

POLICY BRIEF 7 · MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE

Beyond Visas: How National Remote-Work Policies Need Local Implementation Capacity

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KEY MESSAGE

A visa can create legal access, but it cannot create local capacity. Digital-nomad and remote-work policies only become territorial policy when national frameworks are connected to municipal housing, services, integration, community mediation and impact monitoring. The decisive work happens at the local level.

What visas solve

National governments have moved quickly to enable remote-work mobility. Spain created an international remote-worker authorisation under its 2022 Start-ups Law (Jefatura del Estado, 2022), and Portugal introduced a dedicated remote-work residence visa, the D8, in force since October 2022 (Assembleia da República, 2022). These instruments solve a real and previously binding problem: legal access. They give non-EU remote workers a clear, lawful basis for medium and long-term residence, reduce administrative uncertainty, and signal at national level that remote workers are welcome.

This is a genuine achievement. Before these frameworks existed, the legal status of a remote worker wishing to spend six months in a Spanish or Portuguese village was ambiguous, which deterred exactly the medium-stay residents that low-density territories most benefit from. By resolving that ambiguity, national policy has opened the door. The question this brief addresses is what happens after the door is open.

What visas do not solve

A visa regulates entry and residence. It does not, and cannot, determine what a remote worker finds on arrival. Everything that turns legal access into territorial benefit sits below the national level and outside the scope of any visa.

- **Housing.** A visa does not produce a work-capable, affordable place to live, nor does it protect local residents from displacement if external demand concentrates on a small rental stock. Housing is a local and regional matter.
- **Services.** A visa does not create healthcare access, transport connections, food supply or schooling. A legally-admitted remote worker in a village without services will not stay.
- **Integration.** A visa does not connect a newcomer to the community, nor create the channels through which they might contribute. Without local mediation, legal residents can remain socially absent, the integration challenge addressed in detail elsewhere in this series (Marcelino, 2026a).

- **Monitoring and retention.** A visa generates no evidence about whether attraction is working, whether arrivals stay, or whether the local impact is positive. That information must be gathered locally or not at all.

The local burden of national attraction policies

National frameworks and campaigns generate demand at national scale, but the obligations they create fall almost entirely on the local level. A municipality does not decide national visa policy, yet it is the municipality that must find housing, ensure services, welcome arrivals, mediate with residents and absorb any friction. This is an asymmetry between where attraction policy is made and where its consequences are managed.

The asymmetry is heaviest precisely where capacity is thinnest. Small, low-density municipalities typically have limited staff, limited data and limited administrative bandwidth. The same structural weakness that makes them vulnerable to depopulation makes them least able to manage an inflow well. The OECD's analysis of remote work and place-based policy is explicit that the territorial benefits of remote work are conditional on local capacity, and that without it, mobility flows bypass or overwhelm the places that most need them (OECD, 2021; OECD, 2023).

Exploratory evidence from the NomadVillage pre-registration survey is consistent with this concern. On the demand side, prospective remote workers signalled clear interest in Iberian low-density destinations; on the supply side, the small number of responding municipalities expressed openness to hosting. But openness is not the same as implementation capacity. A municipality can be willing and still lack the housing governance, service depth and institutional bandwidth to convert that willingness into durable local benefit. The survey should be read as an early signal, not as representative evidence.

Spain and Portugal: legal access with local implementation needs

Spain and Portugal illustrate the pattern clearly. Both have created competitive legal instruments, the international teleworker authorisation under the Start-ups Law (Jefatura del Estado, 2022) and the D8 visa (Assembleia da República, 2022), that position the two countries among the more accessible European destinations for remote workers. At national level, the policy task is largely accomplished.

Yet the territories that most need the resulting flows, interior and low-density regions in both countries, are also those with the thinnest local capacity to receive them. The legal framework is national and uniform; the capacity to host is local and highly uneven. A remote worker admitted under the D8 visa or the Spanish authorisation may settle in a well-resourced coastal town or a struggling interior village, and the national instrument is indifferent between the two. Whether the second case produces territorial benefit or local strain depends entirely on implementation capacity that the visa does not provide. National access without local capacity simply redirects flows toward places that already have advantage, the opposite of cohesion.

Multilevel governance for sustainable remote-worker attraction

The response is not to weaken national policy but to connect it deliberately to the regional and local levels. This is the logic of place-based policy and territorial cohesion that underpins EU

regional instruments: development happens when national frameworks are matched to local capacity and local knowledge, through coordinated action across levels of government (Faludi, 2006; Medeiros, 2016). Territorial capital, the assets, relationships and institutional capacity a place can mobilise, is activated locally, not by national decree (Camagni, 2009).

Effective multilevel governance also has a horizontal dimension. Research on rural place branding from a multilevel perspective shows that higher-level and lower-level initiatives interact, and that outcomes improve when the levels are coordinated rather than working in isolation or competition (Gulisova et al., 2021). For remote-worker attraction, this means aligning the actors who each hold one piece of the implementation.

- 1. National level: access and framework.** Maintain the legal pathways, and complement them with guidance, baseline standards and funding channels that reach the local level rather than stopping at the border.
- 2. Regional level: coordination and capacity.** Regional agencies translate national frameworks into territorial strategy, pool capacity across small municipalities, and connect attraction to cohesion and rural development funding (LEADER, INTERREG, regional programmes).
- 3. Local level: implementation.** Municipalities handle housing governance, service provision, community mediation and the designation of a responsible actor. This is where access becomes experience, and where a prior readiness assessment is most valuable (Marcelino, 2026b).
- 4. Intermediary actors: connective tissue.** Incubators, local action groups, accommodation providers, coworking operators and community organisations supply the on-the-ground capacity that small administrations lack, and are essential partners rather than optional extras.

Practical checklist for national, regional and local actors

- ✓ National: pair each attraction instrument with guidance and a funding channel that reaches municipalities, not only with a legal pathway.
- ✓ National/regional: avoid promoting destinations at scale before local implementation capacity has been assessed and supported.
- ✓ Regional: pool capacity across small municipalities so that no single under-resourced administration carries the full implementation burden alone.
- ✓ Regional: connect remote-worker attraction explicitly to cohesion, rural development and place-based funding instruments.
- ✓ Local: designate a responsible actor for housing governance, services, integration and monitoring before arrivals begin.
- ✓ Local: engage intermediary actors (incubators, local action groups, accommodation and coworking operators, community organisations) as formal implementation partners.
- ✓ All levels: agree on a shared, lightweight monitoring framework so that impact, retention and risk are visible across the system and can inform adjustment.

Methodological note

The dataset is exploratory by design. It does not represent the entire population of digital nomads or low-density territories. Its value lies in documenting early demand, testing conceptual assumptions, identifying preference patterns and informing the development of a territorial-readiness approach. References to Spanish and Portuguese instruments are illustrative and non-exhaustive; this brief does not offer legal analysis. The legal frameworks cited establish access, but their operation depends on further regulatory acts and on consular and administrative implementation (in Portugal, processing has moved from the former SEF to AIMA), which evolve over time. Readers should verify current procedures against the official, up-to-date sources rather than relying on this brief. Exploratory survey data from the NomadVillage pre-registration instrument are cited only in aggregate and as early signals, not as representative evidence; the survey is self-selected, and openness expressed by a small number of municipalities should not be read as implementation capacity. No causal claims are made.

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