

FLEMISH RURAL REPORT 2024 - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In order to assess the demographic, economic, spatial, and administrative developments in Flanders, the rural report classifies the 300 Flemish municipalities by population density using a threshold of 350 inhabitants/km² as well as by land take percentage, using a threshold of 30%. The result is a categorisation of 140 rural municipalities, 147 urbanised municipalities, and 13 cities with a central regional function.

In the report, the three groups of municipalities are compared for over 40 indicators. It makes use of data that are publicly available, supplemented with relevant research reports. The report clearly illustrates the differences between these types of areas, showing trends over time where possible.

CHANGING RURAL DEMOGRAPHICS: AGING, MIGRATION, AND DECLINING FAMILY SIZE

Rural areas are attractive places to live. The population size is increasing due to migration and people moving to rural areas, which leads to growing diversity. The demographic composition is marked by a significant aging and a decline in young people. These trends will be even more pronounced by 2040, presenting both opportunities and challenges in terms of adaptive housing, home care, services centres, intergenerational living environments, and the accessibility to basic amenities.

The number of private households is rising while the household size is decreasing, resulting in more single-person households, childless couples, and single parents. This change in family composition brings challenges such as loneliness.

RURAL ECONOMY: LIMITED IN SIZE BUT PROMISING IN OPPORTUNITIES

The added value of the rural economy is smaller compared to urban areas. Subsequently the jobratio (the number of filled job positions per 100 inhabitants aged 15 to 64) is 53,4 which is significantly lower than the jobratio in urban areas and cities. This results in significant commuting flows from rural areas to urban areas and cities.

Agriculture remains the primary sector, particularly in terms of spatial, social, and strategic importance. The intensification of the agricultural sector mainly takes place in rural municipalities, while alternative business models like organic farming and short supply chains are relatively more important in urbanized areas.

Rural tourism is on the rise. The attractiveness of landscapes, forests, tranquility and silence translates into a large supply of holiday homes, for short and long stays. At the same time, tourism offers opportunities to revitalize local retail businesses.

OPEN SPACE UNDER PRESSURE DUE TO HOUSING AND MOBILITY

Open space is a key asset of rural municipalities. However, a growing land consumption is observed. Further urbanisation is increasing the pressure on these open spaces and leads to further fragmentation due to residential and mobility patterns in Flanders.

The trend of a growing number of apartments is strengthening village centres, but threatens the village character. Villages are expanding in area but decreasing in usage intensity. As a result, population and employment densities in villages have declined rather than increased in recent years.

More than half of the rural population lives in areas with limited accessibility and few nearby amenities, resulting in 70% of rural residents using cars for commuting. The shift towards sustainable and green mobility is progressing slower in rural areas, with fewer charging stations and shared mobility options.

LIMITED FUNDING AND HUMAN RESOURCES IN RURAL MUNICIPALITIES

Rural municipalities face significantly lower income from fiscal revenues and lower base grants from the Municipal Fund. They have fewer operational subsidies compared to cities. The capacity within the services of rural municipalities is also more limited: with only 11 staff members per 1,000 inhabitants compared to 15,5 in central cities.

AN INTEGRATED POLICY TO STRENGTHEN SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DYNAMICS IN RURAL AREAS AND TO IMPROVE ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY.

The rural report shows that - compared to cities - rural areas face different challenges in terms of economic development, administrative tasks,... In addition, there are similar challenges that manifest themselves differently in rural areas such as demographic development. Finally, there are opportunities in the uniqueness of rural areas to strengthen social and economic dynamics in rural areas and improve the quality of the environment. However, this requires an integrated policy tailored to rural areas.

THE FLEMISH LAND AGENCY AS RURAL POLICY AUTHORITY IN FLANDERS

Since the Flemish Government established rural policy as a policy field in 2004, the Flemish Land Agency (VLM) has been taking charge of its coordination and facilitation. In order to stimulate social and economic dynamics in the countryside and to increase the quality of life, the VLM is the managing authority for LEADER in the Common Agricultural Policy, carries out policy preparation and facilitates policy implementation through project calls.

VLM publishes the Flemish rural report 2024 as an independent analysis of trends and evolutions in rural areas. In doing so, VLM firstly wants to inspire the political parties forming the new Flemish Government to give rural areas an important role in the coalition agreement. Secondly, with this report we are taking a first step for Flanders in the implementation of the European Long-Term Vision for rural areas and the Rural Pact.

