



Rural proofing: looking at policies through the rural lens

Introduction

This Policy Action Lab, organised by the Rural Pact Support Office (RPSO) in cooperation with DG AGRI and DG REGIO, exchanged on the rationale, challenges, methods and mechanisms of applying rural proofing across policies at national and regional levels.

Discussions highlighted that rural proofing is not a one-off check at the end of a policy process – it is about embedding rural thinking into every stage, from agenda-setting and impact assessment, to delivery and evaluation. It demands a shift in mindset, requiring inclusive design, robust local data, open dialogue, and acknowledging rural diversity.

Organiser: Rural Pact Support Office



12 June 2025



Online



Around 140 participants from 27 countries (policymakers, public authorities, local practitioners, researchers and civil society representatives)



Presentations & recordings ([here](#))



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Main highlights from the event

Political will and commitment

- > **Successful rural proofing requires a 'whole-of-government' approach** – long-term thinking and cooperation between government departments and agencies to ensure coordinated action.
- > **Inspiration** from countries already engaged in rural proofing, **support from international organisations**, such as the OECD or WHO, and **small-scale piloting** can help start the process.
- > **Citizen mobilisation and strong, diverse rural voices** can help convince decision-makers to engage in rural proofing.
- > **Politicians change but administration stays**: moments with strong political will bring opportunities to embed rural proofing in administrative processes and build a common understanding between departments that can last even when political will decreases.

Shared vision of rural areas and common understanding of rural proofing

- > **Acting under a shared vision and strategy makes it easier**: experience shows that rural proofing is easier to implement in the context of an integrated strategic approach to rural areas, that helps define the common objectives to be achieved.
- > Rural areas should not be seen only in terms of needs, but also of opportunities – rural proofing can **help unlock the full potential of rural areas**, so it will benefit everyone.
- > There can be **different approaches to rural proofing**, depending on the organisational culture, political importance of rural areas, characteristics of policymaking processes.
- > Rural proofing should be part of the **entire policy design process**, not a box-ticking exercise.

Clear and coordinated roles and responsibilities

- > Rural proofing needs to be done **by policymakers**, in priority in sectors or policy areas not typically focusing on rural areas, such as e.g. energy, housing, health, and transport.
- > It is a process, in which **different elements need to work together**. It involves gathering evidence, involving stakeholders, delivering information that is clear, concise and targeted to the '**rural proofer**' and delivered in the window for action, which can be very short;
- > The question whether rural proofing should be **mandatory** remains open.
- > The involvement of rural practitioners, stakeholders and communities from the very beginning of the process is necessary to **contribute local intelligence**, help address data gaps and highlight hidden impacts not captured by statistical data.
- > **Data provision** and **independent perspectives** of researchers and statistical offices matter.

Rural proofing process and evidence

- > There is a need to **rural-proof laws** – and their application – as well as **action plans, strategies** and **funding streams**.
- > **Effective societal engagement processes**, including **networks and intermediary bodies**, are needed to make it easier to mobilise actors to contribute to specific initiatives in a short time.
- > Different methodologies and indicators can be applied. One practical approach involves **integrating rural checks within territorial or environmental impact assessments**.
- > Data is critical – both quantitative and qualitative – and MS need to **continue working on improving rural statistics**. **Interpretation or translation of data** is needed to help civil servants **make sense of this data and understand** the positive and negative impacts, estimate the scale of impact, and assess effects on various demographic groups.

Measuring success

- > Rural proofing is a complex process and its outcomes – in terms of better quality of life and reduced urban-rural inequalities – **depend on the wider rural support infrastructure**.
- > It is important to **manage expectations** – even if no policy change occurs, rural proofing can help raise decision-makers' awareness and encourage them to 'think rural', raise stakeholders' voices, foster collaboration between policy sectors, and improve data quality.
- > Policymakers' and rural stakeholders' reflections on the process and its outcomes, and exchange of successful and unsuccessful examples are essential for the **learning process**.

Welcome and framing the day

Mario Milouchev, European Commission, DG AGRI ([PPT](#))



Rural proofing is one of the **most important and challenging tasks** that must be completed to improve the future prospects for rural communities – and it must be done collectively at all governance levels.

Following demands raised at the Cork 2.0 Conference of 2016, the European Commission formally committed to implement rural proofing in 2021 through the Communications on [better regulation](#) and [the long-term vision for EU's rural areas](#) and put in place a [rural proofing mechanism](#).

The purpose of rural proofing, implemented mainly through territorial impact assessments, is to ensure that **needs and specificities of different EU territories, including rural areas are better taken into account**, and to make **policies fit for those who live and work in rural areas**.

The Commission's approach to rural proofing is mainly ex-ante and applied to the development of new legislation. Mid-term and ex-post analysis are also carried out but they are called "evaluation" and considered separately. Piloting rural proofing for three years has delivered some promising results but also demonstrated the need to **raise awareness, improve data availability, better resource the process and improve coordination**, things that the Commission committed to do in February 2025.

Paweł Szabelak, Polish Permanent Representation to the European Union ([PPT](#))



The Polish government has included rural proofing in the programme of its Presidency of the Council of the EU. The topic was discussed at several high-level meetings in the first half of 2025, including the Special Committee on Agriculture and the [Agriculture and Fisheries Council](#).

The conclusions of these discussions indicate the need to apply rural proofing to all EU policies and funds beyond 2027, with greater cooperation and involvement of all Directorates-General, beyond the Agricultural and rural development department (DG AGRI).

Tools and access to high-quality data based on a common set of indicators should be further developed, to allow a regular review of EU policies for their impact on rural development, while they are under development, during implementation and after.

As part of rural proofing, the Commission should strengthen stakeholder dialogue on EU policies and funds to obtain feedback from local rural communities. At Member State level, rural proofing should be a voluntary mechanism to avoid generating administrative burden.

Urszula Budzich-Tabor, Rural Pact Support Office ([PPT](#))



Rural proofing is one of the six horizontal actions of the EU [Rural Action Plan](#). A wealth of useful material can support Member States and regions advance with rural proofing. This includes: the ENRD Thematic Group report '[A Framework for Rural Proofing Actions](#)'; Committee of the Regions' study on '[Rural proofing: A foresight framework for resilient rural communities](#)'; and practical guidance for policymakers developed by the [Finnish](#) and [Irish](#) governments.

Additionally, a number of EU-level projects – such as [RUSTIK](#), [GRANULAR](#) and [Coop4RuralGov](#) – are facilitating exchange of experience, and developing tools and recommendations on rural proofing.



How can rural proofing improve policies?

The role of rural proofing in improving policies

Betty-Ann Bryce, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) ([PPT](#))



The OECD has been working closely with several Member States to move forward with rural proofing. It recently produced a working paper on '[Rural Proofing: Lessons from OECD countries and potential application to health](#)', with the support of the World Health Organization (WHO).

Rural proofing is a systematic process which involves several steps: gathering evidence; involving stakeholders; and delivering information that is clear, concise, and targeted to the '**rural proofer**' – ideally, at the stage of policy formulation and developing solutions.

Rural proofing should target in priority **departments who do not 'think rural'** but take policy decisions that indirectly impact rural areas, such as health, environment, labour, education, transportation.

The process needs to be supported by '**rural proofing intelligence**', with different kinds of quantitative and qualitative data and support to **make sense** of this data.

There is a need to **manage expectations** about the results of rural proofing. The process can be considered a success if it was based on relevant evidence, meaningful stakeholder engagement, and resulted in better information or better cooperation between policy departments – even if no immediate policy change occurs. **Changing perceptions** and **building capacities to think rural takes time**.



Technical Support Instrument (TSI) for rural policy review

Irene van Luijken, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, Food Security and Nature, the Netherlands ([PPT](#))



Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries,
Food Security and Nature

The Dutch government is exploring ways to implement **rural proofing, intended as a key element of an integrated approach to rural development**.

This would enable the government to take account of the socio-economic consequences of environmental and climate-related policies.

To achieve this, the government is planning a '**Rural Policy Review**' carried out with the support of the OECD and funding from the European Commission's '[Technical support instrument](#)'. The review will build on the work carried out by Dutch organisations and researchers, for example within the GRANULAR project.

A strategic approach to rural proofing

Learning from Member State experience

Sinéad Quinn, Irish Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht ([PPT](#))



An Roinn Forbartha Tuaithe
agus Pobail agus Gaeltachta
Department of Rural and Community
Development and the Gaeltacht

Ireland's national rural policy – '[Our Rural Future 2021-2025](#)' (shortly to be updated) – applies a 'whole-of-government' approach – over 170 measures are implemented by several sectoral policy ministries.

Based on research results and experience from other countries, a **pilot exercise** of proofing four policy initiatives was conducted. It helped draw lessons on the relevance of early consideration in identifying issues and capacities in rural areas, and on the role of public consultations in systematically prompting rural communities to reflect and advise on policies and proposals.

The pilot exercise highlighted the importance of **place-based approaches to rural development** and the need for **guidance material for policymakers to undertake rural proofing**.

Hanna-Mari Kuhmonen, Finnish Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry ([PPT](#))



Involving all relevant stakeholders and decision-makers – including the Parliament – from the very beginning of the policy process is key. The **Finnish Rural Policy Council** brings together stakeholders from all governance levels and commissions **researchers to develop policy recommendations** that contribute to rural proofing. Stakeholders are invited to **participatory workshops** with in-depth discussion of potential policy impacts on rural areas.

Rural proofing in Finland is not mandatory, and it was used, for example, in municipal-level service planning. Lessons learnt include the need for enhanced communication, training, guidance, and exchange of good practices. To avoid rural proofing being seen as an administrative burden, it can be integrated into other evaluation processes.

Cristina Massot Berna, Regional Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, Fisheries and Food, Catalonia, Spain ([PPT](#))



The Catalan Rural Agenda was developed through an extensive participatory process and in response to rural depopulation. The agenda is coordinated by the government – represented by the **Interdepartmental Commission on Rural Governance** – representatives of civil society and the Catalan Parliament.

Rural proofing, understood as tailoring legislation and regulations to meet the needs of rural areas, is mandatory, and involves not only analysis of legal acts, but also their practical application. This includes preparation of documents and proposals that can ensure that rural communities actually benefit from relevant legislation.

Panel reflections

> Political will is critical

In Finland and Ireland, early involvement of different governmental sectors, strong mandates and clear responsibilities helped embed rural proofing in all relevant policies. In Catalonia, political momentum was built around COVID-19 and EU policy opportunities. High-level government officials' experience of living in a rural area can be helpful.

> What triggered the process

In Ireland, it was the establishment of a dedicated department; in Catalonia – citizen engagement, the EU rural vision, and inspiration from other countries; in Finland, it was the structured approach of the Rural Policy Council and early support from the government.

> How rural proofing improves policies

Rural proofing has helped make policies more inclusive and evidence-based. In Ireland, it increased visibility of rural issues across ministries; in Catalonia, it influenced concrete policy decisions; Finland also saw greater cross-sectoral engagement.

> The biggest challenge – getting other sectors to 'think rural'

Each Spanish region has different realities, which makes coordination essential. Finland's Rural Policy Council plays a role in getting other ministries involved. In Ireland, a practical guide and support help policymakers include rural perspectives from the start. Sometimes coordination between policy departments happens without using the term 'rural proofing'.



Image by the Spanish Rural Development Network (REDR)

Working groups

Jesús Ramón Asensio, Regional Representation of Castilla-La Mancha to the EU (additional presentation in Working Group) ([PPT](#))



The Spanish region of Castilla-La Mancha has developed an integrated strategic response to the demographic challenge – rural proofing is part of this integrated strategy. The rural proofing approach involves: a mandatory check of the demographic impact of laws, plans and programmes for sparsely populated areas; and monitoring of all funding sources to identify how much money is used to combat depopulation.

A group of 30 experts collaborates to co-create innovative tools for rural proofing in order to improve the evaluation of public policies and ensure that the needs of rural territories are integrated in the policymaking process from the very beginning.

Key takeaways from the working groups

- > The impacts of rural proofing – in addition to putting in place more equitable policies – can be **raising awareness of rural issues** among different policy sectors, changing perceptions and making rural areas more visible.
- > **Many policies need to be rural proofed urgently.** The aspects to review include the amount of funding spent in rural areas, impacts of social, environmental, tax, health, education and many other sectoral policies, and the translation of EU policies into national contexts. However, to be resource efficient, it is better to start with a few and adopt a 'pilot' approach.
- > A key element in multi-sectoral and multi-level policymaking is the presence of dedicated '**rural proofers**', understood in this context as **contact points throughout government structures**, in a similar way as is the case with gender or climate proofing.
- > Rural proofing should **start at the earliest possible stage of policy formulation** – keeping in mind that this early on, some stakeholders may not have enough information to meaningfully engage in proofing – and continue throughout the entire policy cycle.

Putting rural proofing into practice

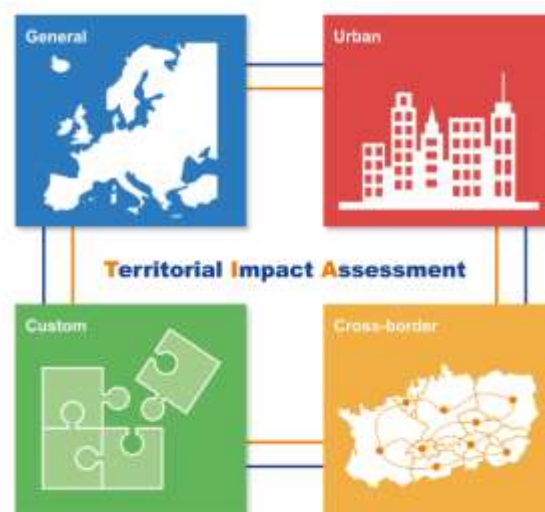
Drawing inspiration from Territorial Impact Assessment

Marjan van Herwijnen, European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion (ESPON) ([PPT](#))



Policies can influence the development of different regions differently, so it is important to assess impacts – including on the territorial dimension – at an early stage of policy drafting, and redesign policies to avoid undesired unbalanced development.

ESPON has developed a [webtool for Territorial Impact Assessment](#) (TIA) which can be applied to EU policies in different territorial categories. The tool includes a 'necessity check' which helps policymakers to quickly identify the need for a full impact assessment of a given policy proposal. They also host a wealth of resources that can contribute to rural proofing intelligence, such as targeted analyses projects and GIS tools on the [ESPON Hub](#).



EU-level projects helping to move forward with rural proofing and address data limitations

Marta Carbonés, MCRIT (PPT)



RUSTIK is a Horizon-funded, transdisciplinary research project aiming to enable rural actors and policymakers to design better strategies, initiatives and policies fostering sustainability transitions of rural areas.

The project has developed an **online data viewer** which integrates a variety of rural data to enable policymakers to access meaningful data sets revealing three key transitions in rural areas: socio-economic, environmental, and digital.



David Miller, James Hutton Institute and Giulia Martino, ECORYS (PPT)



GRANULAR is a multidisciplinary project which aims to enrich rural actors' knowledge of the diversity of rural areas, their functional characteristics, challenges and opportunities. It developed a **methodology for rural proofing**, based on the four pillars of the EU rural vision and [GRANULAR's rural compass](#). Engagement of rural actors was assured through eight living and replication labs throughout Europe.



Anne Pöder, Estonian University of Life Sciences (PPT)



Coop4RURALGov is an Interreg Europe project which fosters cooperation and exchange between public and private organisations from Spain, Estonia, Ireland and Bulgaria. The aim is to improve governance capacities for co-design and make rural proofing a routine part of the decision-making process in sparsely populated rural, coastal and mountain areas.

A **comparative study** carried out in participating countries demonstrated that stakeholders have little knowledge about rural proofing. Recommendations from the study include: making rural proofing mandatory; systematic monitoring and evaluation of the process; building rural intelligence and rural proofing toolbox; better communication; and meaningful engagement of rural stakeholders – combined with the allocation of necessary resources.

Key takeaways from the working groups

- > **Rural proofing is a policy process, but also a technical process** – balance is needed between these two elements. Engagement of both stakeholders and experts is necessary. The role of intermediaries, such as Local Action Groups, is essential to link the political level with local communities.
- > **Multiple initiatives to improve data accessibility at the right level are under way.** Data gaps can be compensated by territorial knowledge of local actors.
- > **Meaningfully engaging a variety of rural actors is essential for rural proofing.** However, such engagement should not create too much burden on local stakeholders and must be supported through adequate funding.
- > One possible way of **reducing the administrative burden** of rural proofing is to link it with existing policy evaluation processes, for example, environmental impact assessment.

Co-creating conclusions and proposals

Keynote listener

Jane Atterton, Scotland's Rural College ([PPT](#))



Rural proofing can be organised around the following steps/actions that underpinned the lab:

- > political will and commitment;
- > shared vision of rural areas and clarity about the role of rural proofing in achieving it;
- > clear and coordinated roles and responsibilities;
- > template and guidance, and robust accompanying evidence;
- > monitoring and evaluation mechanisms; and
- > longer-term actions, including learning and capacity building.

More detail on these is available in the [ENRD Framework for rural proofing](#).

Rural proofing is one part of the 'infrastructure' required in policymaking – this will vary between Member States and regions – while hearing rural communities' voices is another vital part.

Rural areas would benefit from a positive narrative : the whole society needs them to remain sustainable in the future.

A single space to integrate and continuously update all the available information, project outcomes, data repositories, examples and tools on rural proofing would be useful.

Stakeholder panel

Stephanie Van Opstal, Flemish Land Agency, Belgium



The Flemish government is only just starting with rural proofing, for the time being, the main challenge is to explain its value to the different administrative units and to stakeholders. The Parliament is also involved in the discussion, stressing the need to avoid administrative burden. **The next step is to launch the first, pilot action on rural proofing.**

Maria José Murciano, Spanish Network for Rural Development, Spain



The Spanish network has carried out, at its own initiative, a big awareness-raising campaign about the importance of rural proofing. It has produced two publications intended to explain and operationalise rural proofing. These include an overview of experiences: '[Ruralising the policies that affect rural areas – national and international experiences](#)', and a '[Guide to rural proofing for the evaluation of the rural perspective in laws, policies, plans and strategies](#)'.

The main challenge is to secure political will. The network is planning to engage influencers in the **awareness-raising campaign** in order to mobilise stakeholders and move forward with rural proofing.

Hilkka Vihinen, Natural Resources Institute – LUKE, Finland



Rural proofing is an element of a wider effort to make better policies. From a political science perspective, it is important to remember not only the 'vertical' and 'horizontal' aspects of rural proofing, but also the third dimension – time. This includes, for example, the evolution of the rural proofing process over time and the potential links with electoral calendars.

LUKE is set to embark on a new exercise of **rural proofing the nature conservation act**, which is expected to lead to collaborations between political and natural scientists.

Concluding remarks

Next steps for the Rural Pact Support Office

Enrique Nieto, Rural Pact Support Office ([PPT](#))



Two forthcoming events in 2025:

- > [Rural Pact Conference](#) 'From vision to action: Empowering rural areas for the future' (16-17 September 2025);
- > Policy Lab on the place of rural areas in the post-2027 EU policies (5 November 2025).

Participants are invited to join the [Rural Pact Community Platform](#).

Closing remarks of the European Commission

Antonia Gámez Moreno, European Commission, DG AGRI



Many good practices on rural proofing are already in place and a lot of useful material on the topic is available. Expert support on including rural proofing in government reforms can be provided under the [Technical Support Instrument](#).

Practitioners are invited to share their ideas, successes and failures with DG AGRI.

The European Commission is strongly committed to continuing its work for rural areas. Rural proofing will remain an important element of the forthcoming Rural Action Plan update, expected in the first months of 2026, in line with the Commission's [Vision for Agriculture and Food](#). The upcoming Rural Pact Conference will offer an opportunity to make suggestions for this update.

Join the Rural Pact Community and online platform

https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/become-member_en



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