

**Marko Vesligaj, Mayor of Pregrada, member of the COTER Committee of the
Committee of the Regions**

Tackling Demographic Challenges in Rural Areas through Youth Engagement and Empowerment

"In rural communities across Europe, young people face unique challenges that impact their growth and future prospects. In Pregrada, a small town in Croatia, we are actively addressing these challenges by fostering youth engagement and empowerment. Our approach prioritizes two key areas: education and sustainable mobility.

Education is the cornerstone of youth empowerment. In rural areas like Pregrada, we are working to ensure that young people have access to quality education and training programs. This includes bridging the digital divide, in close future also providing essential broadband access , and enabling digital learning opportunities, crucial for the digital and green transition.

Sustainable mobility is another focus. We have plan to investing in transportation infrastructure that supports diverse modes of mobility, including public transit and green alternatives like biking and walking. These efforts are not just about facilitating movement; they are about enhancing quality of life and ensuring that transportation is affordable and inclusive.

Central to our strategy is the engagement of young people in decision-making processes. In Pregrada, we actively involve our youth in discussions and decisions that affect their lives. This engagement fosters a sense of belonging and ownership, essential for youth retention in rural communities.

However, these initiatives require support. We advocate for logistic support, including diverse communication channels and staff training, to ensure the success of projects aimed at youth empowerment. We also emphasize the need for clear public policies, particularly in housing, which should not be left solely to market forces. These policies should be created bottom-up, incorporating the voices of those most affected, especially young people.

In conclusion, addressing the demographic challenges in rural areas demands a concerted effort in education, sustainable mobility, and youth participation. The success stories from Pregrada demonstrate that with the right approach and support, it is possible to create vibrant, inclusive rural communities where young people can thrive. We call on the European Union and national governments to join us in this vital endeavour."

Cuenca, ESPON Seminar, 15-16 November 2023