

## ECCAR Working Group “Small Cities and Rural Areas”

### 2025 Report

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## 1. Introduction

In 2025, the European Coalition of Cities founded the new Working Group “Small Cities and Rural Areas” at the initiative of representatives from the City of Ratzeburg and the District Authority Lauenburgische Seen.

The Working Group focuses on the specific challenges that small cities and rural areas face in their anti-racism work, and on how anti-racism efforts can be effectively designed in rural contexts. It is led by the City of Ratzeburg and the District Authority Lauenburgische Seen and is implemented in close cooperation with the ECCAR Office.

Within the Working Group, a steering group has been established to strategically support the thematic priorities and objectives of the group’s work. The following cities are currently represented in the steering group:

Ratzeburg (Germany) – District Authority Lauenburgische Seen (Germany) – District of Düren (Germany) – Celle (Germany) – Ingelheim (Germany) – Dormagen (Germany) – Hofheim am Rhein (Germany) – Städteregion Aachen (Germany) – Remscheid (Germany) – Stralsund (Germany) – Soest (Germany) – Växjö (Sweden) – Maó (Spain)

– Aarau (Switzerland) – Esch-sur-Alzette (Luxembourg) – Nantes (France) – Nicosia (Cyprus) – Leuven (Belgium) – Wörgl (Austria)

A key characteristic of the work in the ECCAR Working Group is its clear orientation towards a structured work plan. This work plan focuses on the following thematic areas:

- **Out-Reach in rural areas**

- Reaching out to affected persons
- Reaching out to the dominant society

- **Awareness-raising in rural areas**

- Involvement of decision-makers
- Involvement of the dominant society
- Dialogue and cooperation between affected persons and the dominant society

- **Advisory and counselling services in rural areas**

- Partners in counselling work
- Regional counselling networks
- Information about and for counselling services
- Documentation of counselling activities

- **Empowerment of affected persons**

- Needs assessment with and among affected persons
- Needs-based empowerment services
- Gender-specific services

- **Case documentation in rural areas**

- Documentation routines
- Documentation standards
- Accessibility for affected persons
- Case Reporting
- Links to counselling services

The Working Group discusses one of the above topics at each meeting, allowing conceptual work to develop step by step with care, deliberation, mindfulness, and reflection.

The work plan also structures the joint working method. Each working session follows several phases:

1. **Situation analysis** – Assessing the situation of affected persons, existing resources, and structures within the social environment.
2. **Resource analysis** – Identifying networks, contact points, and existing initiatives that can support affected persons or contribute to raising awareness among the dominant society.
3. **Idea development and best practice** – Collecting and discussing possible approaches, formats, and strategies that are both locally implementable and transferable to other rural areas.
4. **Evaluation and comparability** – Documenting results according to uniform criteria so that findings can be compared and transferred between working groups.

This structured approach ensures that the results are not only locally relevant but also usable across regions and comparable with one another.

In its first year of work, 2025, the ECCAR Working Group met three times, including a kick-off event, and focused on the thematic area of “*Outreach in rural areas.*”

## 2. Results of the Working Group meetings in 2025 (Summary)

### 2.1 Thematic Field: Access to communities affected by racism in Rural Areas

#### 2.1.1 Topic: Reaching Out to Affected Persons in Rural Areas

#### Situation Analysis

The first analysis of the local situation shows:

- The invisibility of racism in rural areas is not due to a lack of experiences, but to structural barriers in documentation, outreach, and institutional engagement.
- Existing systems often fail to reach affected individuals, particularly when they live in dispersed settings or outside larger community networks.
- There is a lack of publicly accessible safer spaces for empathy, listening and support.
- Those who experience racism do not automatically engage explicitly with the issue of racism
- Counselling and contact services are scarcely available.
- Even those affected by racism are not always conscious of racist structures and may not always be able to clearly recognise and articulate them as “racist”.
- Experiences of racism are often deliberately ignored out of fear of stigmatisation or reprisals, helplessness, and a lack of support; racism is perceived as part of everyday life.
- Reporting racist incidents is rare, among other reasons, due to a lack of information, loss of trust in authorities, missing support from allies, and the experience that racist incidents usually remain without consequences for perpetrators.

The situation is exacerbated by social precarity and isolation, while empowerment is often lacking.

## Resource Analysis

Existing services, illustrated by the social area of Ratzeburg–Möln–Lauenburgische Seen:

- Self-organisations, such as the Möln mosque association or the Turkish cultural association, are hardly focused on anti-racism work.
- Exchange formats (e.g., migration counselling, “welcome culture,” intercultural encounters) occasionally enable empowerment but mainly focus on everyday issues.
- Schools within the “Schools without Racism” framework offer few protected spaces or concrete strategies for action.

## Good Practice Examples

**Växjö (Sweden):**

- Regular surveys on the experiences of racism with affected communities
- Listening-based dialogue formats with decision-makers
- Festivals and interreligious encounters bring together affected persons and the majority society

**District of Düren (Germany):**

- “Bridge Builder” programme in schools
- GLOKAL – Festival for Democracy and Empowerment, organised by the migrant self-organisation *Deutsch-Afrika Kompass e.V.*

**Hofheim am Rhein (Germany):**

- “Match” project for women from migrant communities
- Language café organised by volunteers

**Wörgl (Austria):**

- Parent–child meetings for Black children and their families
- International women’s café
- Work with parents from migrant communities in kindergartens and schools

- “Festival of Nations”

### Further examples:

- Dialogue rounds with affected persons and decision-makers
- Establishment of networks of affected persons (beyond rural areas)
- Empowerment programmes (especially rights awareness)
- Training of multipliers and allies
- Development of support and counselling structures
- Information exchange on counselling processes
- Creation of “safer spaces” within administrations for employees with migration histories
- Anti-bias training for administrative staff
- Racism-critical design of participation processes

### Idea Development

- Establishment of safer spaces for affected persons and allies
- Networks of permanent contact persons, ideally affected persons themselves
- Improving mobility to enhance accessibility
- Networking local working groups to share knowledge and experience

## 2.1.2 Topic: Reaching Out to the Dominant Society

### Situation Analysis

Furthermore, representatives of the ECCAR Working Group discussed the topic “*Reaching out to the dominant society*” at the 16th Regional Conference on Right-Wing Extremism and Strengthening Democracy in Grevesmühlen, together with other rural municipalities from Mecklenburg–Western Pomerania. They also met a research team from the Centre for Hate Studies at the University of Leicester, led by Professor Neil Chakraborti, which published a study in 2025 titled “*The Rural Racism Project*.”

Findings from “*The Rural Racism Project*” show:

- Rural areas are often “white spaces” with strong boundaries of belonging.
- The narrative of “us and them” is highly present and effective.
- Stereotypes are widespread and clearly assigned:

- Positive: “OUR idyllic village community” – “WE all know each other.”
- Negative: “THEY know nothing about us” – “THEY are simply different and do not fit in.”
- Minorities are constantly observed and evaluated.
- Prevailing attitudes include:
  - Minorities have “no interest” in or “no respect” for local ways of life.
  - Tolerance without true acceptance (“Never fully belonging”).
- Defensive reactions: denial of racism, blaming affected persons, and generalised accusations against anti-racism work.

In addition to the Leicester study, discussions within the working groups confirmed:

- Access to village communities is often mediated by key individuals.
- Adaptation strategies such as “being the good other” or “setting an example” are described by affected persons as highly exhausting.
- Leadership positions are predominantly occupied by white individuals.
- Institutional and structural interculturality is rarely implemented.
- Minorities are sometimes viewed with suspicion or even perceived as a threat (fear-based narratives).
- In some cases, people supporting affected persons as allies are themselves harassed and isolated, especially where right-wing extremist views or racist dominance prevail.

### Resource Analysis

- Low-threshold formats for exchange, dialogue, and encounter are important but limited in reach.
- Influence on attitudes within the dominant society is often structurally embedded, e.g., through legislation and power distributions.

### Good Practice Examples and Idea Development

- Identification of allies and key individuals in positions of influence
- Engaging decision-makers as role models
- Public relations work that provides fact-based information on racism, fosters empathy, and makes successes in anti-racism work visible

- Fundamental debates on coexistence, integration, and distribution of opportunities
- Dialogues addressing the narrative of “us and them”
- Encounters in shared spaces, at festivals, or cultural events
- Not relying solely on persuading individuals, but also addressing structural power relations in rural areas
- Supporting allies through public recognition of their engagement, political backing, empowerment, and networking

### 3. Interim Conclusion

Anti-racism work in rural areas shows that:

- Affected individuals often face structural barriers that limit their access to resources, support networks, and institutional services.
- The dominant society is structurally and individually difficult to reach.
- Narratives such as “us and them” are identity-forming and highly influential.
- Stereotypical classifications are strongly pronounced.
- Allies play a central role but require support themselves.
- The involvement of local decision-makers is of outstanding importance.
- Structural issues of power and access to opportunities are just as important as work on individual attitudes.