

A rural proofing tool
to unlock the full potential of rural areas and
communities through better rural-centred EU
policymaking
(own-initiative opinion)

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European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)

Brussels, 5 May 2026

Why rural proofing matters for the EU

- Rural areas cover most of the EU and are essential for prosperity, resilience and security
- Persistent gaps: demographic decline, limited services, poor connectivity, labour shortages, climate impacts
- Rural incomes remain significantly below urban levels
- Rural women face higher poverty risk and structural inequalities
- Rural proofing ensures policies are designed with rural realities in mind
- **We need to convince those who view policies through an urban lens**

Context of the own initiative opinion

European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) opinions:

- *Towards a holistic strategy on sustainable rural/urban development* - the EESC stressed the need for a place-based approach; rural proofing delivers this in practice.
- *Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas* - the EESC called for systematically integrating the rural perspective into all EU policies; rural proofing enables this.
- *Youth in rural areas* - the EESC highlighted gaps in opportunities, mobility and services; rural proofing helps prevent new policies from worsening these challenges.
- *Greater involvement of Member States, regions and civil society in implementing the LTVRA* - the EESC called for stronger visibility of rural priorities across all EU funds; rural proofing ensures their early and consistent consideration.

What rural proofing is

- A systematic **process** for assessing how policies affect rural areas
- Adjustments made to ensure territorial balance
- A tool, not a policy
- Part of the EU Better Regulation Agenda
- Requires a gender-sensitive, place-based approach

Answer we aim to provide through the opinion:

- Which elements should be included in the **description of a rural proofing tool** and in the **objective** it should achieve?

Core purpose and principles

- Ensure that legislation, finance and programmes are equitable and territorially sensitive – rural lens
- Key principles:
 - accurate data collection and early screening
 - evidence-based territorial analysis
 - cross-sectoral coordination
 - transparency and traceability
 - gender sensitivity
 - stakeholder participation

Answer we aim to provide through the opinion:

- How should key **principles** be operationalised in EU **policymaking** and Multiannual Financial Framework (**MFF**)?

Evolution of rural proofing in the EU

- Introduced in the UK (2001)
- Strengthened through Cork 2.0 (2016)
- Formalised in the Long-Term Vision for EU Rural Areas (2021)
- Commission reports (2023–2024) call for more consistent application across sectors
- **Increasing relevance for transport, digitalisation, energy, cohesion and agriculture**

What an effective system includes

- Screening for rural relevance
- Territorial impact assessment (e.g. ESPON TIA)
- Consultation with rural stakeholders
- Adjustments to mitigate negative impacts
- Documentation through templates
- Clear responsibilities and rural proofers

Answer we aim to provide through the opinion:

- What **methodological steps** should structure a rural proofing process (checklists or templates)?

Measurement and traceability

- Requires measurable **indicators** and transparent reporting
- Rural Observatory provides essential **data**
- **Ex ante** and **ex post** assessments
- Public documentation and regular **monitoring**
- **Without reporting obligations, rural proofing risks remaining symbolic**

Examples from Member States

- Ireland: national guidelines and interdepartmental coordination
- Finland and Sweden: territorial impact assessments integrated into policymaking
- Austria and Slovenia: rural proofing in spatial planning and services
- Poland: focus on demographic challenges and cross-sectoral approaches
- Regional practical models of rural proofing in action - Catalonia using a comprehensive rural agenda and Flanders applying territorial analysis and participatory planning to integrate rural needs into sectoral policies
- **Examples across digital connectivity, mobility, health, education and local development**

Answer we aim to provide through the opinion:

- Which examples or **best practices** should be highlighted, what **challenges** and what **lessons** can be drawn for systematic EU-level application?

Role of EU institutions and the next MFF

- Commission screens its annual work programme and integrates rural considerations
- **Commission should rural proof MFF proposal (ex-ante)**
- Parliament calls for stronger rural mainstreaming
- Committee of the Regions promotes territorial cohesion
- EESC emphasises civil society participation
- **In the next MFF, rural proofing should guide cohesion, green transition, digitalisation and food security programmes**

Answer we aim to provide through the opinion:

- How should rural proofing be **integrated** into the next **MFF**, especially in programme design, conditionalities, impact assessments and monitoring?

Gender issue, youth perspective and rural civil society

- Rural women face barriers in childcare, transport, healthcare, digital access and employment
- Gender-sensitive rural proofing ensures differentiated impacts are considered
- Youth test
- Supports inclusive labour markets, entrepreneurship and leadership
- Strengthens community development and participation

Some conclusions

- Existing mechanisms are fragmented and inconsistently applied
- No EU-validated rural proofing tool
- Rural impacts often not anticipated early enough
- Priorities for improvement:
 - mandatory screening
 - stronger data
 - rural proofing at a level of governments / rural proofers
 - transparent reporting
 - integration into MFF
 - meaningful civil society participation
 - training to build a culture of thinking rural
 - capacity building

Thank you!

➤ Stay in touch:

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Please send your
contributions and
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22 May 2026