European Network for
Rural Development

ENRD Thematic Group
on Rural Proofing

A Framework of
Rural Proofing Actions

Thematic Group
Final Output

2022

EUROPEAN NETWORK FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

The European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) is the hub that connects rural development stakeholders throughout the European Union (EU). The ENRD contributes to the effective implementation of Member States' Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) by generating and sharing knowledge, as well as through facilitating information exchange and cooperation across rural Europe.

Each Member State has established a National Rural Network (NRN) that brings together the organisations and administrations involved in rural development. At EU level, the ENRD supports the networking of these NRNs, national administrations and European organisations.

Find out more on the ENRD website (https://enrd.ec.europa.eu).

The information and views set out in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the European Commission. The Commission does not guarantee the accuracy of any data included and nor can it be held responsible for the use which may be made of the information contained in this publication.

CONTENTS

European Network for
Rural Development

1. INTRODUCTION

Published in 2021, the European Commission's 'A Long-term Vision for the EU's rural areas' invited Member States (MS) to consider implementing rural proofing at national, regional and local levels. This is alongside a commitment from the EU in the Communication 'Better Regulation: Joining forces to make better laws' to integrate rural proofing and territorial impact assessments as part of the Better Regulation Agenda aiming to assess the anticipated economic, social and environmental impacts of major EU legislative initiatives on the different territories of the EU including rural areas.

At the first meeting of the ENRD Thematic Group (TG) on Rural Proofing in January 2022, participants heard how rural proofing has been/is being implemented in EU MS and regions, and the discussion resulted in a synthesis document outlining the key ingredients for successful rural proofing.

Building on these ingredients, a draft of this document, setting out a suggested framework of actions required for meaningful rural proofing was discussed at the second TG meeting in May 2022. Discussion at the meeting was incorporated into the draft to produce this final version of the framework of actions. The document identifies five actions that are essential to undertake in the short-term and four that are desirable to undertake over a longer-term timescale.

This framework of actions aims to support policy-makers and all stakeholders involved in designing or implementing rural proofing mechanisms in their particular context at national, regional or local level. It expresses the views and exchanges within the framework of the TG and as a working document it does not aim to provide an exhaustive checklist of actions.

The policy, political and institutional contexts at national, regional and local levels are very different across MS, as are the scale and extent of rural areas, and the extent to which rural areas are recognised as a national priority. Therefore, even if countries may share very similar visions for their rural communities, the design and delivery of rural proofing mechanisms to achieve those visions may vary substantially, for example, in terms of the order of the actions, the time frames for undertaking them, and the stakeholders involved. TG members expressed that the activities of the EU on rural proofing and Territorial Impact Assessments[1] provide a supporting and coordinating narrative for their actions and a space for ongoing dialogue and information-sharing between countries and with the Commission.

> This document has been developed as part of the work carried out by the ENRD Contact Point, with assistance from Dr Jane Atterton, to support the activities of the Thematic Group (TG) on 'Rural Proofing', and it is based on inputs submitted by TG members. The information and views set out in this document do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the European Commission.

---

(1) During the 2nd TG meeting TG members were informed about a pilot action 'Region-focused Territorial Impact Assessment (TIA)' in the framework of the Territorial Agenda 2030.

European Network for
Rural Development

2. A FRAMEWORK OF ESSENTIAL ACTIONS

Action 1: Clear statement of strong and real political will and commitment

A **'high level' commitment** that rural proofing will be required and explaining the benefits of undertaking it is perhaps the most essential and top priority action. This commitment needs to come from a country's Rural Affairs Minister or, better still, Prime Minister. Such an announcement signifies top-level commitment to ensuring the visibility of rural areas, and that rural issues are consistently high up the national policy agenda. It also ensures that everyone is working with a common understanding of rural areas, rural issues, and the process of rural proofing and its purpose and desired outcomes in working towards the agreed vision (see Action 2). It is important to use language that is appropriate to each national context to maximise buy-in from different levels of governance and stakeholders.

This **high-level commitment should be re-stated regularly** (at least annually alongside a Ministerial report to Parliament outlined in Action 5) and must transcend political cycles with its continuity safeguarded (i.e., it needs to be cross-party and politically neutral). It should also clearly set out the levels at which rural proofing is required and clearly explain the roles and responsibilities of relevant actors. At regional level, this might include a 'translation' role between the national commitment and actions and the 'on-the-ground' experiences across diverse rural communities. Rural 'champions' at all levels have a role to play in regularly re-affirming the commitment.

Based on past/current experiences of implementing rural proofing, a **mandatory commitment to rural proofing** should be introduced and enforced, and it is worth considering if this should, in time, be supported by legislation. Linked to this, it is worth considering the nature and extent of **enforcement measures** that should be established to ensure consistent adherence to rural proofing requirements. While departments that do not fully carry out rural proofing will likely experience reputational damage when rural proofing activities are reported (see Action 5), it is worth considering whether applying additional sanctions would be appropriate (e.g., through refusal for the policy/legislation to be passed)[1]. Whatever sanctions are introduced, policy-makers need to be given adequate time to 'learn' how to rural proof, so it would be worth being flexible at the outset.

---

[1] Applying enforcement measures and sanctions will not be straightforward. It may be useful to see if lessons on how to enforce sanctions can be learned from other appropriate contexts, for example the proposed climate protection Ministry in Germany with the power to veto government policies, or the EU's subsidiarity control mechanism which applies in areas where the EU shares competency with MS.

European Network for
Rural Development

2. A FRAMEWORK OF ESSENTIAL ACTIONS

Action 2: Establish a positive, shared vision of rural areas and clarity about the role of rural proofing in achieving this

The high-level commitment described in Action 1 needs to set out a shared, positive vision of rural areas, which has been co-designed with relevant (rural and other) stakeholders and all governance levels. This vision should be based on the significant economic, social, cultural and environmental contributions that rural areas can make. While the vision should be set out at national level at least initially, regional and local stakeholders have a role to play in 'translating' that vision to ensure it is relevant at these levels to encourage multi-actor mobilisation and buy-in.

The commitment needs to clearly articulate the importance of rural proofing as a mechanism for achieving the vision through a clear purpose and outcomes. These outcomes are ultimately about improving the living conditions through ensuring that all residents of a country, including rural people, have fair and equitable rights and access to resources and services regardless of where they are living. Positive language about the rural proofing process itself, as well as about the opportunities and potential of rural areas, is vital to ensure that it is not viewed negatively as an additional burden for policy-makers.

It is important to have clarity over formal definitions of 'rural' for everyone, including policy-makers, NGOs, community and voluntary groups, etc. In addition, it may be worth considering whether emphasis might be better placed on improving policy-makers' understandings of the key characteristics of rural areas (such as a more dispersed population, longer distances to travel, a more rapidly ageing population, limited employment opportunities, higher natural capital endowment etc.) rather than simply being aware of formal definitions. Policy-makers may find it easier to understand and shape their policies in respect of these characteristics than formal population-based definitions. Introducing a transition or pilot phase at the start allows for testing different approaches and assess their potential to deliver the desired outcomes, as well as their 'deliverability' for policy-makers.

European Network for
Rural Development

Action 3: Establish clear and coordinated roles and responsibilities

It is essential that all actors involved in rural proofing processes at national, regional and local levels clearly understand their **specific roles and responsibilities**, including the need to work together through a **coordinated and partnership approach**.

Existing experience suggests, at national level, it is the Department of Rural Affairs (or equivalent **coordination body**, hereafter referred to as 'lead RP body') that tends to be responsible for ensuring that policy-makers in other Departments undertake rural proofing in their policy decisions. However, such arrangements can be challenging to enforce and so should be kept under review (see Action 1). The lead RP body should have a mandate from the Cabinet to pursue such cross-government action. An alternative, and perhaps preferable, approach may be for a Cabinet level Office or equivalent body to lead rural proofing, given their greater scope to influence the work of others across Government.

At national level, undertaking rural proofing should be the responsibility of individual policy-makers in their respective sectoral departments. The lead RP body will **need to be resourced** to undertake vital support work for this activity right from the start of the policy design phase. They should consider having nominated staff as 'first points of contact' for rural proofing queries from other departments, perhaps working together in a dedicated Rural Proofing Unit. **Regular cross-Government** (i.e., horizontal) **thematic working groups** may be worth considering, in which rural policy-makers provide rural-focused data and analysis on particular issues (e.g. transport, housing, business support, etc.) to raise awareness and improve understanding on an ongoing basis.

A range of **other stakeholders** should have other clearly defined roles in rural proofing **at national level**. These will vary across MS but will include rural interest stakeholders (such as rural movements and networks, LEADER-related groups, rural academics, NGOs, etc.), as well as Parliamentary Committees, Cross-Party Groups and ad hoc Inquiries on rural issues. They may have a role in contributing evidence to inform rural proofing, and/or being directly consulted on particular policies/strategies, and/or providing an independent review role. These roles may be performed in various ways, such as through regular meetings or ad hoc engagement, and appropriate resourcing will be required.

It is equally vital that there are clearly defined roles and **responsibilities at regional and local levels**. Naturally, the organisations involved will vary across MS, and the (vertical) relationships between regional/local and national level will also vary. This vertical dialogue and information exchange from national to local levels is important to ensure that rural proofing activities are coordinated. It is likely that regional and local authorities (i.e., regional/local government) will play a leading rural proofing role when they are designing and delivering policies, while elected officials will have an important scrutiny role. Again, they need to be resourced to undertake this activity. There may be an important campaigning, coordinating and bridging role for regional actors between national and local levels in order to generate a common understanding of what is required. A memorandum of understanding between governance levels may be worth considering.

The principle of **engaging local rural groups, networks, communities and citizens** in rural proofing is essential, but the mechanisms for achieving this in different MS will vary. Some countries have strong grassroots-focused rural and village movements for example, which provide a direct means of feeding views from 'on-the-ground' to policy-makers at national and regional levels. Some countries have regular Rural Parliament events instead/as well, which provide a more ad hoc opportunity for views to be fed into policy. Other countries without such arrangements may need to establish new mechanisms for gathering grassroots views through consultation or deeper forms of engagement. Again, regional stakeholders may have a vital role here in coordinating and reporting back from such local consultation activities.

Action 4: Develop a clear template and guidance and robust accompanying evidence

Most of those countries that have already implemented rural proofing have developed a **template for policy-makers to follow and accompanying guidance**, so there are examples to build on. The template should be created and made available by the lead RP body and it needs to be clear and straightforward for policy-makers across all departments and regional/local bodies to follow, but robust enough to ensure that this is not simply a tick box exercise. Accompanying guidance needs to set out the key steps in the process of rural proofing, including opportunities for stakeholder engagement, the roles and responsibilities of different actors, and the outcomes and impacts that are sought (linked to the vision set out in Action 1). This guidance needs to emphasise the need for policy-makers to be mindful of the diversity of rural areas when undertaking rural proofing, and it needs to be flexible so that it can be adapted and used appropriately at regional and local levels.

Countries may consider whether to implement a **requirement for <u>all</u> policies**, strategies, funding streams, etc. to be fully rural proofed from the outset, **or whether to prioritise key policy/legislative issues** or developments at least initially. If the latter approach is taken, there will need to be transparency about how these priority areas are selected and the timescale for the shift to consider all policies.

Alternatively, countries could adopt an approach whereby **initial light-touch screening** is undertaken by the department initiating the policy proposal to determine whether the policy may result in significantly different impacts in rural areas. If so, detailed rural proofing should then be undertaken; if not, the decision, and the rationale for it, is recorded and full proofing is not required. This may be an appropriate approach to take initially while rural proofing is 'new' and organisations are building up experience and knowledge of undertaking it, in particular at regional level. What is critical, however, is that it is clear and transparent which organisation makes the decision as to whether to fully proof or not, how significantly different impacts are defined, and the evidence used in reaching the decision.

Alongside the provision of a template and guidance is the creation and **availability of a robust rural evidence base** from a range of sources from national, regional and local levels, so that policy-makers and other stakeholders at all levels have access to up-to-date and accurate data to understand the characteristics, challenges and opportunities facing (diverse) rural areas in their countries and regions (e.g., accessible, remote, mountainous, coastal, islands, etc.). The lead RP body has a key role to play here in generating and collating the evidence, but also in encouraging all other departments and national statistical agencies to use rural-urban identifiers on their datasets and to use the officially recognised rural-urban definition/classification. **Dedicated lead RP body staff** will need to be available on both an ongoing and ad hoc basis to assist policy colleagues in other departments, and regional and local stakeholders, with interpreting this data. Rural academics can also support this need for robust evidence gathering and interpretation. 'Good practice' rural proofing examples should be provided as part of this evidence base for policy-makers to follow. Data needs to be made available from all geographies and should be a combination of statistical data from national and regional sources, and intelligence based on local lived experiences 'on-the-ground' (i.e. more qualitative data).

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that in countries where a robust mechanism is already in place for undertaking **Territorial Impact Assessments (TIA)**, rural proofing should complement and add value to these TIA[1] rather than duplicate them as it is the case of the EU level as well. Close and ongoing dialogue will need to be maintained between the lead RP body and the Department responsible for designing and monitoring TIA to ensure that the processes remain complementary and do not overlap.

---

(1)   The links of rural proofing to TIA were explored during the 2nd TG meeting

Action 5: Establish clear monitoring and evaluation mechanisms

Mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the impacts and success of rural proofing are vitally important. These **impacts should ultimately be measured** against the vision set out in Action 2. There may be a variety of different elements to this monitoring.

It may be appropriate to consider the benefits of publishing all rural proofing assessments undertaken at national, regional and local levels. This would maximise transparency and enable scrutiny of rural proofing activity, by citizens, stakeholders and the political system. It may also act as an incentive for rural proofing to be undertaken fully and properly by government departments and regional and local actors.

In some countries where rural proofing has been implemented, the Rural Affairs Minister presents an annual report to Parliament updating politicians on the impacts of the process, how well it is being implemented, etc. This is important as it helps keep rural areas and issues at the forefront of political debates and provides an opportunity for Parliamentary scrutiny of the process and its outcomes.

Alongside this annual report (and as an alternative to full publication of all rural proofing assessments if this is deemed unnecessary or unfeasible), an **annual collation of detailed evidence** on where rural proofing has been undertaken at national level and what it has achieved should be undertaken by the lead RP body. Successful, and indeed less successful, examples and case studies could be highlighted and discussed in order to inform ongoing learning on how to improve the process to better achieve the designated outcomes. In these instances, incorporating local voices as part of the monitoring and evaluation process is vitally important, in order to hold national and regional level stakeholders to account.

This information could also be housed on an online repository alongside the rural data described in Action 4. Indeed, this data is vital for monitoring rural proofing activities against a baseline starting point. Below national level, it may be most appropriate for local/regional governments to lead **the monitoring of rural proofing activity** with information gathered from a wide range of stakeholders (e.g., local health boards, regional NGOs, etc.).

Beyond this, however, at all levels it is also important that periodic **independent evaluation** is undertaken, perhaps by rural stakeholders and/or academics to provide a potentially more independent and robust viewpoint on both the process and the outcomes of rural proofing. Such an evaluation should consider rural proofing activities by all governance layers and the wide range of potential actors who would be required to do this (e.g., NGOs, etc.). Constant learning from the annual monitoring and evaluation work is crucial to ensure that rural proofing is continuously improved and its impacts maximised at all levels.

European Network for
Rural Development

3. LONGER-TERM WORK IN SUPPORT OF RURAL PROOFING

Alongside these essential actions, there are also a number of ongoing activities, which are desirable to ensure that rural proofing continues to be robust, yet straightforward, for policy-makers to implement. The remainder of this document identifies four such activities.

1. Ensuring that **parallel learning** takes place from (and to) other forms of 'proofing' (e.g. gender, sustainability, etc.) and impact assessments (relating to geography, communities of interest, etc.). This collective learning will help demonstrate that policy-makers are required to balance many different dimensions when designing and delivering policies, and rural is only one.

2. **Ongoing dialogue** is important **between national, regional and local levels** to ensure that rural proofing actions at one geographical level are not undermining or duplicating those at another, but instead they are complementary and working towards the same rural outcome/s, based on the varying roles and remits at different levels.

3. It is important that, alongside work to ensure the process of rural proofing remains appropriate and robust at all levels of governance, **the purpose and desired outcomes of rural proofing** and the overarching positive vision that is being sought for rural areas, are **regularly re-stated at all governance levels**, and revisited if necessary. Once the vision, purpose and outcomes of rural proofing are widely understood and used to guide policy-making across all domains, the requirement to regularly re-state the political commitment to rural proofing (set out in Action 1) may become less important. Part of this ongoing learning on rural proofing will be to regularly revisit the need for dedicated or targeted rural policies and funding streams and/or rural proofing to ensure that all policies are as applicable for rural areas and communities as they are for urban areas and communities (termed mainstreaming in some countries). The most appropriate balance will vary between MS.

4. There is a critical role for the lead RP body and wider rural stakeholders, including rural citizens and also European-wide networks, in positively supporting the **learning and capacity building of those implementing rural proofing** at national, regional and local levels to ensure the process is meaningful and successful. Rural proofing is a process that will take time for policy-makers to learn and adequate support, training and resources must be available for them on an ongoing basis.