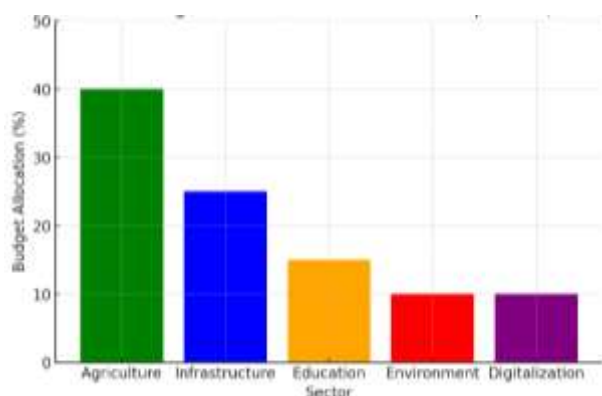


Fig. 5. Sectoral Budget Allocation for Rural Development
Source: IMF, 2024 [7].

This imbalance may contribute to the challenges of modernization and sustainability in rural areas.

Inadequate Stakeholder Coordination

Despite the existence of numerous rural development initiatives, there is a glaring lack of coordination between local governments, civil society organizations (CSOs), and business entities (ENRD, 2021) [5]. Many local stakeholders' express frustration at the absence of a unified vision and strategy for rural development. This lack of alignment between key actors has led to reduced participation in policy discussions, leaving important local insights and expertise untapped.

Missed Economic Opportunities The fragmentation of rural policy has also led to missed opportunities for rural economic development. The lack of integrated policies for agriculture, tourism, and small-scale manufacturing results in the sectors operating in silos, instead of leveraging synergies that could boost rural economies. For instance, the development of rural tourism is often hindered by inadequate infrastructure investments and disconnected policies from ministries over seeing transportation and environmental protection (OECD, 2016).

Limited Community-Led Development: Another critical gap identified in the research is the insufficient emphasis on community-led development. Rural communities often lack the capacity and tools to participate meaningfully in the decision-making process regarding local development. This has led to a sense of disengagement and disempowerment among rural citizens, further exacerbating challenges like youth out migration and demographic decline (European Commission, 2022) [2].

The case studies highlight both successful and failed attempts at fostering cross-sectoral collaboration in rural Slovakia. For example, in the Gemer-Malohont region, overlapping funding for infrastructure and agrotourism projects failed to produce long-term employment or economic resilience. In contrast, initiatives that involved active cooperation between municipalities and regional agencies led to visible improvements in service delivery. However, these successes remain isolated and do not form part of a broader, national strategy.

Policy Recommendations:

Institutionalize Cross-Sectoral Cooperation:

Formalizing the Inter-Ministerial Rural Development Council (IMRDC) should be prioritized, with clear mandates for coordinating rural policies across ministries. This council should meet regularly and ensure that rural development is central to decision-making processes across all sectors—agriculture, environment, economy, transport, and social affairs. Additionally, it should serve as a platform for monitoring the implementation of rural policies and assessing their effectiveness.

Strengthen Regional and Local Capacity

A key recommendation is to invest in the capacity-building of local governments and rural communities. This includes providing training for local leaders, community members, and small-scale entrepreneurs in policy advocacy, project design, and resource management. Developing local expertise and empowering communities will increase the effectiveness of rural development initiatives and enhance local ownership of development projects.

Design a National Rural Development Strategy for 2040

Slovakia should adopt a long-term, forward-looking rural development strategy for 2040. This strategy must reflect the diverse needs of rural areas and integrate economic, social, and environmental objectives. It should include clear goals for enhancing digital infrastructure, fostering sustainable tourism, improving transport connectivity, and promoting local entrepreneurship. Moreover, the strategy should prioritize rural depopulation and aging by offering tailored incentives to retain youth and attract skilled professionals.

Leverage EU Funding and Partnerships

Slovakia should further align its rural development policies with EU initiatives, particularly the EU Rural Pact, and maximize the potential of EU funding programs. Strengthening partnerships with other EU member states and utilizing regional cooperation networks can also support cross-border rural development projects. Collaborative initiatives in technology transfer, renewable energy, and sustainable agriculture

could provide opportunities for knowledge exchange and shared resource optimization.

Foster Public-Private Partnerships

Encouraging collaboration between the public and private sectors is crucial for fostering innovation and investment in rural areas. Slovakia should create incentives for private-sector investments in rural areas, particularly in industries such as renewable energy, rural tourism, and sustainable agriculture. The government could facilitate this by offering tax incentives, subsidies, or co-funding schemes for businesses that establish operations in rural regions.

Improve Data Collection and Decision-Making Tools

Establishing a centralized rural data platform that integrates socio-economic, environmental, and infrastructural data would enable more informed decision-making. By investing in digital tools, Slovakia can track progress, identify emerging challenges, and tailor policies to specific rural needs. Additionally, this platform should be used to engage local communities and stakeholders in real-time decision-making and monitoring.

Promote Bottom-Up Policy Development

To enhance community engagement in rural development, the government should institutionalize bottom-up policy development. This means creating formal channels for rural residents to participate in policy consultations and local development planning. Citizens, local businesses, and NGOs should be directly involved in the creation of rural policies to ensure they reflect the realities and needs of the people who live in these areas.

Proposed Framework for Integrated Rural Development

Based on the findings, this study proposes several key elements for creating a more cohesive and integrated rural development policy in Slovakia:

(i) Inter-Ministerial Rural Development Council (IMRDC)

Establishing a high-level coordination body, composed of representatives from various ministries and local agencies, would help align efforts and ensure that rural development strategies are not only sector-specific but also cross-sectoral. This body should be tasked with

setting shared goals, aligning resource allocation, policies elaboration and facilitating improved communication between ministries, regional authorities, and rural stakeholders. The natural leader for this is the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic and contributing Ministries are: Environment, Interior, Education, Youth and Sports, Trade and other ministries.

(ii) Vision for more attractive rural areas

A suitable solution to deepen inter-ministerial cooperation, including territorial cooperation, is to formulate a common vision for more attractive rural areas by 2040. Intentions and measures in the field of rural development must respond not only to the pressure of social practice, but above all to the increasing limits of the demographic resources of rural areas and the social capital of the territory. Prioritisation needs to be seen as one segment of multi-sectoral relevant actions in order to overcome traditional sectoral thinking and translate it into a joint effort uniting different actors and different departments under a common goal, strengthening the synergies of different support mechanisms.

(iii) Joint Rural Development Fund (JRDF)

The creation of a dedicated fund for rural development could help streamline funding allocation and reduce inefficiencies. The fund should support projects that integrate multiple sectors (agriculture, tourism, transport, etc.) and focus on long-term sustainability. A collaborative approach to fund management would ensure that investments are not only aligned with national strategies but also with the local priorities of rural communities.

(iv) Limited Community-Led Development Mechanisms

Encouraging rural communities to take a more active role in policy development and decision-making processes is crucial. Strengthening participatory mechanisms—such as local forums, advisory boards, and capacity-building programs—will empower communities to drive their own development agendas. This approach can also increase local buy-in, ensuring that policies reflect the true needs and aspirations of rural populations. The adequate involvement of rural actors in policy-making and decision-making processes has long been

absent or insufficient. Proper consultation mechanisms need to be developed to help rural areas face unprecedented crises and challenges.

(v) Cross-Sectoral Data Sharing and Technology Platforms: Leveraging digital tools and platforms for data sharing and coordination will improve transparency and help streamline processes. A centralized digital platform for rural development data could facilitate better decision-making by providing up-to-date information on demographic trends, economic activities, environmental conditions, and policy implementation. These platforms could also serve as a tool for fostering communication between various stakeholders and monitoring progress in real-time.

CONCLUSIONS

The research highlights the pressing need for a cross-sectoral approach to rural development in Slovakia. The fragmentation of responsibilities among ministries and local agencies undermines the effectiveness of rural policies and hampers the long-term development of rural areas. By implementing an integrated framework, including the establishment of the Inter-Ministerial Rural Development Council, the creation of the Joint Rural Development Fund, and strengthening community-led development mechanisms, Slovakia can address these challenges and create a more resilient and sustainable rural future.

Policy integration, both horizontally across ministries and vertically across national and local levels, is essential for achieving the goals of rural revitalization. Furthermore, fostering collaboration between governmental bodies, regional development agencies, civil society, and the private sector will create a more inclusive, adaptive, and forward-thinking rural development model. Slovakia's involvement in the EU Rural Pact and the PoliRuralPlus project has provided valuable lessons and insights that can inform future policy-making. Policy-makers should institutionalize mechanisms that systematically incorporate territorial data and stakeholder insights into rural policy cycles, in line with the EU's Long-

Term Vision for Rural Areas (2040). Evidence-based policy making and capacity building must underpin future strategies if Slovakia aims to achieve resilient, inclusive, and climate-adaptive rural regions.

The study concludes with several recommendations for future research and policy actions. Future research should explore the effectiveness of the proposed framework in different rural regions of Slovakia, identifying best practices and refining mechanisms for cross-sectoral cooperation. Moreover, additional case studies from other EU member states could provide valuable comparative insights into the challenges and successes of integrated rural policies.

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