

ENRD webinar

1st meeting of the Thematic Group on Rural Proofing

Highlights report

This first meeting of the Rural Proofing Thematic Group (TG) introduced the TG objectives and set the scene on rural proofing. TG members actively engaged in discussions on the lessons learned, success factors and challenges emerging from concrete experiences from different countries presented during the meeting, including Estonia, Finland, Germany, Sweden, and Northern Ireland (UK).

Discussions also focused on how to design effective rural proofing mechanisms tailored to specific contexts and how to apply them in practice at different administrative levels (national, regional and local) within Member States (MS).

Event Information

Date: 27 January 2022

Location: Virtual meeting


Organisers: ENRD Contact Point

Participants: 56 participants from 20 EU Member States, including MAs, NRNs, European organisations, the European Commission, Local Action Groups (LAGs), national/regional stakeholders and researchers.

Outcomes: Exchange of knowledge and experiences on rural proofing; suggestions on how to design and implement rural proofing.

Web page: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/1st-meeting-enrd-thematic-group-rural-proofing_en

Rural Proofing in the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas


 **Alexia Rouby** (DG AGRI/European Commission) introduced the [Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas \(LTVRA\)](#) and a number of horizontal actions from the Rural action plan, including implementation of rural proofing at the EU and other levels.

At the EU-level, the LTVRA communication announced that a rural proofing mechanism would be put in place, “*as part of the Better Regulation Agenda, to assess the anticipated impact of major EU legislative initiatives on rural areas*”. Tools have been adapted to implement this in practice. Rural proofing draws on territorial impact assessment (TIA), and on better monitoring of the situation in rural areas. The European Commission said for the first time in its annual work programme for 2022 that it will “*strengthen TIA and rural proofing*”. Better regulation guidelines and tools have been updated to strengthen TIA and these tools (such as ESPON TIA tool) could also inspire national and regional levels. In addition, the European Commission (EC) is working on softer mechanisms to build capacities of the various services to think through a rural lens. The various EC Directorate Generals (DGs) will carry out rural proofing, supported by DG AGRI and DG REGIO, and coordinated through the LTVRA inter-service steering group led by the Secretariat General.

For the other levels, Alexia highlighted the role of the [Rural Pact](#) as a framework for interaction among all levels of governance and stakeholders, through which national and regional authorities can collaborate and exchange best practices on how to implement rural proofing or similar approaches.

Setting the scene on rural proofing

Analytical overview of rural proofing approaches and lessons learned

 **Dr Jane Atterton** (Rural Policy Centre, SRUC) provided academic insights into rural proofing as outlined in the [background document](#) that informed the TG meeting. Jane presented key characteristics of some rural proofing approaches implemented in several countries across the world, including Canada, Finland, New Zealand, Sweden and the UK. Similarities, differences as well as key lessons learned between these approaches were highlighted, providing the ground for further discussions during the day. A discussion highlighted that the different terms in use – rural proofing, rural mainstreaming, place-based policy, place proofing - and how they all connect are worth exploring further.

Rural policy design and rural proofing



Betty-Ann Bryce (OECD) presented an overview of OECD's work on rural policy and highlighted aspects that are relevant for rural proofing. Betty-Ann stressed the importance of tailoring policies to the different types of 'rural'.

Other important factors are leadership, support from the top levels of governance ('buy-in'), the visibility of rural proofing among other policy priorities, comprehension of the process and proper timing. Suggestions that could help embed rural proofing into the overall policy framework include setting up advisory groups to raise awareness, using short-term expert advice and support, offering training opportunities for staff and making use of extensive data research, including advice from other organisations.

Conclusions of the G100 Rural Proofing initiative, Spain

Serafin Pazos-Vidal (COSLA) introduced the [G100 Rural Proofing](#) initiative, the first nation-wide exercise of this kind in Spain. The initiative has been initiated and implemented by a civic organisation and it involved one hundred members, including experts, practitioners, and local and regional politicians. Work was undertaken in 2021 through an open participation and consultation resulting in 70 proposals. Serafin shared several main findings and recommendations, such as the importance of understanding and adapting to the political culture and institutions, implementing a horizontal approach supported by an independent body, or adopting a holistic approach that is permanent, participative and inclusive. This pilot exercise can be seen as a test case for policies tackling depopulation.

Learning from existing experience



Antonia Husberg (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Finland) presented the Finnish experience of rural proofing, which has been applied at local and regional level on a voluntary basis, not being a legal requirement. The method relies on checklists, workshops, geospatial data and questionnaires. The entire process is coordinated by the Rural Policy Council with the participation of stakeholders from all sectors. The main strengths of this approach are its adaptability, awareness of rural issues, improved cooperation between actors and enhanced place-based policy. Given its voluntary nature, the uptake of the method is not high as the process is resource-demanding and it is not prioritised among other impact assessments.



Sally Shortall (Waterford Institute of Technology, Ireland) highlighted that contrary to the Finnish approach, rural proofing in Northern Ireland is legislatively anchored in the Rural Needs Act introduced in 2016 and 'due regard' must be given to rural needs in the shaping of policies. However, the concepts of 'due regard' and 'rural needs' and the governance structure were not defined clearly, resulting in patchy implementation and shirked responsibilities. Sally pointed out that this approach unnecessarily creates an urban-rural binary divide, strengthens the idea of 'needy' or deprived rural areas, and blurs the distinction between desirable and essential services. The way forward could be to identify priority needs, design different strategies for the range of different actors involved and ensuring that good data is collected.



Group discussions

Discussion in breakout groups started with presentations of experiences from three more Member States. **Aare Kasemets and Taavi Kurvits (Ministry of Rural Affairs, Estonia)** presented the Estonian approach to rural proofing that is being put in place and which is closely linked to regulatory impact assessment. **Evelina Selander (Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth, Sweden)** provided an insight into the Swedish approach to rural proofing, which includes stressing the rural perspective and measuring its presence in different policies. **Thomas Krämer (Federal Ministry for Food and Agriculture, Germany)** and **Cordula Woeste (Federal Ministry of the Interior, Germany)** described the German policy for ensuring equivalent living conditions which evaluates the impact of policies from a territorial point of view and focuses on structurally weak territories. A checklist ('[Gleichwertigkeits-Check](#)') and a guideline were established; the electronic impact assessment of federal legislation is planned to be introduced in 2023.

During group discussions, TG members identified key success factors, challenges and recommendation for rural proofing ([group 1](#), [group 2](#), [group 3](#)).

The following key findings resulted from the discussions:

- **Strong political will**, political commitment and leadership are crucial to ensure that a cross-governmental approach is adopted.
- **Defining responsibilities and roles** and **setting clear targets** for policies regarding rural areas is essential for the success of rural proofing.
- An independent **coordination body** can help deal with the coordination of rural proofing processes.
- There is a need to provide **training** on rural proofing to policy-makers and relevant staff of policy-making bodies.
- **Clarity** about what is meant by rural proofing and regarding how it is communicated is needed. **Communication** should be clear-cut, timely and widespread.
- **Rural citizens' participation in rural proofing** must be encouraged through participatory methodologies.
- **There is the need for streamlining the collection of relevant data** and addressing the lack of certain data at different territorial level.
- Relying on **networking** and on the **sharing of best practices** is important.
- A **mandatory approach** to rural proofing could help to ensure its implementation across different sectors and territories at multiple levels.



Designing rural proofing

The panels' discussion on designing rural proofing brought together four selected TG members representing different perspectives – the national, regional, local and academic. They shared their key take-home messages and provided interesting insights on the main priority actions linked to designing rural proofing.



Jela Tvrdonova (National LAG Network, Slovakia) stressed that it is essential to change the negative perception of rural areas and shift the debate's focus from needs to opportunities. She also pointed out that support is needed for those countries that have not yet used the rural proofing concept. Other actions should include: establishing relevant legislation, putting in place monitoring and evaluation processes and involving all relevant stakeholders.



Veronika Resch-O'Hogain (Federal Ministry for Agriculture, Regions and Tourism, Austria) highlighted the importance of communication from the national to regional and local levels and of reaching out to under-represented groups or rural citizens. Considering that rural proofing will be a very resource-intensive process, there is a need to convince all actors of its importance. Defining 'rural' is a challenge to consider within this.



Samuel Feret (Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Montpellier, France) suggested that the concept of 'ruralities' might better capture the diversity of rural areas. He pointed out translating 'rural proofing' into national languages might be an issue in itself, undermining the correct understanding of the concept - e.g. in France 'rural proofing' has been translated as a form of 'rural control'. According to Samuel the 'main' policies applied – for instance Cohesion Policy - should provide the starting point for rural proofing as they provide the ground for the interaction of the different levels of governance (local, regional, national and EU levels).



Eleftherios Stavropoulos (DG REGIO/European Commission) pointed out that the territorial impact assessment process that was recently being updated with the publication of the EU [Better Regulation Communication](#) and in particular [tool boxes](#) no.18 'Identification of Impacts' and no.34 'Territorial Impacts'. Also the pilot action on TIA within the framework of the [Territorial Agenda 2030](#) can be linked to the work of the TG on rural proofing. He also highlighted that the references in the Communication for Better Regulation and the EC Annual programme show that there is a political will to support rural proofing at the EU level. This has to be translated into concrete action. The broad variety and expertise of the members of this TG can help pave the way for rural proofing at national level and regional level.