



RURAL

POPULATION

Key findings from the qualitative
and quantitative research

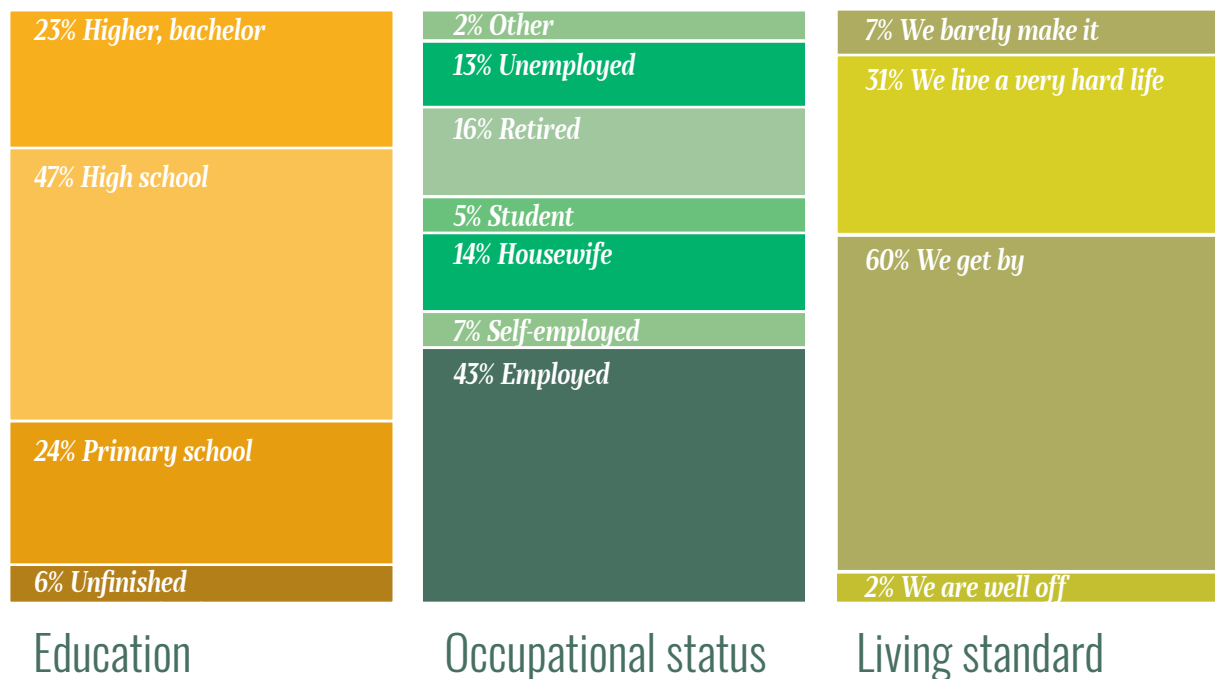
“ I would ask politicians to listen to us. They should come to our village, ask about our opinion, meet with us at least 3 times a year, so that we express our ideas, are heard and included. ”

Female, 28, Tearce

Demographic profile

A total of 518 respondents living in rural settlements took part in the quantitative face-to-face survey. The Law on Territorial Organization of the Local Self-Government defines the rural settlement as a type of settlement with one functional purpose in which one activity prevails, has agricultural features and functions (Official Gazette, No. 55/2004).

In order to gain an in-depth insight into the background, perceptions and opinions of this group, the quantitative survey was complemented by one focus group.



TOPICS OF INTEREST

Interest in socio-political developments in the country and sources of information

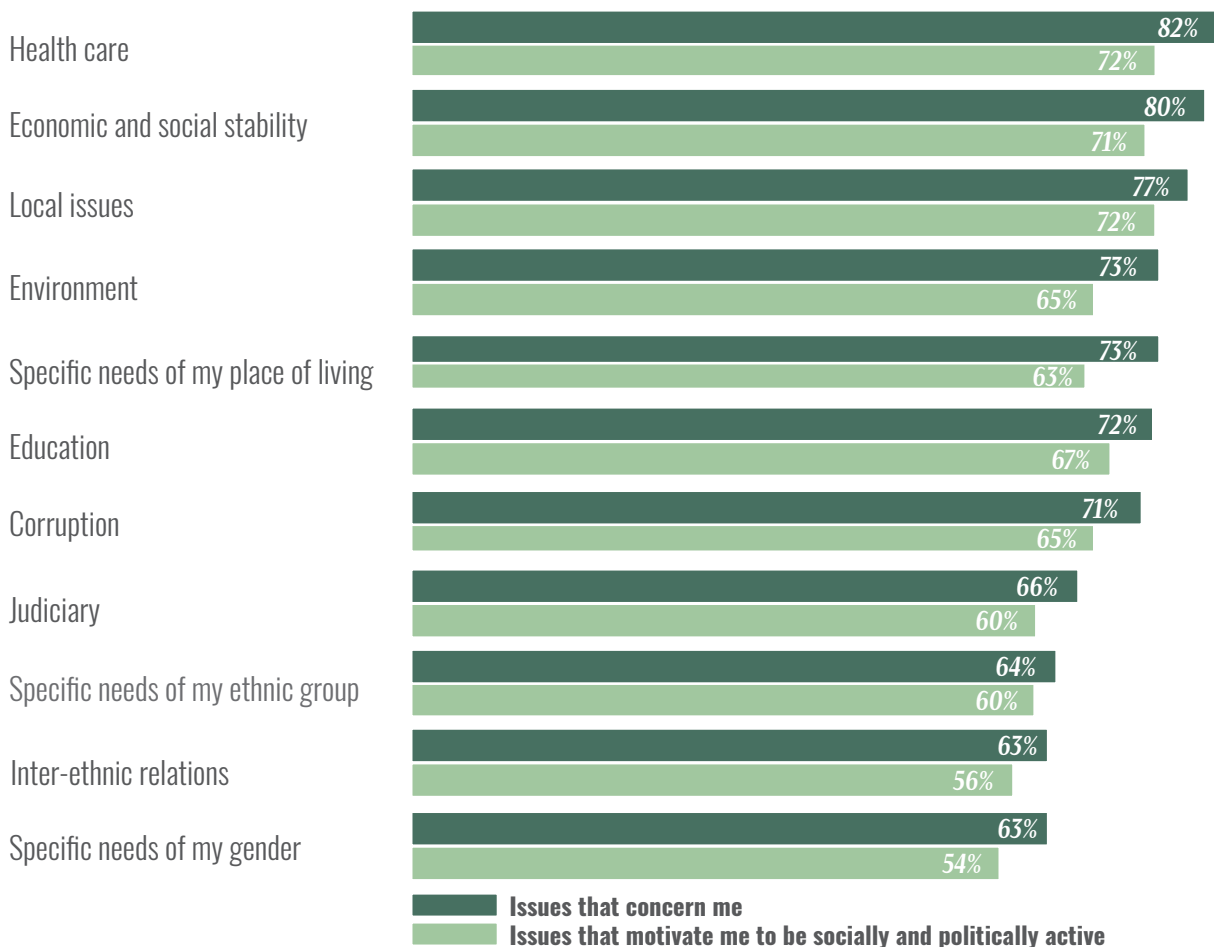
How interested are you in the current socio-political developments in the country and in the world?



The research shows that slightly over half of the respondents (54%) are very or somewhat interested in the current socio-political developments in the country, while 46% are not interested. Similarly to the trends in the general population, the highest interest within this demographic group is observed among men and respondents with higher education, while farmers and housewives are less interested in socio-political developments. Fifty-two per cent (52%) of the respondents discuss socio-political developments sometimes or often, while 48% rarely or never do. Women and young people from this group discuss these issues less often.

Concerns

*How much would you say the following information/issues/topics concern you?
How much would you say the following issues/topics motivate you to be socially or politically active?*



Health care, economic and social stability and local concerns rank the highest on the list of concerns specific to this group, as indicated by more than three quarters of the respondents. These are considered the key driving factors for their social and political activation.

This group is the least concerned about the specific needs of their gender, ethnic group or interethnic relations.

The concerns of this demographic group also relate to unemployment, nepotism and political party membership as a precondition for employment, low standard of living, migration (youth in particular), poor infrastructure, sewage and wastewater problems, frequent power outages, lack of kindergartens, parks/playgrounds, and recreational facilities for children, homeless animals, poor public transport, poor living conditions for people with disabilities, and lack of freedom of speech/fear to express their personal opinion.

Of note is that people living in rural settlements are still struggling with access to social services such as health care, clean water, electricity, sewerage system, and roads.

People living in rural settlements are interested in the current socio-political situation in the country, as well as the pandemic crisis. However, primary points of concern remain their local problems and immediate surroundings.

“ I was expecting that the current local self-government would make a difference, for example, to provide us with access to sewerage. Also, the street is not paved, we walk in mud. But there is no change, only party employments. ”
Female, 70, Kisela Jabuka

INFORMATION SOURCES

Predominant users of television as a primary source of information about current socio-political developments are people over the age of 55, with primary education and monthly household income below 12,000 denars.

Television is the predominant source of information for people living in rural settlements, as indicated by 51% of the respondents, followed by social networks (26%) and web portals (7%).



TV 51%

CIVIC PARTICIPATION

The interest in civic involvement is more pronounced among men, ethnic Macedonians and respondents with higher education.

The research shows that 61% of this demographic group does not believe in making positive change by individual engagement or engagement in NGOs, whereas 20% lack interest in politics, which explains the low motivation for civic participation.

Seven out of ten people living in rural settlements have never been involved in an event, activity, or process that could impact the community or their local surroundings, nor are they interested in a more active civic involvement.

Have you been involved in any event, activity, or process that could have effected change in the community or the place where you live?



Are you interested in greater civic involvement?



Below is an overview of other factors that contribute to the low level of civic participation:

- ♦ People fear they will lose their jobs/incomes if they openly express dissatisfaction;
- ♦ Institutions are perceived as not responsive to citizens' demands;
- ♦ Institutions are believed to be under strong political influence;
- ♦ Perception of the judiciary as a dysfunctional system that fails to protect the citizens and of the law as not applicable equally to everyone.

“ I see that most young people are silent. They think - I will hold still, otherwise I will get fired. People are afraid of being punished. ”

Female, 23, Tearce

“ People do not believe that they can change anything. It is obvious that the system is made for the politicians to steal and never get punished. The political parties are not fond of people who think independently of party views; they do not support or encourage proactivity or self-initiative. Only obedience. ”

Male, 44, Miletino

Factors that promote involvement

Responsiveness of the institutional system, cited by 32% of the respondents, is the key motivator for this group to be more involved in activities that could effectuate change in the community. Other motivating factors pertain to the representation of their interests (cited by 14%) and prospects for obtaining personal or family-related benefits (cited by 12%).

Whereas slightly over half of the respondents (56%) do not believe they can make an impact as a citizen, 26% believe they can make a meaningful impact in their municipality and less than 5% believe they can influence the Prime Minister (4%), the Parliament (3%), ministers (3%) and the President of the country (1%).

Willingness and ability to participate in civic activities

To the question whether they would be willing to participate in civic activities, 45% of the respondents cited a preference for participation in polling, 42% preferred meetings with colleagues/friends on personal or family issues, and 41% cited a preference for brochures or leaflets as information means.

The percentage of actions they would avoid is more prominent: 78% would not attend a political party meeting, 78% would not participate in a public debate, and 74% would not participate in online meetings.

In which of the civic activities are you willing to participate?

45%

Respond a questionnaire



41%

Read a brochure or a leaflet



42%

Meet colleagues, friends to discuss



ELECTION PROCESS

The focus group participants perceive elections as “unnecessary”, “waste of state budget”, and “too frequent”.

The qualitative research shows that this demographic group is suspicious of the legitimacy of all elections in the country, believing that everything has been pre-arranged and that “the international factor” is predominant in determining the election outcome.

Do you believe every vote is important and can impact the election results?

75%

Yes

17%

No

14%

Refuses to answer

Almost three quarters of the respondents are of the opinion that every vote is important and can impact the election results (75%), whereas 17% do not believe so.

Six out of ten respondents indicated that voting per se is not sufficient to effectuate change or influence policies; three out of ten believe that voting can effectuate change or influence policies, whereas one out of ten claimed ignorant on the issue.

Motivation to vote

How regularly do you vote?

75% always or often

14% sometimes

5% usually not

3% never

The research shows that 75% of the respondents vote almost always or often, 14% sometimes, 5% usually abstain, and 3% regularly abstain from voting.

Forty-one per cent (41%) of the respondents regularly vote for the same party, and an equal percentage vote for different political parties. This indicates that they would vote for another party if the policies of the party they support prove to be unsuccessful.

“ I always say - if this person or party has not been good so far, they should be punished. ”

Male, 44, Miletino

Factors that influence the decision to vote

The top three factors that influence the respondent's decision to vote are: perception that voting is a civic right and duty (56%), prospects for better future (39%), and fear that their vote would be stolen (27%).



Whereas the percentage of reported difficulties during voting is small, most cases in this category concern non-possession of valid personal documents (7%).

Almost two thirds of the respondents (64%) stated that their decision to vote regularly or most often, overlaps with that of their families, whereas one third (33%) claimed that it differs from their families.

Six out of ten respondents' decision to vote is not influenced by their friends.

Nevertheless, this demographic group points out the "pressure by their friends" to vote for a particular political party in order to improve their friends' employment prospects.

“ I used to go out and vote because my friends asked me to and I did so to do them a favour. I am glad I could help, they are struggling to get an employment either in REK Bitola or in education. ”

Female, 37, Krklino

People living in rural areas would like to see more people from their local community, and familiar people as candidates on the party lists for elections or as elected officials, e.g. in municipal councils.

If there are representatives of the following groups on the candidate lists, how likely is it that you would vote for that political party?

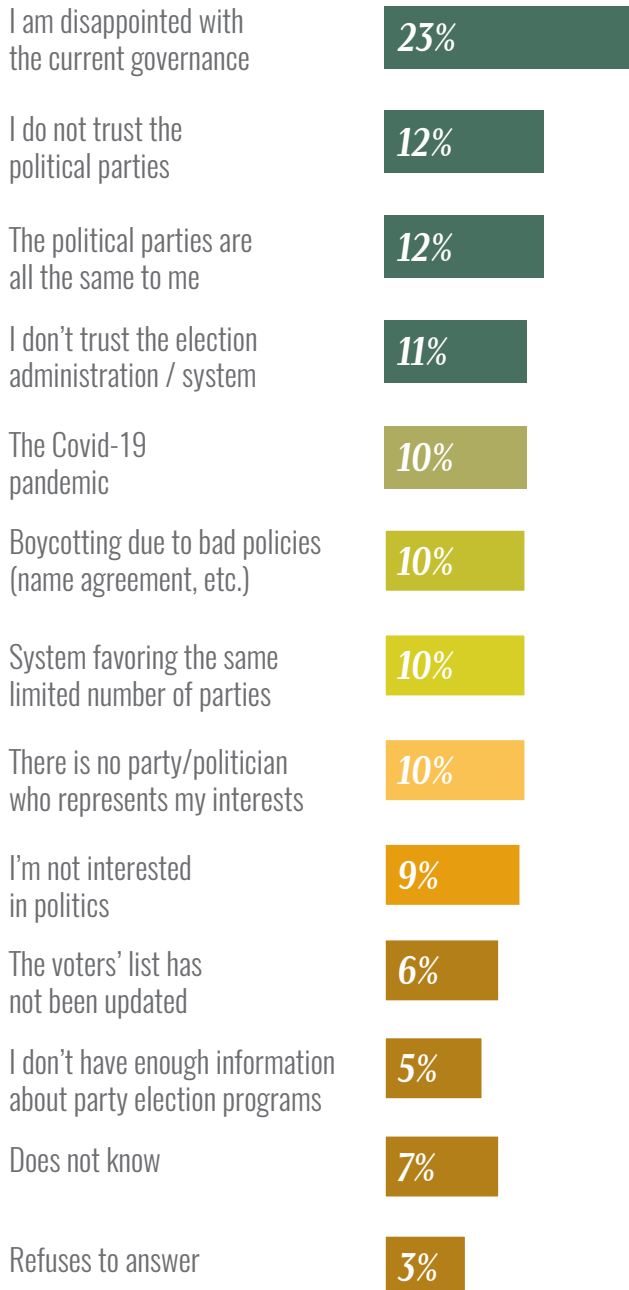


More likely No impact Less likely Do not know

Demotivation to vote

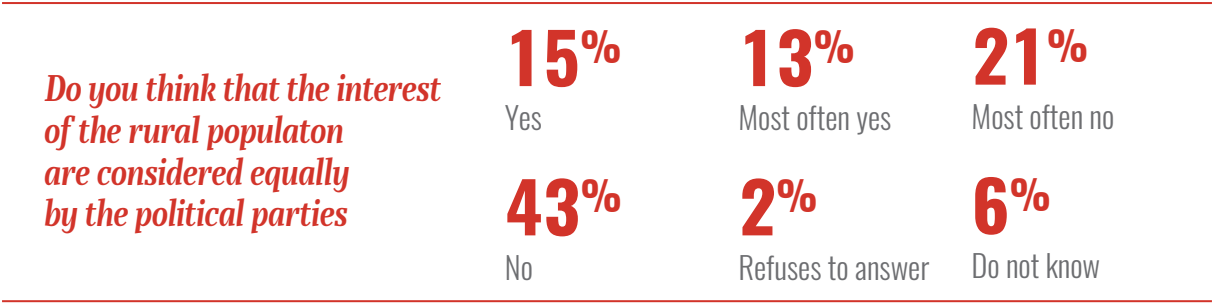
Dissatisfaction with the incumbent government and the political parties is the key factor that influences the respondents' decision to abstain from voting.

What can influence your decision not to vote?



Slightly over half of the responses (57%) concern dissatisfaction with the governance and the political parties in general (disappointment, perception that all the parties are the same, that there is no party or politician representing their interests and values, and distrust).

The vast majority of people living in rural settlements (64%) believe that the interests of the rural population are not considered equally by the political parties in comparison to the urban population.



The belief is that there is a strong discrimination of the rural areas in the country across political programs and political parties. As inhabitants in the rural areas, they feel rejected and unacknowledged at local and central level.

“ In rural areas nobody is interested to do something for us, for the citizens. We live in a divided society, as if we are not there or as if we are some other part of the country. We feel discriminated and rejected. We are only a leftover of the city. ”
Female, 37, Krklino

COMMUNICATION WITH CANDIDATES AND PARTIES

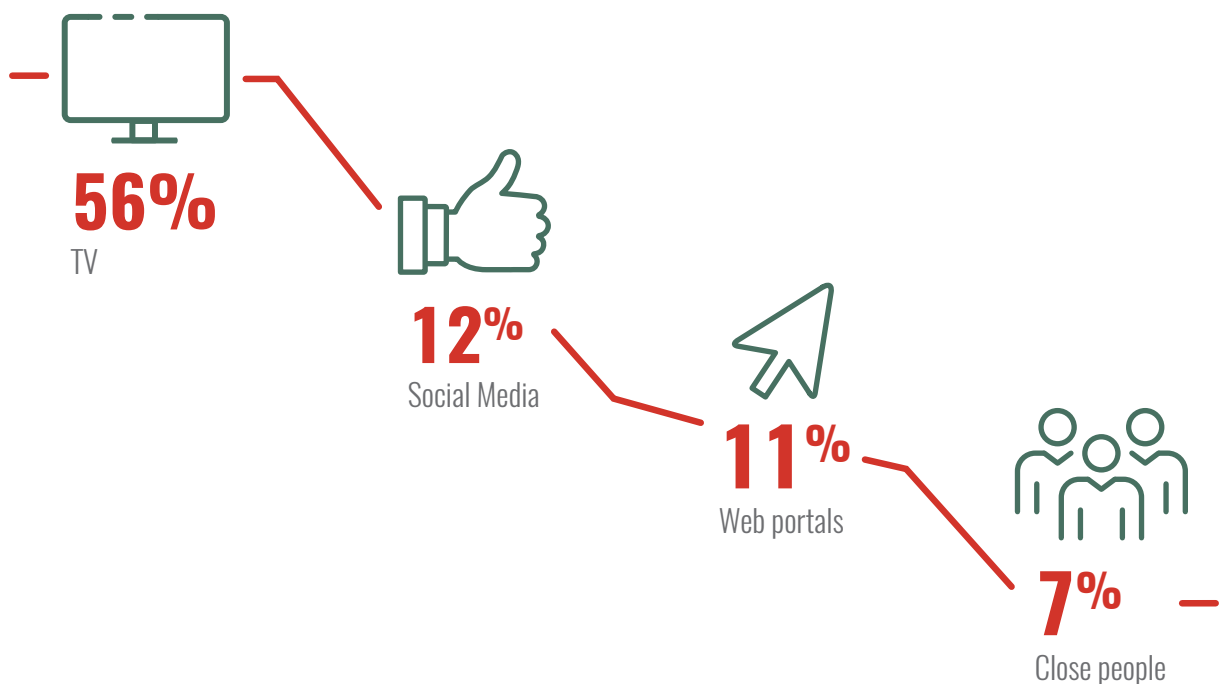
Television (56%), social media (12%), web portals (11%), friends and family members (7%) are the predominant sources of election information.

Newscasts (50%) and debates (32%) are the most practiced methods of sourcing election information by this group.

With regards to the type of communication with the candidates, this group prefers in-person and door-to-door communication (18%) and communication in smaller groups (17%), and relies on the candidates' track record in making an informed political decision.

A preference for in-person receipt of election-related information or via TV programmes can be observed, whereas only 6% of the respondents favour political programs and 2% political rallies.

Where do you get information about election?



“ I would ask them to listen to us. To come to our village, ask about our opinion, meet with us at least 3 times a year, so that we can express our ideas. ”
Female, 23, Tearce

The focus group findings indicate strong dissatisfaction with all political parties in the country. Respondents feel strongly about the unfulfilled promises made by the parties and the conditioned employment or institutional services with party membership. These are cited as the main reason for the low level of interest in the political parties' pre-election programs.

“ They oversell their lies and promises, people are disappointed and dissatisfied. We only see lies, they promise and then they do not deliver. ”

Male, 46, Volkovo

Furthermore, this demographic group points out that the parties visit the rural areas and contact the citizens only in the pre-election period. A prevalent concern among the respondents is the parties' tendency to cater to their own needs and interests instead to those of the citizens and to gather more votes for the next elections.

The polled group of people in rural settlements has the following expectations from the political parties:

- ♦ To promote and support frequent communication and exchange of opinions with the citizens;
- ♦ To be open for the citizens and interested in solving the common problems in the municipality;
- ♦ To take agriculture into consideration, provide the farmers with irrigation water system for their land;
- ♦ To propose a strategy on improving the living standards in the rural areas, revive trade and stop migration;
- ♦ To consult with the young people from the municipality, offer prospects for their future in order to keep them in the villages;
- ♦ To address the problems with stray dogs.

BARRIERS

Comprising a significant share of the overall population in the country (42%, World Bank), the civic and political participation of the rural population is very important. Their disengagement from civic and political life tends to increase their perception of being marginalized and not represented.

Compared to the general population, there is no difference in the level of interest for the socio-political development of the country as well as in the level of their involvement. The polled differences in the interest and participation levels are mostly contingent upon factors such as age, gender, and educational level rather than on location. This is subject to further analysis and recommendations in the report (under the profiles of rural women and rural youth).

However, some particularities persist in terms of attitudes and beliefs of this demographic group.

Although they share the same concerns with regards to: healthcare, socio-economic prosperity, and environment, this group is more concerned about the perceived influence of politics on the personal economic prosperity (employment, nepotism, etc.), quality of life and migration of young people.

Most significant barriers specific to this group are:

- ♦ **Underrepresentation:** strong feeling that their concerns are not addressed by their representatives, accentuated by the feeling of marginalization which reflects negatively on their active participation
- ♦ **Low interest in civic participation** due to disbelief in the genuine interest of politicians in the rural communities
- ♦ **Scepticism** about their power to influence politics and policies in the country
- ♦ **Lack of channels and avenues** for participation and sharing of ideas
- ♦ **Issues with personal identification documents** which reflect during elections/voting
- ♦ **Fear of retaliation** against social activism and criticism

RECOMMENDATIONS

In response to the identified challenges, a set of interventions are recommended that may effectively contribute to improving civic and political participation of the rural population in the country:

Conduct voter registration campaign and/or caravan to monitor, verify and address issues with documents

Strengthen the belief that they can make an impact in the community or society

- ♦ Promote positive local examples that are recognized and respected by the community and highlight their impact. Use examples that show that activism matters and has the power to influence and change the society.
- ♦ Promote and facilitate smaller community projects and initiatives that address various issues of concern.
- ♦ Consider different formats of participation, such as informal meetings with influential local representatives and activists, third-party narratives, community projects facilitated by a political party or other organization.

Alleviate the negative perception of being underrepresented by elected officials

- ♦ Include and keep high in the public agenda issues important for the rural population.
- ♦ Carry out frequent monitoring and follow-up of the rural community's concerns in the period between elections.
- ♦ Encourage politicians and activists to advocate for the needs of the rural population.
- ♦ Use variety of tools to promote two-way communication such as: regular monthly visits to the community, promotion of the concerns of the rural population in the media, as well as regular updates on the progress made; promotion of issues and concerns of the younger rural community on the social media.

Promote local channels and methods to encourage rural population to participate in the civic life

- ♦ Consider various formats: regular meetings, polls or other formats for expression of opinions on a specific subject matter, etc.

Create alliances:

With local civil society organisations to:

- ♦ Identify issues on micro level that are important for the local communities.
- ♦ Support small projects initiated by the local organisations.
- ♦ Establish close contact with the rural communities.
- ♦ Strengthen the capacities, position, and networking of local organisations within the rural community to increase their credibility and influencing power.

With the media (digital and traditional)

- ♦ Promote issues relevant for the rural population, in particular those focused on improving the quality of rural life.
- ♦ Monitor progress of projects relevant for the rural population.
- ♦ Promote positive and success stories of rural activists.
- ♦ Promote diversity of candidates (woman, youth, rural) during election campaigns.
- ♦ Promote new channels and avenues for civic participation of the rural community.

Choose relevant communication channels and apply both traditional and non-conventional approaches

Use TV to reach the rural population.

- ♦ Promote representatives and topics relevant to the rural population via debates, talk shows or interactive debates focused on improvement of the quality of life, youth migration, etc.
- ♦ Use formats that enable to contextualize and leverage the information e.g. use TV to reach out to the elderly, women, and people on the lower spectrum of income and education.

Organize face-to-face meetings or other community events

Harness the potential of familiar formats, such as informal discussions, at the expense of larger events.

- ♦ Use different formats for direct interaction such as small gatherings or informal neighbourhood meetings.
- ♦ Propose community projects or activities conducive to gathering people or specific groups in the community.

Use social media to reach out to the younger rural population

Social media is the key information channel with a great potential to engage the younger portion of the population. It can help promote topics of rural youth life, promote positive examples of the rural youth, and provide opportunities for expression of opinion (polls, debates, incite debates and comments) etc.

Pilot other non-traditional channels

- ♦ Organize entertainment activities and events and introduce new content to activate specific target groups.
- ♦ Explore ways to reach out to the rural population by dissemination of information in the means of public transport, at bus stations, local stores and other local facilities.