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Session: S55 Taking into account diversity to shape just rural futures: novel indicators for resilient and inclusive development

Title: Rural Proofing: Applying the rural diversity compass for Policy Assessment

Authors: Martino G., Miller D., Chartier O., Vilcu, R., Fao, E. and Zomer, B.

Extended Abstract

The Cork 2.0 European Conference on Rural Development (European Union, 2016) identified ten policy orientations to guide innovative, integrated and inclusive rural and agricultural policy in the European Union (EU). The first orientation was to promote rural prosperity, with sustainable solutions to societal challenges such as economic prosperity, food security, climate change, resource management, social inclusion, and integration of migrants. It proposed that rural proofing be used to ensure this is reflected in EU policies and strategies.

The process of rural proofing should enable greater multi-level governance and stakeholder co-ordination (Bryce, 2024 for the OECD), reflecting the value of two-way exchanges, from top down and bottom-up perspectives, regarding problems and proposed solutions. Implementation of rural proofing would complement existing mechanisms used by the EU for trying to ensure coherence between policies and equalities between territories, such as impact assessments, several of which are documented in the EU Better Regulation Guidelines (European Commission, 2021) and Toolbox (European Commission, 2023). In this case the aim is to ensure there are no unintended adverse consequences of policies or initiatives on rural areas, or of different types of areas within rural areas, and inform the tailoring of policies to recognise their needs and circumstances.

One aim of the Horizon Europe GRANULAR project is the development of tailored rural policies, for which a rural proofing approach is adopted, tested and implemented in the project's set of Living and Replication Labs ([Living Labs - GRANULAR \(ruralgranular.eu\)](https://ruralgranular.eu)). An aim is for the methodology developed to be usable by rural actors, public and private authorities and other stakeholders who wish to understand the nature of impacts of a policy on rural areas. The outputs sought from the use of rural proofing in GRANULAR are bottom-up reviews of the potential impacts of policies and initiatives on their rural areas, negative or positive, and evidence of characteristics required of policies such that they create positive effects on rural areas.

GRANULAR has adapted a checklist-type approach which has been used as a screening tool to help policymakers consider a policy is likely to have a different impact in different rural areas, recognising that rural areas are not homogenous in nature (e.g. Hall and Gibson, 2016; Martino *et al.*, 2023). Underpinning this is a rural proofing Framework. This framework is based upon the integration of the GRANULAR Rural Compass (Oostindie *et al.*, 2023) and its functionalities and components with the actions and activities of the LTVRA Action Plan (European Commission, 2024). The Framework has been developed by critically assessing their respective aspects, seeking complementarities and checking for overlaps. The value of integrating these tools is a means of addressing various aspects of rurality, with insights to elements such as demographic trends, access to services, cultural heritage, tourism, commuting and migration, environmental performance, ecosystem services, natural capital, and economic diversification.

The elements of the checklist are grouped under the headings of the four pillars, or action areas, of the Long Term Vision for Rural Areas: Stronger, Connected, Prosperous and Resilient. The building blocks of the LTVRA are included under their relevant pillar, and elements drawn from the GRANULAR Rural Compass are allocated to the pillar of most relevance. This approach enables the rural proofing narratives to be articulated with respect to the framework of the LTVRA.

The Framework guides the user through different facets of “rurality” and takes into account the four pillars of the LTVRA, thus orientating and providing policy direction, from the policy planning, design, adoption, implementation, evaluation and revision, and through to its monitoring. As such, the approach also aligns with the EU Better Regulation Toolkit (European Commission, 2023).

The tool has been compiled in MS Excel, containing rural proofing steps. The steps provide information on the policy or initiative and: i) a high level assessment of whether it may have impacts (positive or negative) on rural areas; ii) a summary of the policy or initiative; iii) the responses to the proofing questions. The output of the guidelines is an overall assessment of the policy or initiative. This comprises a narrative summary, descriptions of the types of impacts, quantitative and qualitative estimates of the magnitude of such impacts (positive or negative), and narratives of means of mitigation.

Reviewing approaches to rural proofing showed that approaches require, or benefit from, transdisciplinary perspectives with inputs from stakeholders from policy, practice, society and research, enabling different types of knowledge to be used and shared (scientific, practice, territorial; Chartier *et al.*, 2023). In GRANULAR, 16 Living and Replication Labs are at the core of the rural proofing methodology, reflecting the significance of the place and context-specific knowledge of their members, and as such they are best equipped to assess the impacts of an initiative on their territory. At the level of the Labs, the process in GRANULAR enables science, policy, practice and civic society to provide bottom-up perspectives in their review of policies or initiatives. Guidelines for rural proofing have been produced to take users through the process to produce an output of the potential impacts of policies and initiatives on different types of rural areas, negative or positive, and evidence of characteristics required of policies such that they create positive effects on rural areas.

In spring 2024, the rural proofing process was tested by Living Labs. The output from the testing and feedback has been used to revise the rural proofing framework, linking the LTVRA and the Rural Compass as elements against which to test potential effects of the policy or initiative. European Commission DG AGRI also shared perspectives on the role of outputs from rural proofing in aiding delivery of economic, social and territorial cohesion across public policies (European Commission, 2021). Strengths and weaknesses in the approach were identified informing the refinement of the framework.

Feedback included reporting rural proofing as potentially useful at local, regional and national policy levels, possibly for developing evidence for use in lobbying at an EU level. They emphasized the importance of having a methodology to evaluate the effectiveness of policies in rural areas to inform improvements, identifying opportunities to apply rural proofing to local policies which have been in place for some time.

However, some concerns were raised about capacity and its practical application. For example, a need was noted for data and analyses of conditions at a granularity relevant to the management of resources and functionality of local areas. This includes understanding the dynamics, changing circumstances, and the potential for change in rural areas. There was also some uncertainty about the capacity of local and regional levels to effectively work with such a methodology, and how to utilize the results if a policy is deemed rural-proofed or not. The outcome of the process was a rural proofing process with an improved alignment of the framework with the LTVRA pillars and Action Plan (European Commission, 2021) and the integration with the GRANULAR Rural Compass (Oostindie *et al.*, 2024).

The rural proofing of selected policies and initiatives by Living and Replication Labs is being undertaken over winter 2024/25. The lessons learnt from those exercises, of the potential implications for rural areas of different characteristics of new legislative initiatives, will be used to inform recommendations for tailoring rural policies. In turn, the experiences of using the rural proofing and further feedback will provide evidence for use in informing the development of skills in integrating rural issues in EU policy-making across departments as envisaged by the European Commission (2024).

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