



**European Committee
of the Regions**

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SPEECH BY 1ST VICE PRESIDENT TZITZIKOSTAS

THE EUROPEAN STARTUP VILLAGE FORUM 2023

ORGANISED BY THE

EUROPEAN COMMISSION - JOINT RESEARCH CENTRE

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Distinguished Commissioners

Dear colleagues,

I am particularly glad toady to constate

that regional and local authorities

share with the European Commission

a **common long-term vision for rural areas,**

as they are indeed **places of innovation.**

We all agree that living in the countryside

should not be a handicap preventing Europeans

from creating new delivery models for the food they produce,

from being at the forefront of hydrogen production,

or from running a co-working hub for local enterprises.

But reality is that young people still leave the countryside and do not return

because there are **too few job opportunities** for them,

no broadband connections,

or **little support** to raise their children.

This generates frustration, as **many feel left behind**

by both national governments and the EU.

The European Committee of the Regions therefore

strongly supports further developing a more dynamic image of rural areas.

The Start-up Village Forum is then a perfect place for the exchange of good practices

and for **make emerge an innovation-driven rural entrepreneurship,**

and I thank the Commission for organizing it today.

We, the local and regional administrations,

are supporting the creation of innovative ecosystems in our territories,

as **our aim is to help generate innovative social and economic activities** in rural areas.

We want to use innovative solutions to **improve resilience**, and harness the potential of each rural area.

Innovative ecosystems are indeed key for

changing the perception of rural areas, and for **attracting investors.**

Dear colleagues,

The reality is that

there is a huge potential in our rural areas,

as fostering rural entrepreneurship, today, goes hand in hand with the green and digital transition.

As you well know, **rural start-ups**

can easily harness local, natural, renewable materials and energy.

And new technologies will help them diminishing communication and transport problems.

But while digitalisation in the rural areas is key in this respect, it **remains a challenge.**

Even if the rural-urban gap has almost been closed for 4G mobile,

the deployment of all other digital infrastructure lags behind in rural areas:

5G connectivity all around the EU is currently mainly available in major cities and urban areas;

in addition, only 17 out of the 27 Member States are involved in the existing 5G cross-border corridors.

Moreover, **rural areas need more than infrastructures.**

In most EU countries, the share of people

never using the internet

is significantly higher in the countryside than in urban areas.

We therefore need to invest not only in digital equipment, but also in skills development and in training.

In this context, progress towards our ambitions should also be monitored.

This is why the Committee of the Regions is happy to cooperate with the European Commission in order **to develop a robust and comprehensive system of local digital indicators** measuring the "digital maturity" of rural areas.

Dear colleagues,

Innovation ecosystems also depend on

people trained in soft skills

such as open innovation, interregional and international cooperation, and intercultural communication.

We therefore support the **European Year of Skills 2023**, as a better skilled rural workforce will reinforce the welfare of rural areas.

And this is the reason why the Committee also stands ready to be an active player in the roll out of the **new Talent Booster Mechanism**

with a view to fully realise the potentials of our territories, their populations and businesses.

We also believe that **Start-ups should become a natural part in developing smart municipalities in rural areas.**

This is why we welcome the initiative of start-up villages

as it represents an important strand for developing the economic pillar of smart villages.

To conclude:

We remain committed to making this long-term vision a success

at local, national and European level,

and this through:

the Rural Pact,

rural proofing

and targeted initiatives like the start-up village Forum.

I wish you fruitful discussions.