Vila Verde Manifesto for the Future of Rural Areas

1. A National and European cause

The future of Portugal and Europe is also shaped in rural areas. It is there that communities produce food, care for the landscape, air and water, protect natural resources, preserve heritage and cultural identities, and sustain human presence. Rural development must therefore be recognised as a strategic priority for National and European public policies—not to protect the past, but to strengthen cohesion, food sovereignty, climate resilience, territorial balance and local democracy.

Minha Terra Federation advocates for rural development to have a clear, stable and ambitious place in National and European public policies, particularly in the European Union's next Multiannual Financial Framework for 2028–2034 (MFF 2028–2034). Greater flexibility, simpler programmes and national and regional partnership plans tailored to local needs will only represent progress if they translate into a genuine commitment to rural areas and their communities.

This Manifesto sets out our proposals for the 2028–2034 period, with the aim of turning the flexibility of the next financial framework into effective territorial cohesion, built around four priorities:

- Recognise rural development as a strategic priority;
- Ensure stable funding for LEADER/Community-Led Local Development (CLLD);
- Safeguard the effective participation of local partners in setting priorities, selecting projects and monitoring strategies; and
- Adapt procedures and instruments to the scale of local investments.

In this Manifesto, LEADER refers to the European rural development approach based on local strategies and partnerships between public, private and civil society organisations, originating in the Common Agricultural Policy. CLLD (Community-Led Local Development) is the territorial instrument that applies this participatory approach through different funding sources and policy frameworks. In both cases, decisions are guided by a strategy developed within the local area and implemented with local responsibility.

2. What is at stake

Rural areas face persistent challenges that reinforce one another. Population decline and ageing reduce demand for and the availability of essential services; inadequate transport links and digital connectivity make it harder to access decision-making centres and more specialised facilities; and lower business density, a shortage of skilled jobs and barriers to investment make

it more difficult to attract and retain people and economic activity. These challenges are compounded by vulnerability to climate change, the risk of productive land falling into disuse and pressure on natural resources, all of which entail substantial costs in terms of protection and restoration.

These challenges cannot be addressed through one-size-fits-all solutions, as each territory has its own combination of resources, difficulties, development trajectories, capacities and opportunities. The LEADER/CLLD approach responds to this diversity by starting with local communities, mobilising local partners, combining public investment with private initiative, and making the most of endogenous resources alongside external resources. In this way, small-scale opportunities identified within a territory can be transformed into projects tailored to local needs and into tangible drivers of development.

3. The irreplaceable value of Local Action Groups (LAGs)

In many rural areas, this local presence is ensured by Local Action Groups (LAGs): networks capable of bringing together individuals, businesses, associations, local authorities, producers, young people, schools, private social solidarity institutions, cooperatives and other organisations around shared goals. In Portugal, these partnerships involve more than 3,500 organisations. Within an ecosystem in which different organisations contribute their own specific expertise and capabilities, LAGs perform a complementary and irreplaceable role: they identify opportunities, encourage initiatives, build partnerships and connect each idea with the capabilities needed to bring it to life. Whether it is a small business with potential to grow, a local product with the potential to reach new markets, a village capable of attracting new residents, or a collective initiative that can address a specific problem, LAGs help turn local potential into concrete action.

The value of these networks lies in their ability to turn local proximity into collective action. Over more than three decades, LAGs have established themselves as an infrastructure for territorial development and resilience: fostering socio-territorial, environmental, cultural and artistic innovation; supporting entrepreneurial initiatives; and connecting resources, knowledge and partners. Through capacity-building for individuals and organisations, national and international networks, and the participatory development of local strategies, they help retain skills, create jobs, test solutions and train new generations of practitioners and leaders. This legacy of knowledge and cooperation strengthens the ability of territories to retain their populations, services and economic activities, regenerate resources and build a future.

4. Principles to guide the 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework

The next financial cycle must give due consideration to the specific needs of rural areas and shape policy instruments around the results they are intended to achieve. Decisions on the 2028–2034 MFF should therefore be assessed against five criteria: funding stability, proximity in decision-making, policy coherence, effective community participation, and the ability to translate funding into measurable results.

These criteria underpin the following principles.

1. **Recognise rural development as a strategic priority**, ensuring that rural areas have a distinct place in European and National policies, with responses tailored to their needs and potential.
2. **Ensure stable and predictable funding**, safeguarding an overall level of funding commensurate with the sustainable development of rural areas.
3. **Simplify procedures**, reducing the administrative burden through rules proportionate to the scale of projects and the risks involved, and ensuring that, under LEADER/CLLD, Local Action Groups are not confined to predominantly administrative functions at the expense of territorial animation and the development and facilitation of networks and partnerships.
4. **Support local-scale investments**, including small-scale projects that create jobs, attract and retain people, modernise activities, make the most of local resources and strengthen community life.
5. **Mobilise different forms of public support in a coordinated manner**, enabling each territory to combine resources from Agriculture, Cohesion Policy, Fisheries and other instruments to implement its strategy. This combination should support integrated responses in areas such as skills, services, infrastructure, climate action, energy, the bioeconomy, tourism, transport, logistics and digitalisation, drawing on the specific expertise required rather than seeking solutions through poorly coordinated policies.
6. **Integrate CLLD into territorial programming**, recognising it as the most appropriate model for governing and implementing local strategies and ensuring that community participation does not depend on optional or short-term policy choices.
7. **Promote the LEADER/CLLD approach as the most advantageous** and efficient way of managing and deploying public funds in rural areas, ensuring dedicated, stable and predictable funding specifically for LEADER, amounting to at least 5% of rural development resources.
8. **Implement LEADER in all rural areas**, without restricting it to areas facing specific disadvantages, and monitor and evaluate its results and impacts using appropriate indicators that go beyond financial implementation.
9. **Strengthen local decision-making,** ensuring the effective participation of local partners in setting priorities and selecting projects, within a framework of transparent, proportionate and verifiable rules, so that administrative procedures support, rather than replace, locally driven decision-making.
10. **Distinguish between the allocation of funding to rural areas and the implementation of Community-Led Local Development**: the former indicates where funds are invested; the latter determines how communities participate in the strategy, priorities and decision-making. The allocation of Cohesion Policy funding to rural areas should therefore be accompanied by channelling a significant share of these resources through participatory approaches that are close to local communities.

5. Solutions for stronger rural areas

We advocate a policy cycle that recognises rural areas as spaces of opportunity and as part of the solution to National and European challenges. Food security and the climate transition require local production, short supply chains, local processing, active forest and water management, the circular economy, the bioeconomy, energy efficiency and local adaptation. Cohesion and quality of life require decent jobs, affordable housing, services, mobility, connectivity and social inclusion. Competitiveness requires micro and small businesses, sustainable tourism, quality products, culture and heritage. The social and solidarity economy, cooperatives, associations and social innovation cut across all these areas, connecting economic initiative, community participation and integrated local development. Taken together, these solutions require networking, skills and creativity.

These opportunities and solutions will only deliver results if policies are designed with rural areas, rather than simply for them. This means placing trust in local partnerships, ensuring institutional stability and investing in technical capacity, education and the continuous training of those involved in local development and other local stakeholders, so that they can foster initiatives, build partnerships and develop projects. This is particularly important in the many practical dimensions of the bioeconomy and the climate and digital transitions, which are profoundly transforming the work of territorial development. It also means respecting the time needed to achieve lasting results. By recognising the strategic importance of Community-Led Local Development, the 2028–2034 MFF can turn these principles into a model for the implementation of European funds that combines territorial intelligence, democratic participation and a tangible impact on people's lives.

6. Our commitment

Minha Terra Federation reaffirms its commitment to a more socially and territorially balanced, fair and cohesive Portugal. It also undertakes to mobilise Local Action Groups, bring partners together and contribute to proposals that strengthen the capacity of rural areas to act and make decisions. As part of this commitment, it recognises the role of non-governmental organisations working in local development and the importance of ensuring the institutional conditions, autonomy and sustainability they need to fulfil their mission of mobilising and empowering communities. The objective is clear: no rural community should be treated as peripheral, no local idea should be dismissed, however small, and no territory should be denied the opportunity to shape its own future.

To defend Community-Led Local Development is to defend a Europe that trusts its citizens, respects the diversity of its territories and turns participation, proximity and shared responsibility into effective decision-making and transformative capacity. Cohesion cannot be imposed from the centre; it must be built together with communities that have the resources, skills and autonomy to take action.



7. Final appeal

We call on the European institutions, the Portuguese Government, local authorities, public bodies, economic and social partners, and civil society to ensure that these principles are reflected in decisions for the next European funding programming period. This means recognising rural development as a strategic priority, safeguarding dedicated funding for LEADER/CLLD and establishing this approach as a locally rooted instrument in support of cohesion. It requires ensuring local decision-making and adopting rules proportionate to the scale of projects and the dynamics of each territory.

We are not asking for privilege; we are asking for territorial justice.

We are not asking for exceptions; we are asking for rules that reflect realities on the ground.

We are not asking for symbolic recognition; we are asking for the effective capacity to act.

Because every rural inhabitant counts. Because every territory matters. Because the future of Portugal and Europe is also decided in their villages, towns, fields, mountains and communities that keep the country alive every single day.

