



Policy Lab ‘Rural Proofing: Looking at policies through the Rural Lens’ 12th June 2025

Reflections

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Reminder: ENRD Framework of Rural Proofing (RP) Actions

1. Clear statement of strong and real **political will and commitment**
2. Establish a **positive, shared vision** of rural areas and clarity about the role of rural proofing (RP) in achieving this
3. Establish clear and coordinated **roles and responsibilities**
4. Develop a clear **template and guidance** and robust accompanying **evidence**
5. Establish clear **monitoring and evaluation** mechanisms
6. **Longer-term actions** including learning from other policy assessments, ongoing dialogue at difference governance levels (national, regional, local), restating the purpose and desired outcomes of RP, and supporting learning and capacity-building around RP

Political will and commitment (Action 1)

- Is missing political will a key reason why some countries/regions are not progressing with RP? Or are there other factors?
- How can that political will/commitment be obtained?
 - Strong rural voices (but diverse), building capacity of and relationships between, rural stakeholders, work of others e.g. OECD
 - Mario Milouchev presentation – “*RP is the most important and challenging task to complete and we need to do it collectively*”
 - But politics gets in the way (timescales)
- If a country has that political will/commitment, what happens next? Examples
 - Finland – many groups/bodies involved from outset including Parliament; OECD a key catalyst (2006-8)
 - Ireland – dedicated department and national policy with **all of govt approach** (Betty-Ann’s end users) (incl gathering silent local knowledge); rural buy-in at high level in Government (Minister with personal experience of living in a rural place); piloting (Scotland too!), beyond box ticking exercise and made more meaningful
 - Catalonia – citizen mobilisation, rural agenda of Catalonia incl requirement to take rural needs into account through impact assessment, EU level policy, rural present at the govt table – became a govt agreement
- Do you actually need a mix of top-down and bottom-up?
 - Commitment to cross-Government working needs to underlie successful RP (e.g. of thematic groups in Finland)
 - Bottom up mobilisation in Catalonia
 - Is this actually the first (most important?) step not political will?
 - ENRD Framework will apply differently in different contexts
- Relationship building and collaboration with other departments; engaging with/supporting the policy-makers critical to make RP part of the whole process of policy design
- Extending beyond political/election cycles
 - RP process needs to be embedded in the long-term – (lots of) time may be needed

What is rural proofing (RP)? (ENRD Action 2)

- Do we have a common understanding of what it is?
 - Horizontally between countries, between regions within countries, between localities and communities?
 - Vertically between different levels of governance within countries and beyond (e.g. member states and Commission)?
- Do we need a common understanding of what it is?
 - Yes, in order to agree on common outcomes from RP and appropriate ways to measure them – European toolkit?
 - Yes – to agree budget lines for RP?
 - Do any countries have dedicated budget lines to fund RP activities?
 - But regions/countries may be at different stages in the process of adopting RP so they may not all have a common understanding
 - And Betty-Ann's car will look different in different places! (organisational culture, political importance of rural, characteristics of policy-making processes, etc.)

What is rural proofing (RP) (ENRD Action 2, cont.)?

- Needs to be done from the outset of policy being designed (key part of the process is raising awareness, changing perceptions) – but often hard to do from the outset (not all actors will be involved at this stage)
- One approach – RP is a systematic (circular) process (not a policy in itself) to address urban-centric policies and policy-making, to reduce urban-rural inequalities, and to promote higher rural wellbeing for the benefit of all
 - This is a big ask for RP
 - RP is complex and requires a number of different elements (e.g. data, political support, stakeholder engagement (including communities)) – those elements will vary in importance/strength/capacity between countries/regions – and RP is part of a wider (also complex) rural support infrastructure
 - *“Rural proofing must start with communities and their wisdom” “Nothing about us without us”* (quotes from Professor Bruce Chater at WHO Roundtable on rural health equity and integrated rural development, June 9th 2025)
- One more practical approach - Defra (UK) says that Departments need to assess:
 - financial allocations – to ensure that funding formulae reflect the costs of service delivery and needs in rural areas
 - investment decisions – to ensure that rural businesses can thrive
 - service delivery – to ensure that rural needs have been assessed
 - ([The government’s approach to rural proofing, 2025 - GOV.UK](#))

The need for rural proofing (RP) to be a positive process, described positively, with positive outcomes is critical (ENRD Action 2)

- Need to move beyond RP as special pleading and only about needs – it should be seen as an opportunity not a burden
- RP must not lead to rural being marginalised
- “*RP is about representation; rural areas are not, and should not be regarded as, passive*” (summarised comment from meeting chat)
- Rural areas are the future and ‘good’ rural proofing will benefit everyone

Why do we need rural proofing (RP)? (ENRD Action 2)

- Reflecting on the ENRD Framework – what comes first?
 - Do you need to make the case for the importance of RP to get that political will and commitment?
 - Do you need a shared vision to make the case for RP, or is one task of RP to work towards achieving a shared vision?
- Is RP more important in certain countries/regions? E.g.
 - % of country's/region's population that is rural?
 - To counter-balance urban-centric policies and policy-making?
 - To tackle increasing urban-rural inequalities?
 - To raise rural health and wellbeing - and to do this might need different approaches compared to how to achieve this in urban places
- Because rural areas are the future!
 - Making the case that RP is required to help unlock the full potential of rural areas (e.g. as sources of healthy food, clean water, renewable energy, carbon sinks, etc.) for the benefit of everyone
- But even in Finland, where RP has been in place for a long time, the situation regarding rural proofing is not widely known – why?

Clear responsibilities for RP (ENRD Action 3)

- Should it be a legislative commitment, mandatory, voluntary?
- Cabinet Office (or equivalent) lead? Rural Dept leading?
- Finland – Rural Policy Council – brings together many different stakeholders, including researchers
- Independent oversight/evaluation? (Countryside Agency and then Commission for Rural Communities in England, for example)
- Role of researchers
 - Finland – Natural Resources Institute doing the rural proofing of the Nature Restoration Act
 - Scotland – Government (5 year) Strategic Research Programme delivered by a group of research institutes
- Statistics agencies (regional, national and EU level, ESPON, etc)
- Rural practitioners, stakeholders and communities (including businesses, LAGs, rural networks and movements/associations, ELARD)
 - Involvement of young people and seniors
 - *“Nothing about us without us”* (quote from Professor Bruce Chater at WHO Roundtable on rural health equity and integrated rural development, June 9th 2025)
 - What mechanisms are used for this engagement (different approaches will work differently in different places)
- Ultimately, housing, health, transport, etc. policy-makers are the ones doing rural proofing (Betty-Ann – always remember the end users)

What and how do we rural proof? (ENRD Actions 3&4)

- As we have heard, there is lots happening in relation to rural proofing (RP) in many countries (also in some countries there are things happening that are in effect RP but may not be called that)
- Need to rural proof laws themselves **and** how they are applied
 - Question of who does RP when implementation is often at local level
- But not just laws – also action plans, strategies, funding streams, etc.
- Approaches differ depending on the different parts of the car and the place/context that the car is being built in!
 - Need to adapt the framework to different contexts – things may happen in a different order in different places
- Voices of stakeholders are critical
- Data is critical – both quantitative and qualitative
 - Actually goes beyond data – need interpretation of that data, ‘intelligence’ in order to be able to assess the potential (+ve or –ve) impact of a change and therefore how to address it
 - Finland – RP includes measuring the intensity of –ve/+ve impact (but how does this process take account of different potential impacts between different demographic groups)
- RP as a ‘communications exercise’ – this gives the impression of a very broad range of activities as part of the process
- Or (a more practical and limited approach?) might be RP through rural checks in territorial impact assessments, strategic environment assessments, etc.
- Use of different methodologies (e.g. Portugal – ‘game of left behind’ is being developed) and indicators in the process
 - RUSTIK data viewer includes EU-wide indicators and specific indicators for local places (including through Living Lab work)
- Is there a dedicated budget line for RP?
 - Are there any countries/regions where RP has a dedicated budget? (Often it is assumed that it will happen without a dedicated budget)

Why is rural proofing (RP) still not happening everywhere? And even where it has been adopted, why is it still difficult?

- Finland – 2009 (1988)
 - Rural perspectives are more visible but still some ‘bad’ examples of laws where rural not taken into account (which have had to be changed)
 - Still seen as a burden and difficult
 - One solution is to integrate it into other evaluation methods
- RP at different levels of governance? (focus today is national and regional)
 - Finland – RP used in municipal level service planning
 - Should national level do the rural proofing at municipal level? Or municipal level rural proof themselves? Does municipal level have the capacity to do this?
- Could priorities for rural proofing change over time?
 - Defence now a top priority for RP for some European countries?
 - Need to start somewhere to ensure RP is manageable, at least initially?
 - Ireland – started with 4 policies to test as pilot and has moved to an all of government approach
 - Start with RP money spent in (geographically and socially) hard to reach communities?
- Should RP be mainstreamed across all policy areas? So that it happens almost invisibly? Is that the end goal?

What are the desired and actual goals and outcomes of rural proofing? (ENRD Actions 2 and 5)

- Who is rural proofing for?
 - Policy-makers or communities, or both?
 - Is improved wellbeing and quality of life for all people 'too big' a goal to set for rural proofing?
- **Only about the process** (even if no change occurs in policy) – about raising awareness amongst end-users, more thinking rural, better data, voice for stakeholders?
 - Bringing rural into the spotlight (Finland); RP workshops - cross-sectoral, hidden impacts beyond stat data – community collected data
 - All of govt approach for rural policy – highlighted the rural priority (Ireland); established inter-dept group with all ministries represented – relationship building
 - Recognise where it is happening but not called rural proofing e.g. strengthening the consultation process, incl questions in surveys and workshops re rural perspective)
- Or **going beyond the process** (after X amount of time)?
 - Local slaughterhouses (Catalonia)
 - Slowing depopulation, or achieving rural population growth
 - Improved rural service provision
 - Faster/more reliable digital connectivity
 - Improved wellbeing
 - Supporting and enhancing the contributions of rural regionally and nationally

Monitoring and evaluation (ENRD Action 5)

- Betty-Ann – how do we define rural proofing (RP) success/not?
 - Through monitoring changes to the policy-making process
 - Through monitoring awareness of rural and engagement with rural areas/issues amongst policy-makers
 - Is this enough? About managing expectations
 - Is success about better informed decision-making (even if no action is taken to change the policy following identification of potential negative rural impacts)?
- Hearing end-user reflections is critical
 - How they have done RP in relation to ongoing policies and adjustments, new policies, in crisis situations (Betty-Ann's categories)
 - Should rural stakeholders bring end-users in other policy domains to events like this (i.e. to hear how RP is done in the housing policy domain for example)
- Or does there need to be (quick?) tangible outcomes for rural communities reported, in order to ensure continued buy-in locally and nationally/politically?
 - E.g. Hearing rural residents' reflections on what has improved for them and how, as a result of RP?
- Ex-ante and implementation
 - Integrated with other impact assessment processes?
- Ongoing learning and formative evaluation
 - Ireland – pilots
- Data is critical to monitoring and evaluation (longitudinal data as impacts may only be felt in long-term)
 - RUSTIK Living Labs involve different stakeholders including communities in their work
- How do we ensure accountability?
 - Robust monitoring, compliance mechanisms?
 - Sanctions – 'just' reputational damage or tangible repercussions or punishments for policy-makers/depts that do not RP?

Three over-arching points for me

- Rural proofing (RP) is one part of the ‘infrastructure’ required in policy-making... and this will vary between member states (and regions/localities)
 - Need for an over-arching rural vision/strategy (helps also to frame the positive narrative)
 - Effective policy-making strategy and approach overall
 - Finland – Rural Policy Council
 - Research and data (OECD, WHO, EC, research institutes/projects, etc.)
 - RP approach which takes account of national, regional, local diversity is critical (the shape/colour/size of Betty-Ann’s car will vary in different contexts)
 - Engagement of everyone is critical (including rural communities and policy-makers – they need to be receptive to this as they are the end-users)
- Hearing communities’ voices is vital part of RP
 - *“Rural proofing must start with communities and their wisdom”* (quote from Professor Bruce Chater at WHO Roundtable on rural health equity and integrated rural development, June 9th 2025)
 - Reaching the hard to reach communities
 - *Rural areas are not passive, rural proofing is also about representation* (summarised quote from meeting chat)
- Positive narrative
 - *“cities need rural areas to remain sustainable in the future. We need to invest in ensuring basic services in rural areas of each country such as connectivity, housing, mobility and distance education and training as pillars of strategies for the years to come”* (summarised quote from meeting chat)

Possible actions?

- Events like this are very valuable for sharing experiences and making connections
- A European toolkit or roadmap?
 - Or is ENRD Framework 'enough' as a starting point at least?
 - There is significant national (and regional and local) diversity so one toolkit might not be applicable everywhere
- Sharing of 'real life' successful/unsuccessful examples
 - Suggestion for communications network to share learning
 - Reflecting on the process (e.g. how to use data effectively, how to engage stakeholders – even if change doesn't actually result?)...
 - ...as well as the outcomes (i.e. what difference has been made on the ground)?
- One (digital, updated) place for collating all research, links to data repositories and tools (incl Rural Observatory, ESPON TIA webtool and project info, other projects e.g. RUSTIK, GRANULAR), national checklists, guidance and toolkits
 - Continuing to raise awareness of ESPON tools/projects, RUSTIK etc. projects – are they sustainable and how can they be kept up to date (rural proofing is a long-term process)