



# **Inclusive workforce models for rural and remote areas**

**This discussion paper is part of the cross European programme Working for Inclusion and provides background and contextual information for the study visit to Bodø, Norway, from 25–29 January 2010**

**Children in Scotland**  
every child - every childhood



## ***WORKING FOR INCLUSION: the role of the early years workforce in addressing poverty and promoting social inclusion***

### **About the programme**

*Working for Inclusion* is a cross-European programme to examine how improving the qualifications and skills of those working with our youngest children can help reduce poverty and improve social inclusion.

Taking place from February 2009–January 2011, the programme seeks to encourage and facilitate discussion and debate over the role of the early years workforce, enabling greater and more effective dialogue between local and national governments, education, services and practitioners.

The programme encompasses research to provide a clear picture of the qualification and skill levels in early years services and how these relate to levels of poverty and social inclusion. Research is taking place simultaneously in Scotland and the UK, Poland, Norway, Italy, Slovenia, France, Denmark, Portugal, Sweden and Hungary and will offer an overview of developments throughout the EU. The data will contribute towards policy development at an EU level as well as Scotland and the rest of the UK.

### **Programme partners**

The programme is led by Children in Scotland in partnership with:

La Bottega Di Geppetto	Italy
Nordland Research Institute	Norway
Comenius Foundation for Child Development	Poland

Each country will provide the context for exploring particular key challenges within the early years workforce:

- working with the child as an active agent in their own learning (Italy)
- working with diversity, in particular ethnicity, language, disability and gender (Scotland)
- inclusive workforce models for rural and remote areas (Norway)
- working in an inclusive way with children and families, across agencies and age groups (Poland).

A discussion paper and report will be produced on each of these themes. All papers, reports and publications can be accessed through [www.childreninscotland.org.uk/wfi](http://www.childreninscotland.org.uk/wfi).

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# 1. INTRODUCTION: WHAT DO WE MEAN BY RURAL AND REMOTE AREAS?

No simple definition of 'rural' covers the variety of areas the term describes.

Individual countries have different official definitions, based on factors such as dispersed population, an agriculture-based economy, distance from major urban centres and lack of access to major services. In 2004 the English Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Countryside Agency published new definitions for 'rural' and 'urban' based on population figures for each settlement (town, village or hamlet) and the district in which the settlement is located; population sparsity is now the defining feature of a rural community (Twomey, 2006).

There is no EU definition of rural areas, though it is accepted that an agreed single official definition would be useful (European Commission, 2008).

At an international level the most frequently used definition is from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), to allow meaningful comparison between different countries. This classifies regions into predominantly urban (PU), intermediate (IR) and predominantly rural (PR), based on the share of a region's population living in rural local units, i.e. areas with a population density below 150 inhabitants per square kilometre. In areas classified as PR more than 50% live in rural local areas; in IR areas, 15–50%; and in PU areas, less than 15%.

This definition has two shortcomings: it depends on the size of local units and regions, and does not take into account characteristics of adjacent regions. To address this, Dijkstra and Poelman (2008) and EU Regional Policy propose dividing IR and PR areas into two subgroups: regions close to a city, defined as 45 minutes' drive away from a centre of 50,000+ population, and remote regions. Using this classification, Dijkstra and Poelman divide the EU population in 2004 as follows:

- urban regions – 44% of population
- intermediate regions close to a city – 36%
- intermediate remote regions – 1%
- rural regions close to a city – 13%
- rural remote regions – 5%.

The 5% living in rural remote regions represents nearly 26 million people, with 90.5 million altogether living in rural remote regions or rural regions close to a city.

Finland, Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Spain and Sweden have the largest extent of rural remote regions, followed by Austria, Bulgaria, France, Hungary and Scotland (Dijkstra and Poelman, 2008). The EC report *Poverty and Social Exclusion in Rural Areas*, based on a study of 14 member states plus Norway, shows the largest share of rural population in Bulgaria, Romania, Lithuania and Norway, while the most urbanised country is the UK (which mixes

densely populated areas in England, Scotland and Wales with very remote rural areas in Scotland).

However these subgroups do not fully capture the variations within rural areas. Traditionally, rurality has been defined by factors including the rate of land use for agricultural activities; but though this is still an important feature of many rural areas, only 2% of the population in England and 3% in Wales are currently employed in farming, and rural areas today include 'honeypot villages' that depend heavily on tourism, commuter villages and former industrial communities.

## **2. THE RURAL CONTEXT – WHAT MAKES IT DIFFERENT?**

Rural areas have demographic, geographic, economic, social, cultural, and service conditions that may affect, for example, the need for, access to and use of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. However statistics rarely reflect the great variation among rural areas and we should beware of generalisations.

Some trends, particularly rural areas becoming commuter villages, are blurring rural–urban differences and introducing new problems. *Poverty and Social Exclusion in Rural Areas* notes:

“ ... commuting may help reduce unemployment in rural areas; however, it may divert demand for key services away from local providers towards nearby urban ones, resulting in a decline in local provision of services ... Commuting has changed the characteristics of many rural areas, by making them more similar to peri-urban areas. Consequently, they are characterized by problems such as high inflation in the housing market, transport costs, pollution and environmental problems, etc.” (European Commission, 2008)

Developments such as these have led Francesco di Iacovi, Professor of Agricultural Economics at the University of Pisa, to point to the advantages of a more effectively interlinked rural–urban ('rurban') system with stronger links between towns and the surrounding countryside offering the potential for both better planning of urban food consumption and greater rural control over agriculture and other resources (Children in Europe, 2010).

### **2.1 Demographic conditions**

Many rural areas have an unfavourable demographic situation, with a large share of elderly people, few young people and low density affecting economic performance. Low birth rates and migration of young people worsen the situation (European Commission, 2008).

### **2.1.1 Two large-scale processes of demographic change**

There is a long-established trend of population movement from remote rural areas into urban and more accessible rural areas, and more recently a 'counter-urbanisation' flow (made possible by new transport and ICT infrastructure) from urban areas into accessible rural areas. The latter is particularly evident in France and the UK. There are also 'returning migrations', i.e. people returning after migrating to urban areas or abroad. In eastern countries the exodus from rural to urban areas (especially the capital city) is currently relevant; while migration abroad, notably of young people and women, risks a general impoverishment of rural areas. This is particularly acute in Bulgaria, Lithuania, Poland and Romania (European Commission, 2008).

### **2.1.2 An aging population**

This is particularly severe in PR areas, where people may have additional difficulties due to isolation and distance to basic services such as health care. Gender can be a factor: in western countries specific problems exist among older single women, while in eastern and southern countries there is out-migration of rural women due to labour market barriers. In the former case policy measures need to focus on the problems linked to remoteness; in the latter, antidiscriminatory policies and affirmative action are needed (European Commission, 2008).

### **2.1.3 Loss of population**

This is more acute in rural remote regions than any other type of area; between 1995 and 2004 they were the only type of region to record an annual drop in population, falling 0.18% per annum compared to a rise of 0.29% per annum in PU regions (Dijkstra and Poelman, 2008).

## **2.2 Geographical conditions**

### **2.2.1 Remoteness**

Remoteness is a significant difficulty. Concentration of main services in urban areas can impact quality of life for groups already at risk of social exclusion: for example, health services for elderly or disabled people or childcare facilities for female workers. Accessibility of schools is important. Some areas also experience reduced public and private services (e.g. retail, postal offices, banks, childcare, libraries, kindergartens). The problem is relevant for PR regions in all 15 countries (European Commission, 2008).

### **2.2.2 Environmental benefits**

Families living in rural areas have more access to the countryside and nature.

## **2.3 Economic conditions**

### **2.3.1 Employment rates – overall**

With the exception of the UK (and Norway, which is not an EU country) PR and IR regions are far from reaching Lisbon employment targets. A mixed

picture emerges with regard to the rural–urban divide: in some countries (for example Bulgaria, Spain, Hungary and Italy) employment in PR regions is significantly lower than PU areas, which may be partly explained by poor employment opportunities in rural areas. Elsewhere, for example in Germany, France, Poland and Portugal, employment is higher in PR regions. Usually IR regions are in between. Mediterranean and eastern countries (except Portugal) tend to have lower employment rates (European Commission, 2008).

### **2.3.2 Employment rates – by gender**

Of 15 countries studied in *Poverty and Social Exclusion in Rural Areas* only Portugal, Slovenia and the UK already exceed the 60% (Lisbon) threshold. However, urban areas clearly dominate rural in terms of female employment. Some studies stress difficulties in the labour market for women created by the decline of agricultural activities in rural societies. In many countries (such as France and southern Italy) low employment for women is specific to rural areas (European Commission, 2008).

### **2.3.3 Economic activity – overall**

In Norway, Ireland, the UK, Spain, Italy and Hungary, PU regions show clear dominance over PR regions. However the opposite picture emerges in Germany, France, Portugal and Romania (European Commission, 2008).

### **2.3.4 Economic activity – by gender**

There are big differences between countries, particularly along the north–south axis: but the influence of rural as opposed to urban patterns is less apparent. Female activity rates do not show a clear pattern, perhaps a signal that the main difficulties encountered by women in the rural labour market are linked to demand, i.e. employment opportunities, rather than supply (European Commission, 2008).

### **2.3.5 Poor labour market opportunities**

In many rural areas qualified people are forced to migrate and the quality of the local labour force declines; this becomes a disincentive for inward investment in the area and the labour market deteriorates further (European Commission, 2008).

## **2.4 Social conditions**

### **2.4.1 Housing conditions**

These appear worse. Generally young, unemployed, low-skilled and low-income people report the worst housing conditions. While these conditions appear almost nonexistent in northern countries, in eastern countries and southern countries such as Italy, Greece and Portugal they are severe (European Commission, 2008).

### **2.4.2 Household composition**

The incidence of lone parents is lower in rural areas (European Commission, 2008).

### **2.4.3 Income and poverty**

Rural areas have a higher degree of income poverty, with the gap in poverty rates between rural and urban areas bigger in eastern than western countries. In eastern countries poverty is associated with agricultural sector difficulties. In western countries rural poverty is concentrated in remote or inaccessible regions. In western countries, e.g. France, the greatest increases in poverty are in urban areas, even if rural districts still have the highest proportion of poor people. *Poverty and Social Exclusion in Rural Areas* observes: “ ... one of the main obstacles faced by a strategy against rural poverty is *the political irrelevance of the rural poor*... European rural poor in official statistics and documents are often *invisible*” (European Commission, 2008).

### **2.4.4 Health**

In England and Wales rural communities enjoy better health and wellbeing than their urban counterparts. On standard measures such as life expectancy and infant mortality, rural communities consistently score better. Levels of the most common mental health problems are lower in rural areas: rural residents make less use of health services and have a more positive view of the state of their own health. More people in rural areas wish to stay in their community long term compared to people in urban areas (Twomey, 2008).

## **2.5 Cultural conditions**

### **2.5.1 Indigenous minorities**

Rural, especially remote, areas are less likely to have recently migrated minority ethnic groups: any such groups are more likely to be indigenous or first nation people such as Roma families. Roma experience high levels of social exclusion and a high risk of poverty, often living in segregated settlements with poor housing and health conditions. Low educational attainment and a high unemployment rate are characteristic, along with a predominance of large households with many children (European Commission, 2008).

### **2.5.2 Migrant minorities**

Insufficient attention is paid to the specific risk of poverty and exclusion among immigrants in rural areas, especially significant in areas whose economy is characterised by strong seasonality and less qualified people. Mediterranean rural areas such as southern Italy, Spain and Greece, once traditional emigration areas, have become a destination for a large number of immigrants in the last 15 years (European Commission, 2008).

### **2.5.3 Language**

This ethnic pattern is reflected in languages, with a higher concentration of regional and minority languages in rural areas. The OECD review *Starting Strong* refers to a meeting of the review team with representatives from the Inari in northern Finland, the largest municipality occupying an area of 17,321 km<sup>2</sup>. The area includes a significant number of Sami people and four languages are spoken: Inari Sami, Skolt Sami, North Sami and Finnish. The note comments that:

“... language is a particular problem ... Separate provision for Sami-speaking children is often very difficult to achieve, and children are obliged to travel into the school area or region to obtain daycare (usually located at the school site)” (OECD, Finland country note).

For further examples of regional and minority languages in rural areas, and services supporting their use, see *Children in Europe* issue 12: *In my own words: services for young children in a multilingual society* (Children in Europe, 2007).

## **2.6 Service conditions**

### **2.6.1 Broadband**

There is still a large gap between urban and rural areas. Broadband access in more remote and rural regions is limited because of the high costs associated with low population density and remoteness (European Commission, 2006). Polish research found that while rural strategies emphasise the importance of enabling access to new technologies, in practice children in rural primary schools have far less internet access than their urban counterparts (Lotys, 2010).

### **2.6.2 Health**

Strong disparities exist in access to health care, which can sometimes be explained by factors such as remoteness, low density and dispersion of villages. In other cases differences may result from decentralised decision making, which gives regional and local authorities policy discretion and permits regional differences in funding (European Commission, 2008). Most services are located in highly populated urban areas, especially specialist services such as care and support for people with mental health problems (Twomey, 2008).

### **2.6.3 Transport**

Limited infrastructures can increase distance from markets and social isolation. Where populations are very dispersed providing traditional public transport is difficult and expensive: particularly relevant for some eastern countries, notably Bulgaria, Poland and Romania, where the overall infrastructure quality is lower (European Commission, 2008).

### **2.6.4 Education**

Low levels of education are a main problem. Educational attainment is significantly lower in rural than urban areas in Ireland, France, Greece, Poland, Italy, Spain and Hungary. Out-migration of educated younger people can be a factor. In some countries in eastern Europe literacy problems still affect mainly rural areas.

Students in PR areas may have difficulty accessing education due to daily commuting. Grouping strategies have led to a decline in the number of rural schools, increasing distances pupils travel and costs to families. Education

infrastructure and staff qualification levels tend to be lower in rural areas, and ICT scarce; equipment for vocational and apprenticeship education may be obsolete or missing (European Commission, 2008).

Low educational levels contribute to low employment and increased poverty, which negatively affect the chance of receiving high quality education.

Demography, remoteness, education and the labour market may interact in rural areas to generate “vicious circles”, which amplify poverty in rural areas. Human capital patterns in rural areas point to a “social immobility trap” in terms of intergenerational persistence of income and occupation, and of educational attainments. Out-migration, rational from the individual viewpoint, leads to progressive aging of the rural population and an impoverishment and economic decline of rural areas (European Commission, 2008).

### **3. EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SERVICES IN RURAL AND REMOTE AREAS**

#### **3.1 Type of services**

The family is the predominant day care provider in rural areas in many countries, including Denmark, Finland and Sweden (OECD, 2001).

Services may take different forms: for example, in France mixed age grouping in *écoles maternelles* is uncommon in urban centres but occurs frequently in rural areas (OECD, 2006). The pattern is the same in Poland, where most kindergartens are divided into four groups according to age, but rural kindergartens may be smaller with only one or two groups.

#### **3.2 Provision, availability of and access to services**

Generally, rural areas have fewer services and fewer children use early childhood education and care. Differences begin to emerge at preschool level: in Poland in 2003, for example, 58.9% of 3–5-year-olds educated in nurseries were in urban areas, with only 8% in rural areas. Many countries face a similar lack of preschool structures: even in Nordic countries, well known for efficient and extensive pre-education services, there is a clear rural–urban pattern with 76% of preschool children in Oslo in kindergarten compared with 52% in the rural Aust-Agder region. Similar regional differences are found in the provision of supervised after-school activities (European Commission, 2008).

This is confirmed by *Starting Strong I*, which mentions barriers to access including scattered communities, small-scale demand linked to sparse population densities, poor transport, lack of suitable buildings, and difficulty

finding qualified staff. Rural childcare, especially in isolated communities, is likely to be more expensive (OECD, 2001).

Specific examples emerge in the national reports prepared for *Working for Inclusion*: in Poland, for example, “attendance [at kindergarten] varies greatly between urban and rural areas, being highest in cities, and lowest in rural, sparsely populated areas. In 2008, according to the Central Statistical Office, 70% of 3–5-year-olds went to kindergarten in urban areas, more than twice as many as in rural areas (30%)”; while in Hungary “provision of services, in particular *bölcsőde* [nurseries], varies considerably from place to place, and is higher in large, urban municipalities, and lowest in small, rural ones.”

### **3.3 Quality of services**

Many rural areas have less access to formal services. Lotys (2010) notes that *zlobki* (nurseries), the main service for under-3s in Poland, are “rare or nonexistent” in most rural areas and most rural children do not have access to *przedszkola* (kindergartens) but rely on *oddziały przedszkola* (nursery classes).

Rural settings may offer more extensive opportunities to outdoor environments and local activities, and may make more extensive use of parental and community support. However access to qualified staff and providing professional support and development can be limited: increasing initial qualification requirements and ongoing professional development are challenges for many rural areas.

### **3.4 Workforce**

*Starting Strong I* refers to difficulty finding qualified staff as a barrier to accessing services, but does not specify how widespread the problem is or its causes. Rural areas tend to have more acute staff recruitment problems and difficulties accessing inservice training (OECD, 2001).

The report *Childcare Services for Rural Families: Improving provision in the European Union* (European Commission, 1995) found early childhood education and care services to be an important source of employment for many rural communities, but likely to experience difficulty in recruiting qualified staff.

## **4. IMPROVING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SERVICES IN RURAL AND REMOTE AREAS: POLICY PROPOSALS, INITIATIVES AND LOCAL PROJECTS**

The European Commission Childcare Network recommended instituting guidelines for collecting data on a basis that compares urban and rural areas,

“and permits the Commission to assess implementation of Article 3.1 (of the 1992 EC Childcare Recommendation)”. Other recommendations included using European rural and agricultural funding to share information on new models and practice.

The new European Commissioner for Education Training and Culture, Androulla Vassiliou, notes that EU member states and the European Commission are strengthening cooperation in education and training and see early childhood education and care as an area identified for improvement under ET2020, the new strategic framework. One specific goal is that by 2020 at least 95% of children between 4 years and compulsory school age should participate in early childhood education. She draws attention to the increased funding available to rural areas for vocational training and the development of educational infrastructure and related services (Children in Europe, 2010)

European funding has supported the exploration of new models for delivering educational services in rural areas when linked to rural development and economic diversification, and this is reflected in national and regional strategies for rural areas. In Tuscany, Italy a major collaboration between the University of Pisa and the Tuscan region explored new models and strategies to developing and supporting services, including the concept of ‘social farming’ – the use of farms to provide a range of services for children experiencing difficulties within their families, or whose families are seeking political asylum (Children in Europe, 2010).

*Starting Strong I* outlines strategies to improve access to services in rural areas, including:

- integrating services with schools;
- itinerant teachers;
- mobile services;
- family day care.

It mentions examples of these initiatives in countries including Australia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Portugal and the UK (OECD, 2001).

In Sweden a number of reforms were introduced following transfer of all early childhood education and care services to the education system in 1996, including extending entitlement to attendance from 12 months of age to all children; a period of free attendance for 4- and 5-year-olds; and a maximum fee for all other children (approximately £112 a month for the first child in a family, less for subsequent children). The impact of these reforms was evaluated by Skolverket (the National Agency for Education), which concluded:

“The proportion of children enrolled in pre-school has increased in all municipality groups ... *This increase has been greater in some municipalities than others*, which means that the proportion of enrolled children has become more evenly distributed among Swedish

municipalities after the introduction of the reform. The importance of various background factors (for instance, municipality of residence, parents' occupation and foreign background) for participation in pre-school has decreased" (Skolverket, 2007: emphasis added).

This has closed the gap between rural and urban municipalities, with attendance rates in rural and other smaller municipalities rising from between 45 and 50% to around 70% (Skolverket, 2007).

Another example of an effective national initiative is Poland, where non-government organisations piloted alternative forms of kindergarten education particularly suited to rural areas. The pilot was implemented on a national scale between 2005 and 2008, with very good results: 20 organisations helped rural municipalities establish 900 kindergarten centres. Since 2007, municipalities have been allowed to set up other forms of kindergarten care to supplement the network in areas with special demographic and geographical conditions, with non-public service providers receiving public funding equivalent to 40% of per capita expenses in a public kindergarten. Many of these are in rural areas, and participation rates are slowly rising.

Another initiative exploiting the benefits available to rural and remote areas has been the development of forest or nature kindergartens, which have shown strong growth and widespread appeal in Norway, Denmark and other Nordic countries (Children in Europe, 2008).

Access to qualifications within schools and by distance learning has helped some countries, for example Norway, to overcome difficulties in developing a skilled workforce, and pedagogical advisers can help to overcome professional isolation. A new initiative in southern Belgium has supported this through networks of professionals working together on such issues as trainee supervision, continuity of care and work with mixed age groups (Pirard, 2010).

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