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“Resilient rural areas and sustainable food systems: governance, policy frameworks and structural challenges”

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Beyond Infrastructure: Linking Human Activation and Institutional Opportunity for Rural
Regeneration and Food System Resilience

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Abstract text

Across Europe, governments have invested heavily in rural development through infrastructure, public services, and institutional support. These investments have improved living standards and created conditions for economic activity. Yet infrastructure alone does not create development; it creates the possibility of development. Realizing that possibility depends on people who can recognize, pursue, and transform opportunity into productive enterprise.

Despite decades of subsidies, grants, and infrastructure investment, many rural regions across Europe continue to experience depopulation, generational outmigration, and declining productive capacity. The persistence of these trends suggests that prevailing explanations of rural decline may be incomplete. Meanwhile, the advantages of urban living have weakened

for many households as housing costs, commuting burdens, and stress increasingly offset wage premiums, while rural living offers benefits in health, child development, and quality of life. Despite these advantages, many people who would choose rural life are unable to act on that choice because the institutional structures that support viable rural livelihoods are absent, and the human development systems needed to activate local enterprise remain underdeveloped. The coexistence of persistent rural decline and latent demand for rural living suggests an overlooked challenge: the need to develop both human capacity and the structural conditions necessary for sustainable regeneration.

This paper asks: what combination of human development methodology and institutional design can move rural communities beyond subsidy dependence toward self-sustaining regeneration, and what are the implications for food systems that depend on the small- and medium-scale producers increasingly disappearing from rural communities?

Rural regeneration depends not only on creating opportunity but also on enabling people to realize it. The paper proposes a humanistic approach to rural policy grounded in the integration of two complementary forms of investment: human activation and institutional opportunity. Third Force Economics (TFE), together with its implementation methodology, Enterprise Facilitation (EF), provides the human development framework for activating local potential and entrepreneurial capacity. The Fortin Rural Economy Compact (FREC) provides the institutional architecture through which human capacities can be translated into sustainable rural regeneration and food system resilience. By aligning human development with institutional design, the integrated framework offers a conceptual model for sustainable rural development, linking the capacity to create opportunity with the conditions necessary to sustain it.

The FREC addresses the institutional dimension of this challenge through six interdependent foundations designed to function as a unified system: Anchor-Commit, which secures multi-year commitments from anchor institutions; Production Credits, which make local output visible to financing systems; Housing Conversion, which expands worker and entrepreneur housing while limiting speculation; Infrastructure Bond, which transforms infrastructure commitments into enforceable delivery mechanisms; Rural Finance Bond, which provides continuity beyond political cycles; and iTRUST (Integrated Transport Regional Utilization System Theory), a community-governed multimodal logistics system designed to improve market access and competitiveness.

While the FREC establishes conditions for regeneration, TFE provides the human development framework through which those conditions can be activated. TFE positions the entrepreneur as a catalyst for community development, grounded in belonging, contribution, self-determination, creativity, and risk-taking. EF operationalizes these principles through listening, relationship building, and support for locally rooted enterprises. Drawing on four decades of practice across hundreds of communities, EF is a responsive, bottom-up methodology focused on identifying and supporting entrepreneurial potential already present within communities. Within the integrated framework, EF provides the human activation component, linking local initiative and entrepreneurial capacity to the institutional conditions created through the FREC.

The central thesis is that these two forms of investment are complementary and mutually reinforcing, linking human capacity with institutional opportunity in a more sustainable framework for rural regeneration. Human activation without structural inclusion leaves motivated entrepreneurs excluded from access to finance, housing, and markets. Conversely, institutional reform without human activation leaves mechanisms underutilized. Ultimately, sustainable development depends on communities recognizing and exercising their own agency.

The paper develops its argument through comparative analysis of EU rural development instruments and evidence drawn from EF practice across multiple national contexts. It concludes by outlining implementation considerations for the 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework, including candidate countries, where emerging rural institutional architecture offers a unique opportunity to design integrated systems from the outset. By aligning human activation with institutional opportunity, the framework offers a pathway toward more resilient rural communities and food systems.

Keywords: rural regeneration; sustainable food systems; human activation; endogenous development; enterprise facilitation; generational renewal; rural resilience.