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of the Regions**

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Territorial Cohesion Policy
and EU Budget**

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Natural Resources**

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Rural proofing – a foresight framework for resilient rural communities

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Executive Summary

The study Rural proofing – a foresight framework for resilient rural communities is focussing on a term that has become in recent years a prominent concept within rural development. Rural areas are considered as particularly at-risk regarding disparities and unbalanced impacts of policies on EU level and other levels of governance, therefore the idea of “rural proofing”, namely ensuring that “thinking rural” becomes part of the policy design at all governance levels, potential negative impacts are addressed and positive aspects of a policy are fostered. Rural proofing is called for by the Cork Declaration 2.0, by the EU long-term-vision on rural areas and is a declared approach of the 2022 Work Programme of the European Commission.

Rural proofing is furthermore included in the Better Regulation Agenda at multiple points. From a methodological point of view it is close to Territorial Impact Assessment (TIA) as recognised by the Better Regulation Toolbox, tool #34 in its approach of focussing on assessing impacts based on specific regional traits and characteristics. Rural proofing however is not only an impact assessment process, but rather part of the overall policy design. “Thinking rural” needs to be relevant at all stages, from drafting the initial policy strategy all the way to impact assessment after implementation.

Based on expert interviews and literature review, an assessment of existing rural proofing approaches in (mainly) national circumstances was conducted in the study, identifying main challenges and main success factors for implementing rural proofing. Building on this knowledge, a grid assessment of existing TIA approaches was conducted in order to identify potentials and shortcomings of those methodologies for rural proofing. While some methodologies are not well suited due to their methodological approach or geographic focus, three particular methodologies were identified that can potentially contribute to rural proofing exercises. The TIA Quick Check, territorial foresight as well as EATIA carry such a potential, all of which apply different approaches regarding territorial demarcation, use of quantitative data and expert involvement.

As none of those methodologies has yet been applied for rural proofing, three cases demonstrating the practical application in hypothetical examples were developed. The test runs do not only serve as practical examples, but also contributed to identifying shortcomings in practical application. Based on those test-runs a number of recommendations for further development of those tools could be made. Inter alia, improvements are advised to specific tools, increasing their geographical resolution and database flexibility as well as visualisations.

Furthermore particular guidance for application in rural proofing as well as adapting templates provided to the specific application are recommended.

Apart from specific of methodologies, the wider implementation of rural proofing in policymaking, including supporting measures has been assessed. The study has shown, that rural proofing where it has been applied rarely succeeded if it consisted only of a checklist approach or an individual methodology. Key factor for successful implementation was the establishment of a responsible ministerial department or other governmental body for rural proofing. Those bodies should provide expert input to other departments on thematic and methodological issues, act as a networking and exchange platform, and in general be involved in policy drafting processes from early stages onward. A solid basis for rural proofing within the legislative framework is also considered as a key success factor.

Therefore, a better link between the EU legislative process as laid down in the Better Regulation Guidelines, the existing emphasis on Territorial Impact Assessment and Rural Proofing will be necessary. For example, at EU level, tool #34 should be expanded in order to address, how TIA can serve rural proofing exercises, and how the methods currently included can be used in practice. Another entry point for such an integration may be the preliminary impact assessment stage, where the use of a territorial lens (including the rural one) may serve as horizontal first assessment step to identify potential impacts of the sectoral dimensions (economic, social, environmental etc.) in different types of territories.

The study provides detailed recommendations on the above topics, aiming to contribute to the development and mainstreaming of rural proofing and TIA at all governance levels. Not only the EU level, but also national and regional levels are addressed and specific guidance for them is provided. Ultimately, the study should contribute to the debate on rural proofing raising awareness about the issue, but also provides concrete recommendations for the successful implementation.

Introduction

This study is focussing on a term that has become in recent years a prominent concept within rural development. Rural proofing has become a part of actions to strengthening territorial impact assessments and is a declared approach of the 2022 Work Programme of the European Commission. Rural areas are considered as particularly at-risk regarding disparities and unbalanced impacts of policies on EU level and other levels of governance.

In 2016 the Cork Declaration first coined the term “rural proofing” in the context of the CAP: *“The rural potential to deliver innovative, inclusive and sustainable solutions for current and future societal challenges such as economic prosperity, food security, climate change, resource management, social inclusion, and integration of migrants should be better recognised. A **rural proofing** mechanism should ensure this is reflected in Union policies and strategies. Rural and agricultural policies should build on the identity and dynamism of rural areas through the implementation of integrated strategies and multi-sectorial approaches.”*¹ It has become obvious that since the CAP reform 1999 with the introduction of Rural Development in the realm of Agricultural Policy that rural areas are seen as specifically to be addressed regions in Europe. The assumption was (and still is) that rural areas are differently affected by policies (as compared to urban regions) due to the specific traits such as, for example, low population density and net-population loss, lower income and economic potential, relatively high dependence on single sectors (agriculture and related sectors) and low connectivity and infrastructure endowments.

Rural proofing shall in this sense support to revitalise rural areas and close the rural-urban gap by ensuring all relevant policies are aligned with rural needs and realities. It is one of the transversal elements outlined in the Long-term Vision for Rural Areas². As the long-term vision, the rural proofing tool to be developed shall contribute to implementing Art. 174 and 349 TFEU. As a part of the Better Regulation Agenda, it should serve to assess the anticipated impact of major EU legislative initiatives on rural areas. The vision also calls for Member States to consider implementing the rural proofing principle at the national, regional and local level.

Throughout the years there have been various definitions used and, in many cases, there has been a mix of defining the term with policy changes to be captured by the mechanism. In a most recent publication for the European Network for Rural

1 https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/cork-declaration_en.pdf

2 https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/long-term-vision-rural-areas_en

Development (ENRD) the following definition has been used: *“rural proofing is a systematic process to review the likely impacts of policies, programmes and initiatives on rural areas because of their particular circumstances or needs (e.g. dispersed populations and poorer infrastructure networks). In short, it requires policy-makers to ‘think rural’ when designing policy interventions in order to prevent negative outcomes for rural areas and communities.”*³

This definition implies that rural proofing is to be regarded as a tool to assess territorial impacts caused by any policy/intervention specifically filtering between these effects in rural vs. any other areas. In other words, this definition leads the way to the following components of the term:

- Territorial impacts: to be understood as a consequence of an external trigger (exposure to a policy, shock, intervention) for a specific type of territory (rural area – to be specifically defined and demarcated from any other area – e.g., urban). This definition follows a set of certain territorial characteristics, which determine the reaction of the territory on the external trigger.
- Overall effect/impact: to be identified in contrast to any other territories. This means that without comparison this contrast or difference of effect may not be seen.
- Territorial unit: following suit the issue of demarcation of rural areas is then the granulation on which the impact has to be captured. This implies that any territory too large in size may not be suited to effectively show the different effects of the policies. The phenomena of levelling out effects in too large an area may occur.

This brings rural proofing very close to the methodological approaches used for Territorial Impact Assessment. The Better Regulation Guidelines Toolbox⁴ (Tool #34) uses the two concepts synonymously: *“Impact assessments and evaluations should systematically consider territorial impacts when they are relevant and there are indications that they will be significant for different territories of the EU. Thanks to territorial impact assessments (TIA) and rural proofing⁵, the needs and specificities of different EU territories can be better taken into account (for*

3 Atterton J. (2022): Analytical overview of rural proofing approaches and lessons learned; ENRD Thematic Group Rural proofing – Draft background document; Rural Policy Centre, SRUC (Scotland’s Rural College)

4 https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/br_toolbox_-_nov_2021_-_chapter_3.pdf

5 Commission Communication, The Future of Food and Farming, COM(2017) 713 and Commission Communication: A Long Term Vision for Rural Areas, COM(2021) 345

instance of urban⁶/rural areas, cross-border areas⁷ and the EU outermost regions⁸) to facilitate cohesion across the Union.” It furthermore defines TIA in the following way: “Territorial impact assessments are looking into all thematic aspects of impact assessments (economic, social, and environmental) by translating them into the territorial setting (regions)”. This strong conceptual link between TIA and rural proofing is explored in the study. TIA methodologies provide an important input for the methodological development of rural proofing.

For many years rural proofing has been rather applied on the Member State level with more or less success and stringency (see examples from the ENRD Working Group on Rural proofing⁹). The Cork Declaration and the following policy discussion the Directorate for Agriculture (DG AGRI) has lifted the mechanism up to the EU level. Quite logically – as the regional/local focus is clearly embedded the Committee of the Regions (CoR) has also been following the debate with interest. The study “Rural proofing – a foresight framework for resilient rural communities” for which the present document is written aims at identifying the mainstreaming potentials of existing rural proofing methodologies and territorial impact assessment methodologies in the EU policy process. It should contribute to a better understanding of rural proofing, its links with TIA, its potentials and its limitations.

The study is based on desk research, expert interviews and case studies of rural proofing applications. It is split in 5 parts:

- **State of play of rural proofing** in which past and recent developments in the EU policy process related to rural proofing are outlined. Existing methodologies from inside and outside of the EU are assessed regarding their methodological approach and its advantages and disadvantages. Experience in implementation (if available) is also presented.
- **Existing TIA tools** which assess methods for territorial impact assessment currently applied. Their suitability for rural proofing is assessed and, if applicable, which modifications to the methodology would have to be made.
- **The specificities of rural areas** where the crucial challenges for rural areas which are oftentimes considered the reason for a need for rural proofing are

6 Pact of Amsterdam: Urban Agenda for the EU (2016) and Council Conclusions on an Urban Agenda for the EU (24.6.2016)

7 Commission Communication: Boosting growth and cohesion in EU border regions, COM(2017) 534

8 defined in Article 349 TFEU, which provides for the adoption of specific legislative measures for the EU nine outermost regions across EU policies, taking into account their permanent constraints.

9 https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-thematic-work/long-term-rural-vision/TG-rural-proofing_en_en

outlined. The implications for policy planning and in particular rural proofing tools are addressed as well.

- **Application and improvement of existing methodologies** in which (virtual) case studies of applications of rural proofing are conducted. For example, policies, three different methodologies are showcased and potential outputs are presented.
- **Guidance for better rural proofing** finally synthesizes the results of parts 1 to 4 and provides recommendations for rural proofing at EU, national, regional and local level as well as general recommendations for enhancing the EU legislative process to include rural proofing.

1. State of play of Rural proofing

Rural proofing has been implemented in various forms in a number of countries, with implementations ranging from voluntary application to mandatory part of the policymaking process and from development of specific methodologies to inclusion in broader impact assessments for policies. The term “Rural proofing” and methodologies explicitly connected with it is particularly known in some (former) commonwealth countries as well as in Scandinavia.

In the European Union, no such methodology has been adopted as standard, though the European Commission underlines the need for it in several documents. Notably the Cork 2.0 Declaration calls for an implementation of a rural proofing mechanism in EU policymaking. Furthermore, the EC in the Staff Working Document “A long-term Vision for the EU’s Rural Areas – Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040” states that a rural proofing mechanism will be put in place for the EU policymaking process as part of the Better Regulation Agenda (Atterton 2022; Bryce 2022; Expert interviews 2022; European Commission 2016; European Commission 2021).

1.1 Rural proofing in the Better Regulation Agenda

Following the call of the Cork Declaration and the long-term vision for rural areas, the European Commission included particular considerations for rural areas into the Better Regulation Agenda. While urban-rural disparities, challenges for rural regions etc. have been mentioned in the Better Regulation Guidelines and Toolbox before as well, the discussions seem to have influenced the recent revision of the Toolbox in 2021. Notably, explicit reference to rural areas is currently made in 11 individual tools:

- #18 Identification of Impacts
- #24 Competition
- #28 Digital-ready policymaking
- #30 Employment, working conditions, income distribution, social protection and inclusion
- #31 Education and training, culture and youth
- #34 Territorial impacts
- #35 Developing countries
- #36 Environmental impacts
- #49 Format of the evaluation report
- #55 Horizontal matters
- #59 Cost estimates and the “one in, one out” approach

Furthermore, the term “rural proofing” is explicitly included in Tool #34 Territorial impacts, and assessment of effects concerning particularly rural regions is stressed multiple times in this tool. While the Commission recommends several particular methodologies for Territorial Impact Assessments (which can partly include assessments of impacts on rural regions), no such recommendation is made for rural proofing. The European Commission has announced in the past however that the development of a tool for assessing impacts on rural areas is currently ongoing (European Commission 2021, ENRD 2017)

1.2 Rural proofing methodologies

A number of approaches for rural proofing have already been applied, with different methodologies and approaches, on different geographical levels and against different policy backgrounds. Based on academic literature and in particular based on inputs gathered from the recent ENRD meeting of the Thematic Group on rural proofing, some of the most relevant methodologies have been selected and are described below. For each method, a brief outline of the approach, a grid-assessment based on the paper of characteristics of rural proofing methods (Atterton 2022) as well as an overview of advantages and disadvantages is provided.

1.2.1 Rural proofing (Finland)

Development and implementation of rural proofing in Finland started in the mid-2000s based on international examples. While the importance of such assessments was recognised by policymakers, it still was seen as an additional burden to the law-making process and thus introduced only as voluntary action (Nordberg 2020, 4; Atterton 2022, 3). The core of the method is formed by a checklist produced by the rural policy council located in the ministry of agriculture, however implementation rests with the authority concerned with a specific policy. Depending on the policy and implementation level, the checklist is completed either by individual public officials, or in cooperative workshops engaging NGOs or even the wider public. The process is supported by geospatial data analysis and a questionnaire in some cases (Husberg 2022; Atterton 2022, 3).

Rural proofing	
Mandatory?	Suggested application
<i>Application is suggested/encouraged. The Rural Policy Council acts within their networks and actively pushes/supports the relevant policymakers where necessary or requested.</i>	
Method for assessing the impacts	Stakeholder consultation/single person assessment/checklist/data-based assessment
Depending on the implementation level, different methods are usually used. The core is formed by a checklist, however methods for completion of the checklist differ. On national level, mainly one or a few civil servants assess the potential effects based on their knowledge and experience. On regional and local level, the process is usually more participatory bringing in stakeholder workshops, questionnaires etc.	
Involved institutions	Agricultural or rural ministry or authority/Non-Agricultural or rural ministry or authority
<i>The responsibility for implementing the procedure for a specific policy rests with the authority in charge of that policy. The overall responsibility for rural proofing methodologies, guidance and support lies with the Agricultural Ministry.</i>	
Level of application	National/regional/local level
<i>The method has mainly been applied at regional and local level, and occasionally at national level.</i>	
When in the policy process is it applied?	Early policy design phase/late policy design phase
<i>The method is used ex-ante. It is advised to be used in the early policy design phase, however as it is a voluntary procedure, in practice the responsible authorities can decide when/where to use it.</i>	
Thematic focus	Rural areas (general)
<i>A broad range of thematic fields are addressed in the checklist and assessment. Those fields are supposed to cover all relevant topics for rural areas, no specific thematic focus can be identified.</i>	

Source: Atterton (2022, 3), Husberg (2022), Nordberg (2020, 4f)

Main **advantages** of the method are its broad thematic orientation and adaptability to regional and local circumstances. It can be tailored for different circumstances and as such be applied to all kinds of legislation. It raises awareness of rural issues in policymaking, and if applied in a participatory manner, it can act as an “incubator” for regional and local actions by bringing different stakeholders together (Husberg 2022; Nordberg 2020, .4f)

The main **disadvantages** are the slow uptake due to its voluntary nature and the large amount of time and resources needed for a participatory process. As rural proofing is one out of multiple available impact assessments, this reduces the likeliness of it being applied even more (Husberg 2022; Nordberg 2020, .4f).

Overall, the method is strongly tied to other “checklist” approaches that have been developed by different countries, and picks up multiple elements from them. It is by design “open” to various assessment methodologies, and best used in a participatory manner at lower geographic levels. This allows finetuning the assessment to a wide variety of circumstances and topics, which is particularly important for rural areas.

1.2.2 Regional Impact Assessment Statement (Australia)

The Regional Impact Assessment Statement (RIAS) was implemented in July 2003 by the State Government of South Australia and comprises an extensive analysis of regional impact. It is required any time a significant decision may impact services in regions. As the RIAS policy was introduced as a new approach, agencies got assistance in deciding how best to implement it in their particular circumstances. After a feedback process in different training and information sessions, the guideline has been revised and re-published (DTED 2005, 2).

Title of the method	Regional Impact Assessment Statement (RIAS)
Mandatory?	Legislation backed mandatory
<i>The RIAS process must be applied to any major government decision that will affect regional services. This includes new policies, legislation or funding proposals, new or amended regulatory provision, new or altered service delivery models, and program design and evaluation.</i>	
Method for assessing the impacts	Checklist
<i>A RIAS shall follow the template available on the website of the Department of Primary Industries and Regions of the Government of South Australia (PIRSA). The template can be understood more as a general guidance than a checklist, indicating the required text parts and matters to be covered in the document.</i>	
Involved institutions	Rural ministry or authority
<i>The Government of South Australia, Department of Primary Industries and Regions (PIRSA) is committed to ensuring effective consultation and communication with regional South Australian communities prior to the implementation of decisions with a significant impact on regional communities. The RIAS Policy is part of that commitment. Regional South Australian communities can download the RIAS template from the PIRSA homepage.</i>	
Level of application	Regional
<i>The RIAS applies to all South Australian Government departments, agencies and statutory bodies.</i>	
When in the policy process is it applied?	Early policy design phase/late policy design phase
<i>A RIAS must be prepared prior to implementation of any decision that result in a significant impact to one or more regional communities. This includes changes to existing or introducing new services or initiatives.</i>	
Thematic focus	Specific topics
<i>During the preparation of a RIAS economic factors, social and community factors, environmental factors as well as equity factors shall be considered.</i>	

Source: PIRSA (2018; 2019a; 2019b; s.a.)

The main **advantages** of the Regional Impact Assessment Statements are the legal framework, the precise definition of when a RIAS is to be carried out, and the standardised guideline in the form of a template.

The main **disadvantage** of this method is the purely descriptive approach, which does not allow for the same degree of objectivity as could be achieved, for example, through quantitative evaluations. Furthermore, the guidance is rather broad and leads to significant variation in implementation.

To conclude, the Regional Impact Assessment Statements are a good tool to get a first overview whether a major government decision might affect regional services, but cannot supplement a more detailed analysis. Since RIAS is a purely descriptive method and no precise statistical analysis is required, the individual assessments vary significantly in terms of depth and content. As a result, individual RIAS are not comparable with each other – especially if they were written by different persons or agencies.

1.2.3 Rural Lens (Canada)

In 1996, the “Rural Secretariat” was founded within the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food to bring together governments departments concerning rural issues and priorities and to promote dialogue between rural Canadians and the federal government. The Rural Lens in this context was developed as a policy tool to review federal policies and programs through the eyes of people living in distant and rural areas. The “Rural Secretariat” however was discontinued in 2013 (Atterton 2019, 34ff). Nowadays, a new approach to highlighting rural issues in the policymaking process has been implemented in the context of Gender-based-analysis plus.

Title of the method	Rural Lens
Mandatory?	Legislation backed suggested
<i>Despite its mandate, the Rural Lens had no authority to enforce horizontal coordination. After the completion of the draft review, the Rural Lens Unit submitted a report back to the respective government department. Considering the implementation of the comments, sponsoring departments had no responsibility to report back to the Rural Lens Unit or the Rural Secretariat. There was no legislation that required government departments to apply the Rural Lens and no sanctions if it was not applied.</i>	
Method for assessing the impacts	Checklist
<i>The Rural Lens tool was divided in 10 stages which were: Concept; Environmental Scan and Impact Assessment; People and Organisations Involved; Development and Design; Communications; Validation and Consultations; Refine Initiative and Identify Resources; Approval; Deliver Program; Monitor and Evaluate Program. The guide described the stages on the left side and included a template to fill in, questions to answer or examples to follow on the right side.</i>	
Involved institutions	Agricultural or rural authority
<i>The Rural Secretary prepared a guide for using the Rural Lens, which was published by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.</i>	
Level of application	National
<i>The Rural Lens was designed to review federal programmes and policies from the perspectives of remote and rural regions.</i>	
When in the policy process is it applied?	Early policy design phase/late policy design phase
<i>Although, the Rural Lens was created as a policy tool to review federal programmes and policies in the early development stages, it tended to be applied in the later policy development stages.</i>	
Thematic focus	Rural areas (general)/specific topic
<i>In stage 2, environmental and general impacts on rural, remote and urban areas were scanned and assessed. Further sub-columns for specific groups could be added.</i>	

Source: Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (2001), Atterton (2019, 34ff).

Advantages: An early impact assessment could have helped to identify positive and negative effects on rural areas. The guidance provided is rather comprehensive gives a good overview on important questions to be considered.

Disadvantages: Since the Rural Lens tended to be applied in the later policy development stages, it was often too late for the adaptation of the policy or programme. The role and importance of the Rural Secretariat was somewhat hidden and the success of the Rural Secretariat and the Rural Lens was mostly “behind the scenes”. Furthermore, the Rural Secretariat had limited financial resources and a small number of employees, which complicated long-time planning. (Atterton 2019, 34ff)

Following the Rural Lens model, the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador developed a Rural Lens tool and has published a guide for public bodies with the aim of assessing regional policy implications. The Rural Lens was created to help Cabinet decision-makers evaluate both positive and negative direct/intended, indirect/unintended, and disproportionate or divergent implications of proposed Cabinet decisions on rural individuals, stakeholders, and communities (PEP 2019, 3). In the past years, considerable additional efforts were made to integrate rural considerations in the policymaking process, including mandating the considerations through “gender-based analysis plus” in some topics and creating a centre of expertise for rural proofing. The assessments place an emphasis on rural economic development, however include broader rural issues as well. This approach is considered successful in encouraging the communities to contribute to rural development and supporting development from the inside.

1.2.4 Rural proofing (New Zealand)

In 2018, New Zealand made a formal commitment to rural proofing, acknowledging the importance of rural communities to the country, as well as the different structures, challenges, and drivers that exist in these communities, implying that the impact and outcomes of new policies and programs may differ from those in urban areas. Linked to this process, the New Zealand government presented policymakers with recommendations for rural proofing. Along with the recommendations, policymakers are provided a checklist, a paper detailing typical concerns to examine, and a case study example (Atterton 2022, 4).

Title of the method	Rural proofing
Mandatory?	Suggested application
<i>Rural proofing is a guidance tool for agencies rather than a mandatory assessment process.</i>	
Method for assessing the impacts	Checklist
<i>The Ministry for Primary Industries published a rural proofing Guide for policy development and service delivery planning with 7 points that should to be considered early and throughout policy development and implementation to make rural proofing effective. Furthermore, the</i>	

<i>rural proofing Impact Assessment Checklist is designed to help to consider potential impacts on rural communities while developing a policy.</i>	
Involved institutions	Ministry
<i>The Ministry for Primary Industries published the rural proofing Guide and the rural proofing Impact Assessment Checklist. The implementation lies with the authorities responsible for a specific policy.</i>	
Level of application	National/regional/local level
<i>Since the rural proofing Guide and the rural proofing Impact Assessment Checklist are not mandatory yet, the level of application is not specified.</i>	
When in the policy process is it applied?	Early policy design phase/late policy design phase
<i>It is recommended to consider rural proofing early and throughout policy development and implementation to be most effective.</i>	
Thematic focus	Specific topic
<i>The rural proofing Guide focusses on infrastructure, health, education and other services, ease of doing business/cost of compliance and communication. The rural proofing Impact Assessment Checklist foresees to identify benefits and implications for rural communities in the following areas: infrastructure, social, business, equity, and other.</i>	

Source: MPI (2018a; 2018b), SWC (2018, 2)

The rural proofing Guide and the rural proofing Impact Assessment Checklist have the **advantage** of providing an easy way to identify benefits and implications for the rural communities. The guidance for its application is rather comprehensive. The rural proofing Guide also indicates relevant rural contacts and organisations to seek advice from.

The main **disadvantages** of this methods are its non-mandatory nature, the purely descriptive approach to an impact assessment, as well as the explicit distinction between “urban” and “rural” areas and comparing these regions with each other.

Overall, the method offers a first introduction to rural proofing. Despite the purely descriptive approach, the comprehensive guidance ensures some consistency in application. The government has established a core group on rural proofing as a supporting measure, which monitors specific policy areas. Where relevant and needed they take part in consultations, provide advice on rural issues and also provide methodological support. Furthermore, they are available to authorities for ad-hoc consultation on specific questions, ensuring a quick and unbureaucratic process. This has been identified as one of the main success factors for rural proofing in New Zealands policymaking.

1.2.5 Rural proofing (England)

Rural proofing in general has a long tradition in England being introduced in the year 2000, with a formal requirement to publish annual reports on the matter. Implementation however was lacking commitment from the responsible

authorities, and if conducted was done at a late stage without the possibility to influence the policy process. The government department for rural affairs provides guidance on assessing impacts on rural regions in the form of a checklist, decision trees and examples for possible assessments (DEFRA 2017; DEFRA 2021; Atterton 2022)

Rural proofing (England)	
Mandatory?	Mandatory application
<i>While in principle rural proofing for policies is mandatory and dedicated personnel is defined at each department, practical implementation seems to be lacking</i>	
Method for assessing the impacts	Checklist
<i>Based on guidance provided by the department of rural affairs, a department responsible for a specific policy has to assess the potential impacts, their strength and required policy actions to address them. The method involves guiding questions and decision trees, with a descriptive assessment of impacts.</i>	
Involved institutions	Ministry
<i>The department responsible for a policy conducts the assessment.</i>	
Level of application	National/regional/local level
<i>The level of application in principle is open, however guidance tends to be oriented towards the national level. Further guidance on applying the method on the local level is provided by other institutions and considered informal.</i>	
When in the policy process is it applied?	Early policy design phase/late policy design phase
<i>As per the guidance the rural proofing exercise should be conducted in the early policy design phase. Practical implementation shows however it is usually done at a later stage with little potential influence.</i>	
Thematic focus	Rural areas (general)/specific topic (e.g. environment, farming ...)/Sub-element of TIA
<i>The thematic focus is broad, explicitly addressing infrastructure and services, working and living conditions, environment and equality</i>	

Source: DEFRA 2017; DEFRA 2021; Atterton 2022

The main **advantage** of the method is the formal commitment by the government and the annual monitoring reports for implementation. Furthermore, comprehensive guidance on the government level is published and regularly updated to account for changing circumstances.

Main **disadvantage** is not linked to the method itself but to the practical application. As responsible personnel was defined, the resources were available, however, it seems the willingness to take up the issue in the policy design phase was not high. There were no consequences if the assessment was not carried out in an adequate manner, and furthermore confusion about responsibilities contributed to the lacking quality (DEFRA 2017; DEFRA 2021; Atterton 2022).

2. Existing TIA tools

Territorially differentiated impacts of policies have been a topic in academic research as well as in policymaking for a long time. Territorial Impact Assessment (TIA) as a way of analysing such territorially differentiated impacts in a structured manner as well as formulate suggestions for adapting policies based on the outcomes of such analyses. By design, such TIA methodologies should be neutral, i.e. not judging on the success of a policy but simply answering the question “which regions or types of regions are impacted in which way by the policy”. In some cases, such an imbalance in impacts can be undesirable and requires action by policymakers to reduce them, while in other cases it might be acceptable or even a desired effect (Fischer et. al. 2014, ESPON 2018).

The European Commission in the Better Regulation Toolbox, Tool #34 “Territorial Impacts” included a reference to rural proofing, however does not consider it a TIA in itself. Nevertheless, a number of existing TIA methodologies are in principle suitable for assessing impacts on rural areas, either by themselves or in comparison with other regions. No TIA method developed so far can be used as-is for rural proofing (in the sense as elaborated above – i.e. with its strong normative character of policy shaping instead of policy assessing) without additional considerations, however several methodologies can be easily adapted or integrated into a rural proofing exercise (EC 2021, 297-303).

The Better Regulation Toolbox explicitly references three TIA methodologies (TIA Quick Check, RHOMOLO and LUISA), all of which are assessed on their suitability for rural proofing below. Furthermore, additional methodologies which are the most commonly referenced ones in academic literature and at the same time potentially suitable for rural proofing were included in the assessment, namely EATIA, TARGET TIA and Territorial Foresight methodologies. There are numerous other methodologies available, however many of them are either outdated or not promising for rural proofing. The CoR has conducted research on this topic already and provided a comprehensive overview of available methodologies (CoR 2019) for further reference.

For the selected methodologies, a grid assessment outlining the general approach and characteristics has been conducted below. The limited space available naturally only allows for a quick overview, however weblinks are included for further in-depth information for each method.

2.1 TIA Quick Check

The ESPON TIA Quick Check is an ex-ante territorial impact assessment method with a hybrid approach based on the vulnerability concept. The combination of territorial sensitivity (in the form of quantitative data) and exposure (expert assessments in a workshop setting) leads to maps of potential territorial impacts (impact patterns) for each region. It allows for a comparison of regional impacts in the fields of economy, environment, society and governance, however indicators used are broad and can be tailored to different effects (OIR, AIDICO 2013; OIR 2021). Furthermore, the assessment can be focused on different types of regions, i.e., allows to address rural regions in particular (OIR 2021).

ESPON TIA Quick Check	
General method	Hybrid
<i>The method applies a combination of quantitative data (“sensitivity”) from statistical sources and qualitative data in the form of expert judgement on the strength of effects (“exposure”) collected in a workshop setting.</i>	
Processes/methods used	Territorial data analysis, Workshops, reporting
<i>The core of the method is formed by an expert workshop, during which effects are identified and maps on potential territorial impacts are generated with the webtool. The interpretation of the maps takes place in the same workshop setting.</i>	
Territorial level	NUTS3
<i>While the method in principle is capable to work on any territorial level, as long as granulated statistical data is available, the Webtool available at the moment works on NUTS3 level. On this level, the balance between data availability on the European level and a granulation fine enough to capture a regions characteristics is hit. The method is however transferrable, e.g., to the national context, where different statistical data might be available.</i>	
Timing in the policy process	Ex-ante
<i>The method is designed for an ex-ante assessment and should ideally be placed in the inception impact assessment phase for EU policies.</i>	
Suitability for rural proofing	Could be used without modifications
<i>While assessment of impacts on rural regions has been part of some TIA exercises, it has not yet been used in a dedicated rural proofing setting. Comparative assessments are possible without modification to the webtool at the moment. Some modifications could however increase the suitability for rural proofing, e.g., improving the visibility of specific types of regions on produced maps.</i>	

Source: OIR, AIDICO 2013; OIR 2021

The method allows for focusing the assessment on rural regions, thus in principle is capable of contributing to rural proofing exercises. Within past assessments, rural regions have been addressed in several instances, however, it has not yet been used for a specific rule proofing application (CoR 2022). Based on the underlying methodology, all assessments are comparative, i.e. either comparing impacts on rural regions with urban regions, or comparing impacts on rural regions amongst each other.

Main advantage is that the methodology is already recognised by the better regulation toolbox as one of the territorial impact assessment methodologies for the EU policy process. This ensures that knowledge about the method is already available and would allow for easy adoption in rural proofing applications.

The method and tool are developed in projects commissioned by ESPON EGTC, which provide trainings, webinars and application support¹⁰.

2.2 RHOMOLO

RHOMOLO¹¹ is a “Spatial Computable General Equilibrium Model” originally developed by the JRC and DG REGIO for the assessment of cohesion policy on regional level. It can be used for broader policy assessments in several fields, with multiple modules expanding its capabilities beyond the assessment of purely economic impacts. It is a well-tested and established methodology and recognised by the Regulatory Scrutiny Board, making it well suited for impact assessments of EU policies in the ordinary legislative procedure (COR 2019, 5f; Mercenier et. al. 2016).

RHOMOLO	
General method	Quantitative
<i>The method relies on a tailored computable general equilibrium model for calculating regional impacts on NUTS 2 level.</i>	
Processes/methods used	Quantitative assessment
<i>The core of the method is built by the CGE which models interlinkages between regional economies. A baseline scenario is produced, to which a policy is introduced as a “shock” allowing for calculating impacts to regional economies. The method is highly specialised and requires expert inputs.</i>	
Territorial level	NUTS2
<i>The model includes all EU NUTS2 regions and one region which represents the rest of the world.</i>	
Timing in the policy process	Ex-ante and ex-post
<i>The method allows for both ex-ante as well as ex-post assessments.</i>	
Suitability for rural proofing	Could be used with modifications
<i>Main issue related to rural proofing is the territorial level, i.e. NUTS2 level. This does not allow for sufficient distinction between rural and other regions. The method thus in principle is transferrable and can be used, however relies on the collection and calculation of background data on lower regional level.</i>	

Source: CoR 2019, 5f; Mercenier et. al. 2016

Since the results of RHOMOLO are calculated of NUTS2 level, the direct application to rural proofing is limited. NUTS 2 does not allow for clear distinction between rural- and other areas, as almost all NUTS 2 regions contain

10 <https://www.espon.eu/tia-tool-2022>

11 <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/rhomolo>

a multitude of different types of sub-regions, including both densely populated urban areas as well as rural areas. The methodological approach would be transferrable to lower geographical levels, however would require considerable effort to calculate and construct the underlying matrices. Another approach proposed by the developers is the combination of RHOMOLO and LUISA model assessments as outlined below (Lavalle et. al. s.a.).

The model has been applied with success on higher geographical levels. Access to the Rhomolo Webtool is possible for interested persons with registration. However, application to concrete policies requires expert knowledge. The JRC runs a dedicated webpage for the model¹².

2.3 LUISA

LUISA¹³ refers actually not to one single model, but is considered a “Territorial Modelling Platform”. At its core, it is a cross-sectoral model for projecting “land functions” in a grid-based approach modelling the change in land function for each grid cell over time based on inputs from several external models/sources. Based on those land function projections, a number of different modules can provide results for a range of aspects (e.g. accessibility, employment...). LUISA can also be applied in combination with RHOMOLO with outputs from one model feeding into the other one (Lavalle s.a. 3ff; CoR 2019, 6f).

LUISA	
General method	Quantitative
<i>Core element is a grid-based land-function projection model. Results are obtained by comparison of a calculated baseline scenario with calculated “policy scenarios”</i>	
Processes/methods used	Quantitative assessment
<i>The assessment of the primary land-function projection calculates projections types of land use in a 100x100m grid. Further modules are linked to those primary results, allowing to calculate e.g. impacts on accessibility or employment</i>	
Territorial level	Free or flexible
<i>The primary model is grid-based producing results on a 100x100m grid. Outputs regarding further results can vary in territorial level, partially linked to the level of input data.</i>	
Timing in the policy process	Ex-ante
<i>The model is primarily used on ex-ante assessments. It has been applied at several stages and is not linked to a specific phase of the policy process.</i>	
Suitability for rural proofing	Could be used with modifications
<i>The grid-based results allow for a clear differentiation and calculation of results for rural areas. The modelling platform is in principle open and allows to tailor functionalities for rural proofing, e.g. allowing to single out rural regions in the assessment, or aggregating results for rural regions only.</i>	

Source: Lavalle s.a. 3ff; CoR 2019

¹² <https://rhomolo.jrc.ec.europa.eu/>

¹³ <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/luisa>

The modelling platform is flexible and allows for the integration of modules, tailoring to specific rural proofing application. The grid-based nature of land-use projections is well suited for singling out impacts on rural regions in a policy assessment. In particular in combination with RHOMOLO outputs (i.e. based on the proposed RHOMOLO-LUISA linkage by the JRC) a sophisticated projection of potential impacts on rural regions can be produced on a sufficiently detailed regional level. Application to concrete policies requires expert knowledge, i.e. not easy to integrate in a simple inception impact assessment or similar procedures (Lavallo s.a., 5f).

LUISA has been applied with success and is one of the methodologies recognised by the Better Regulation Toolbox. Access to the modelling platform is possible for interested persons. The JRC runs a dedicated webpage for the platform¹⁴.

2.4 EATIA

EATIA (ESPON and Territorial Impact Assessment) is a methodology developed in the framework of the ESPON programme. It is set up in a participatory manner, aiming to involve relevant stakeholders and decision makers alongside of experts in the assessment. At its core it consists of an “impact assessment matrix” which is filled step-by-step by the assessors streamlining the expert knowledge gathered through workshops and other consultation formats. The regions and types of regions for which the assessment is made are defined in the process and are in principle not bound to any administrative or statistical regions. The matrix finally provides impact scores and directions of impacts for visualisation in maps and other graphics (ESPON 2012).

EATIA	
General method	Qualitative
<i>The method is mainly based on expert consultation in different formats. Qualitative assessments are made building on a structured process guided by an assessment grid. Results are visualised and verbalised.</i>	
Processes/methods used	Stakeholder involvement/workshops
<i>The methodology is highly participatory and involves stakeholders and external experts through direct consultation as well as through structured workshops.</i>	
Territorial level	Free or flexible
<i>The regions or types of regions which are affected in a specific manner as well as their distinction is defined in the process. Due to the qualitative nature of the methodology it is not limited to administrative boundaries or statistical regions.</i>	
Timing in the policy process	Ex-ante/ex-post
<i>The method can be used for both ex-ante as well as ex-post assessments. The broader and flexible nature of the qualitative assessments is suited particularly well for ex-ante</i>	

14 https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/luisa_en

<i>assessments where little data is available.</i>	
Suitability for rural proofing	Could be used without modifications
<i>Defining the assessed types of regions and distinguishing effects on different types of regions form each other is at the core of the methodology. While principally it should be left open to the involved experts to define the types of regions in one of the preparatory steps, it would be possible to predefine “rural regions” for the assessment.</i>	

Source: ESPON 2012

Rural proofing methodologies in the UK were among the several methodologies inspiring the EATIA method. In the cases where EATIA was trialled so far, impacts on rural regions were assessed as one of different typologies, but were not at the centre of assessments (ESPOON 2012). As the method includes as one of the first steps to define the types of regions for which the assessment is made, it is however suited for rural proofing without further modifications.

The flexible nature of EATIA allows to tailor it to many different circumstances, i.e. it can be used from the European level down to on sub-national level. Furthermore, the assessment can address a broad range of topics or it can be focused on a few topics of particular interest. Due to the qualitative nature, it is particularly suited for thematic areas where other methodologies are limited due to the lack of quantitative data available.

The original methodology however is somewhat limited in capturing smaller differentiations as it only defines 2 positive and 2 negative impact classes. Furthermore, if a broad range of topics are to be addressed, numerous consultations are necessary in order to avoid basing assessments only on single-expert-opinions.

The methodology is thus particularly valuable for broader assessments and for cases where little or no quantitative data is available.

The method itself has not been applied outside of the ESPON project it was developed for and trialled in. ESPON runs a website section for the project¹⁵.

2.5 TARGET TIA

TARGET TIA is not recognised by the Better Regulation Guidelines (BRG) as one of the standard TIA methodologies, however it has been applied both as test-run in an academic setting as well as in practice assessing impacts on cross-border programmes. The method allows to assess the impacts along predefined

15 <https://www.espon.eu/programme/projects/espon-2013/targeted-analyses/eatia-espon-and-territorial-impact-assessment>

dimensions (socioeconomic, environmental, sustainability, governance/cooperation and polycentricity) and is based on the vulnerability concept (for hybrid assessments) or purely on qualitative expert judgement (for ex-ante assessments). Essentially, the method consists in the calculation of an impact matrix (on a -4 to +4 scale) consisting of arithmetic average of impacts for indicators under each dimension and finally calculating of an overall impact (Medeiros 2014).

TARGET TIA	
General method	Hybrid
<i>Depending on the timing of the assessment, a purely qualitative approach (ex-ante) or a combined qualitative and quantitative approach (ex-post) is used. In a multi-vector approach, numerical impact values are calculated for four predefined territorial cohesion dimensions</i>	
Processes/methods used	Interviews/quantitative assessment
<i>Depending on the timing and thus approach, either solely qualitative assessments based on methodological knowledge and expert interviews are conducted, or a combined quantitative-qualitative approach combining statistical data with expert interviews is followed.</i>	
Territorial level	Free or flexible
<i>In principle the territorial level is free as for qualitative assessments the territorial units can be defined in the process. However, when using quantitative data, the availability of data determines the possible territorial level for the assessments.</i>	
Timing in the policy process	Ex-ante/ex-post
<i>Both ex-ante as well as ex-post assessments are possible</i>	
Suitability for rural proofing	Could be used with modifications
<i>For assessing impacts on individual regions as compared to others, the tool is suited well. For larger-scale comparisons, the effort necessary for an assessment is considerably larger than for other methodologies.</i>	

Source: Medeiros 2014

The TARGET TIA methodology can be used for assessing impacts on specific regions, thus it can be used for rural regions in comparison with other regions. However, assessments on a broader scale, i.e., multiple regions, can require a lot of resources and might not be feasible. Furthermore, the fixed dimensions of the original methodology are geared towards cohesion policy and might be too strict and not the most relevant ones for a specific rural proofing exercise.

The flexibility of the method regarding data availability and territorial level is valuable when targeting certain thematic fields which are not well-backed with data. Furthermore, the broader scale of impacts as compared to other methodologies is useful for distinguishing in more detailed ways between regions and effect strength.

2.6 Territorial Foresight

The method of territorial foresight brings together qualitative and quantitative analysis, combining foresight with elements of territorial impact assessment. The method builds largely along participatory and co-creative approaches, in combination with thorough desk research and mapping, for locating the territorial implications. There are four key steps that guide territorial foresight (Böhme, Lüer, & Holstein, 2020).

- Step 1: Defining the research “what if” question. At this stage is where the link to the policy and the territory is made. The question should include the future element, the territory in focus, the policy to be assessed for rural proofing and the time horizon. In the case of rural proofing, the following question could serve as example “What future outlooks would rural regions have if *policy A*, is put into place by 2030?” Therefore, in the case of rural proofing, the territory will be the rural areas, while the question will ask how the respective policy to be assessed will impact rural areas in future.
- Step 2: Going through a thorough desk study and background research by reviewing existing literature, material and resources to identify relevant trends, factors, wild cards, challenges and their impacts, time span and possible impacts on the territories, e.g., following the STEEP approach (Social, Technological, Economic, Environmental, Political).
- Step 3: Running the participatory process, i.e., involving engaged experts and stakeholders in a well-structured participatory processes, to spark lateral, out-of-the-box thinking. Different approaches can be used, ranging from workshops and focus groups, to surveys and interviews. The participatory approach is also used for identifying and sketching preliminary scenarios and territorial implications e.g., for rural areas in the case of rural proofing. A key step in this process is to make a first stakeholder mapping.
- Step 4: Post-processing of the material, i.e., developing a combined picture of Steps 1-3 and bringing them together into a coherent story. At this stage, the mapping of the identified territorial implications can be finalised.

Territorial foresight	
General method	Hybrid
<i>The method combines qualitative and quantitative approaches, drawing from literature, as well as available data through desk research.</i>	
Processes/methods used	Desk research and participatory processes
<i>The key starting point of the method is a thorough desk research of different sources, to run a</i>	

<i>first trend collection, i.e., a collection of drivers, trends, challenges, wild cards that may influence different territories to a different extend. The next core element of the process is the participatory process, which benefits from the lateral thinking and expert knowledge of different stakeholders. At this stage the impacts of the policy at hand on rural areas will be discussed.</i>	
Territorial level	Free/flexible
<i>The method for identifying and locating the territorial implications can work at different levels. Depending on the availability of data, insofar that qualitative material can be used for the development of maps. In the case of absence of quantitative material, the experts' knowledge and qualitative sources are used instead. In the case of rural proofing, the rural areas are in focus. The future impacts that a respective policy may have on rural areas will be shown in the maps and scenario story.</i>	
Timing in the policy process	Ex-ante
<i>The territorial foresight method is not used to predict the future. Instead it offers a flexible tool for developing different possible futures and can be used for assessing what impacts a policy may be used on different territories. Therefore it is designed for ex-ante practice.</i>	
Suitability for rural proofing	Could be used without modifications
<i>The territorial foresight method has not been used so far for rural proofing. However, it could potentially be a good method for exploring the impacts different policies may have in the future, on rural areas. A focus on rural areas may be reflected in the mapping process of the method.</i>	

Source: Böhme, Lüer, & Holstein, 2020

The territorial foresight method can be a possible method for rural proofing exercises, although it has not been that specifically used before. An advantage of the method is that it can deal with the high complexity and uncertainty of the future and future trends by using lateral thinking and co-creation approaches. Territorial foresight is a credible method for exploring futures and dealing with this uncertainty for such a normative concept as the “future”. For rural proofing, it can be used to check what impacts a policy may have on rural areas in future. Furthermore, the territorial implications further add an interesting element of “how” the different futures look like “where”.

The added value of foresight can be summarised to better anticipation, i.e. to prepare better and sooner, better policy innovation, i.e. bringing new thinking in policy making and running a future-proofing, i.e. a stress test of existing or prosed strategies against different futures (OECD, 2019). To ensure a trustworthy analysis, specific elements need to be considered during the process, such as covering a variety of topics (e.g. by following the STEEP, Social, Technological, Economic, Environmental and Political approach and specific topics within), analysing possible cross-policy impacts and exploring possible biases, e.g. by asking specific questions or exploring the matters from different angles (European Parliament. EPRS. Panel for the Future of Science and Technology, 2021). This helps in designing better and more sound policies for all types of territories.

The method has so far been used in a number of projects from ESPON for the development of territorial scenarios, such as the ESPON Territorial Futures (ESPON, 2018), the ESPON Territorial Scenarios for the Baltic Sea Region (ESPON, 2019) and the ESPON Territorial Scenarios for the Danube and the Adriatic Ionian macro-regions (ESPON EGTC, 2020).

Other methods may include a stronger focus on qualitative approaches, such as modelling or trend extrapolation, horizon scanning methods, Delphi methods, impact analyses and others. A more detailed description of these methods can be found in the following indicative and non-exhaustive list of sources:

- European Commission. (2021). 2021 Strategic Foresight Report. The EU's capacity and freedom to act. Brussels: Secretariat General, European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/strategic-planning/strategic-foresight/2021-strategic-foresight-report_en#documents
- European Parliament. EPRS. Panel for the Future of Science and Technology. (2021). Guidelines for foresight-based policy analysis.
- European Commission. (2020). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council – 2020 Strategic Foresight Report. Charting the course towards a more resilient Europe. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0493&from=EN>
- OECD. (2019). Strategic Foresight for Better Policies. Building Effective Governance in the Face of Uncertain Futures.
- Rosling, H., Rosling, O. & Rönnlund, A. R. (2018). Factfulness: ten reasons we're wrong about the world – and why things are better than you think. First edition. New York: Flatiron Books.
- European Commission DG Environment. (2017). Methodological Framework for the systemic identification of emerging issues for the environment.
- UNDP. (2014). Foresight: the Manual. <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/capacity-building/global-centre-for-public-service-excellence/foresightmanual.html>
- Randers, J. (2012). 2052: a global forecast for the next forty years. White River Junction, Vt.: Chelsea Green Pub.
- Loveridge, D. (2009). Foresight: The Art and Science of Anticipating the Future. New York and London: Routledge.
- UNIDO. (2005). Technology Foresight Manual (Vol. 2).

3. The specificities of rural areas

The EU's rural areas are home to 137 million people representing almost 30% of its population and over 80% of its territory, considering all communes and municipalities of Europe with low population size or density. While they have always faced particular challenges, social and economic changes of the last decades, including globalisation and urbanisation, are changing the role and nature of rural areas (European Commission, 2021a). While potentially giving the impression of a “gloomy future” for rural areas, the following section will focus mainly on the challenges and topics relevant for such areas. These must not be understood though as a purely negative outlook, as oftentimes challenges are also linked to opportunities. E.g. remote regions might suffer from low accessibility or broadband infrastructure, however at the same time the remoteness secures natural capital which could not be maintained in other places. Rural proofing should not only try to address the negative aspects (i.e. also contribute to fostering development potentials and advantages of regions), nevertheless oftentimes the challenges as compared to other regions are oftentimes the crucial aspect in policy design (Shortall, Sherry 2019; ENRD 2017).

3.1 Trends and challenges in rural areas

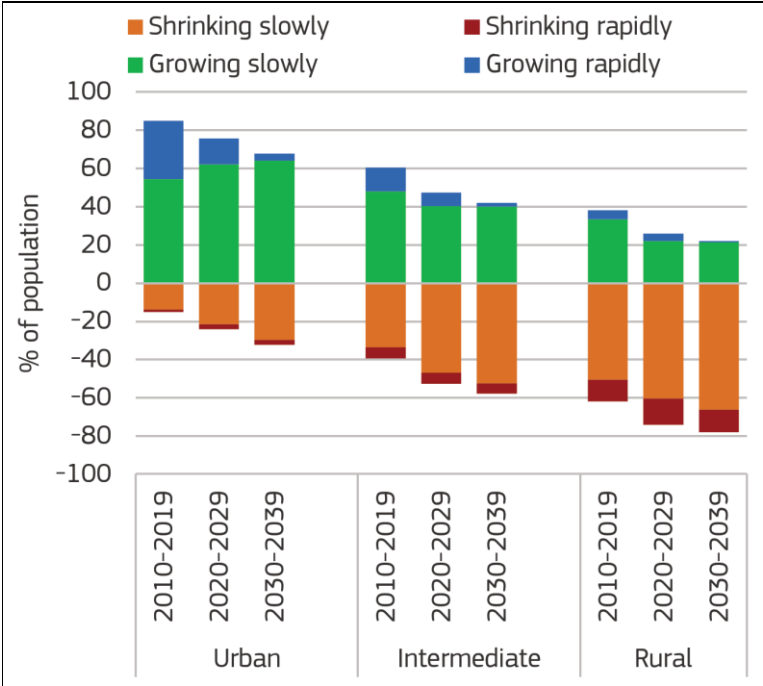
Challenging trends in rural areas can be identified in numerous thematic fields. Some of the main issues are population decline and ageing, erosion of rural infrastructure and service provision, including access to healthcare, social services and education as well as to postal and banking services. Rural areas are also affected by shrinking employment opportunities, reduction in income or limited transport services and lower digital connectivity (European Commission, 2021a).

Rural shrinkage and demographic change

The demographic change in rural areas is characterised by two trends: the overall loss of population (“shrinking”) and the increase of the share of older people and the decrease of younger people (“aging”).

In 2020, already 34% of the EU population lived in a shrinking region. Rapid reductions in population are more likely to occur in rural regions than in urban ones (11% as against 1%). Projections show that in the future, more regions will be shrinking. In 2040, already 51% of the EU population will live in shrinking regions. (European Commission, 2022)

Figure 1: Population by type of demographic change by urban-rural typology, 2010-2040

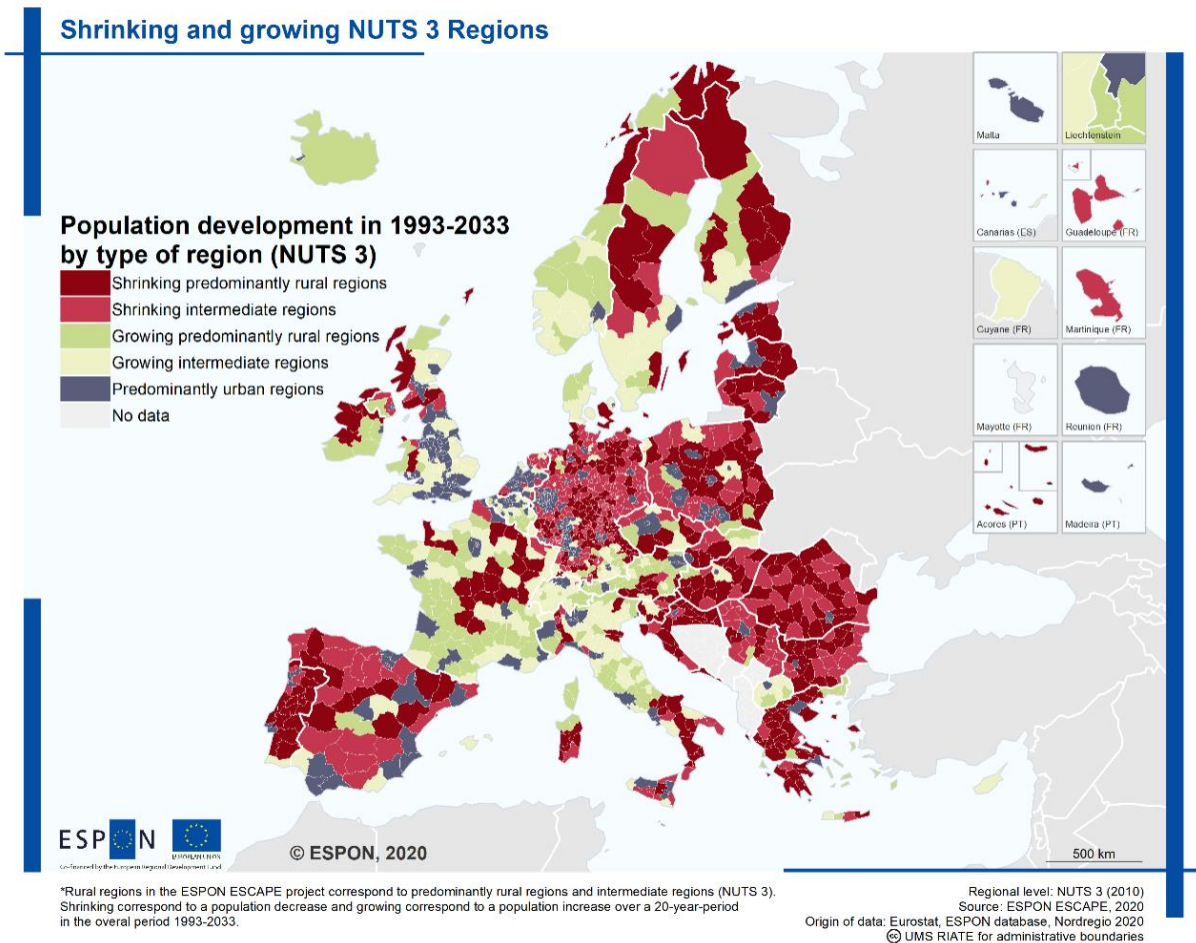


Source: European Commission (2022)

Across Europe almost 60% of Predominantly Rural or Intermediate NUTS 3 regions meet criteria of sustained (past or projected future) demographic decline. These regions cover almost 40% of the area of the EU and contain almost one third of its population. These regions are mostly in the East and South of Europe, with scattered regions in the North and West, in particular in Germany and Sweden (ESPON ESCAPE, 2020).

The EU’s population in general is ageing, however the population in rural areas is already older, on average, than the population in towns and suburbs and cities. Rural regions have, on average, seen a reduction in population in recent years mainly due to negative natural population change, not compensated by sufficient positive net migration. Certain eastern and southern Member States are even confronted with both challenges, as natural population change and net movement in their rural regions have been negative. Moreover, young women are more likely to leave rural regions than young men. These demographic trends, when coupled with a lack of connectivity, infrastructure and productivity challenges and low access to public services including education and care, can contribute to the lower attractiveness of rural areas as places to live and work in particular for younger people (European Commission, 2021a).

Figure 2: Shrinking and growing regions in the European Union



Source: ESPON ESCAPE

Especially rural regions will have to adjust to a growing population aged 65 and over, and a shrinking working age and younger population with severe consequences (European Commission, 2022):

- The shrinking of the working-age population (aged 20-64) weakens growth potential and skills development, while favouring the concentration of economic activities in fewer locations. This could lead to *labour market shortages*.
- The increase in the population aged 65 and over is likely to lead to an *increase in the demand for healthcare*, which will have to adapt their infrastructure and services to make them more accessible to people with limited mobility, and increase the capacity of healthcare services.
- Large reductions in the number of young people are likely to lead to a *reduction in the number of schools*, which may lead to longer distances to the closest school.

As a result of demographic change, there will be more older patients suffering from chronic diseases. Almost half of persons 65 years or older are perceived as

having a disability or long-standing activity limitation. In addition, the effects of climate change, natural disasters and environmental degradation and pollution tend to disproportionately increase pressure on older people's health. This will increase the need for healthcare and other care or support services.¹⁶

Economic parameters

While higher growth has enabled the gap to narrow since 2000, **gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in rural regions** was still considerably lower (at 75%) than the EU average in 2018. The economic catching-up did furthermore not reach remote rural regions (which remain at around 70% of EU GDP per capita).

The average **employment** rate in the EU's rural areas increased between 2012 and 2020 (from 67.5% to 73.1%, i.e. higher than in cities), while the average **unemployment** rate dropped (from 10.4% to 5.9%, i.e. lower than in cities). Young people have a higher unemployment rate compared to the general working age population, also in rural areas.

In terms of share of population that is at risk of **poverty** or social exclusion, the figures in 2019 are higher in rural areas (22.4%), compared to cities (21.3%) and towns and suburbs (19.2%), and in ten Member States the percentage of the population at-risk-of-poverty in rural areas has increased since 2012 (European Commission, 2021a).

There is a **gap between male and female employment** in rural areas of 13 percentage points (versus 10 percentage points in cities), rising to over 20 in certain Member States. This gap has remained fairly stable at EU level since 2012. In over half of the Member States, this gender employment gap is wider in rural areas than cities. Many women have precarious contracts (e.g. seasonal workers) or play an "invisible role" in rural societies (e.g. assisting spouses), which may leave them exposed to vulnerable situations (such as no access to social protection or maternity benefits) (European Commission, 2021a).

Education opportunities

The share of population with **higher education** in rural areas remains low despite an increase from 18% in 2012 to 22% in 2019. The difference between rural areas and cities also increased from 17 percentage points in 2012 to 19 in 2019. As regards **basic skills** (reading, mathematics and science), the performance gap between urban and rural areas is also wide in many countries, as indicated by the results of PISA 2018. In terms of at least basic **digital skills** the gap amounted to

¹⁶ Green paper on ageing (COM(2021) 50 final)

14 percentage points (48% for rural areas vs 62% for cities) in 2019 and is stable since 2015. At EU level the rate of early leavers from education and training is higher in rural areas and towns than in cities (European Commission, 2021a).

Access to high-quality education and training cannot be taken for granted, especially in thinly populated regions, where people may have to travel long distances to the relevant facilities. The combination of low birth rates and out-migration of young people can reduce the demand for schooling in rural and remote regions. This can lead to a vicious circle: the number of children can fall to such a low level that it is difficult to justify maintaining a school. This in turn makes it less attractive for families with children to move to or remain in such a region (European Commission, 2021b).¹⁷

Schools in some rural areas often struggle to provide quality education due to their geographical isolation and small size. They are faced with insufficient infrastructure and educational support services, a limited educational offer and a lack of experienced teachers. This can limit the uptake of e-services and the potential to study and work remotely, which influences the availability of **quality jobs** in rural areas (European Commission, 2021a).

Access to public services and infrastructure

A core need of modern life is access to **quality public services and infrastructure**. In particular, essential services and related infrastructure – such as water, sanitation, energy, transport, financial services and digital communications – are key to guaranteeing social and economic inclusion. They complement and facilitate access to other services that fulfil an enabling function, such as childcare, education, long-term care, housing, labour market and social services and they can also be an important source of job creation.

Longer distances, lower population density and larger catchment areas make both delivery and access to services in rural areas more difficult and oftentimes economically challenging for providers. Delivering **services of general interest** in rural areas with comparable quality to those in urban areas is key to maintaining equitable living standards for all citizens and across all territories, including in the most remote rural areas and in the outermost regions (European Commission, 2021a).

¹⁷ Green paper on ageing (COM(2021) 50 final)

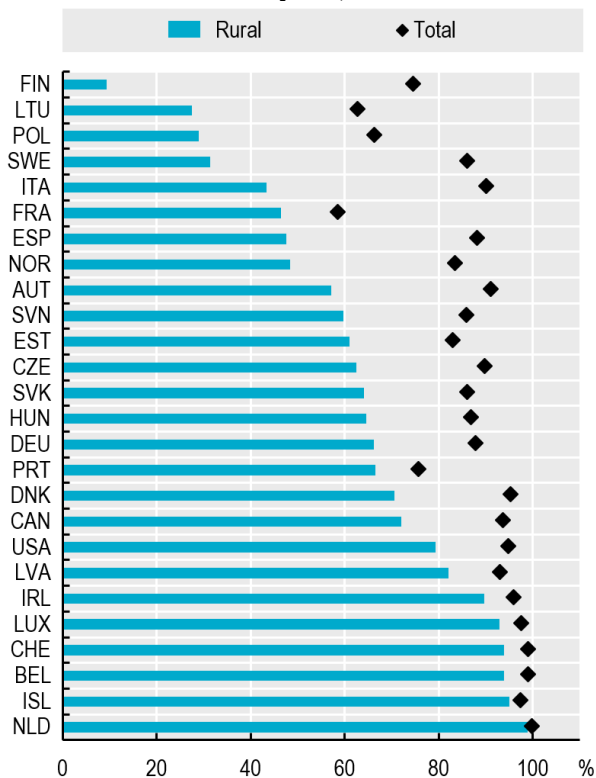
Availability of digital infrastructure

The digital transition is moving forward at different speeds across Europe. Basic broadband access is almost universal in the EU, but very-high-speed connections are only available to 2 out of 3 city residents and 1 out of 6 rural residents. A digital coverage gap exists between metropolitan areas and peripheral regions (European Commission, 2022).

Many peripheral regions are currently disadvantaged in their competitiveness due to a lack of or insufficiently powerful internet connection. This results in a lack of an important prerequisite for exploiting development potential and for securing or creating new jobs and thus reducing migration. In particular during the COVID-19 pandemic and the widespread remote-work coming with it this factor has become even more important (ÖROK 2021).

A closer look at the access to high-speed broadband reveals a clear urban-rural divide.

Figure 3: Percentage of households with access to Internet >30Mbit/s in 2019 or latest available year, at the rural and national levels



Source: OECD, 2020

Business models and approaches such as e-services, mobile service solutions, private-public partnerships, social enterprises, cultural and creative industries as well as cooperatives are generally a key factor for rural socio-economic development. They crucially depend on the level of digital skills and the availability and affordability of adequate **digital infrastructure**, and the capacities to effectively deploy digital technologies, such as digital service platforms. The key prerequisite for the digital transformation is internet connectivity. Despite recent improvements in high-speed broadband connectivity, only 59% of households in rural regions have access to next generation access (NGA) broadband (>30Mbps), compared to 87% of the households in the EU. (European Commission, 2021a)

The EU Rural Action Plan articulated flagship initiatives and projects. European funding from the EAFRD, the ERDF, the ESF + and the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), the RRF as well as national and private funding, should work together to invest in infrastructure, technology and people. These investments will contribute to reaching the goal of 100% fast broadband coverage in rural areas by 2025. A minimum of 20% from the Recovery and Resilience Facility should support the digital transition. The goal for 2030 set out by the European Commission is that all European households should be covered by a Gigabit network and all populated areas covered by 5G by 2030 (European Commission, 2021a).

Challenges related to climate change

Rural areas face specific challenges related to **climate change** and environmental degradation. Farming and forestry are more vulnerable than urban economic activities to more frequent adverse climate events such as storms, floods and droughts. These sectors are among the first to feel the consequences when biodiversity is lost posing a threat for the long-term economic perspectives of the rural communities that depend on them. Furthermore, tourism related to natural capital is an important income factor in many rural regions, thus threatened by such developments as well (European Commission, 2021a)

3.2 Impacts on policy planning and assessment tools

The above trends and challenges are not universal to all rural regions across Europe, but can be considered somewhat common for many of them. Ultimately those topics are more likely to be of importance or more likely to pose a challenge for a rural area than they are for an urban area. They are thus of particular relevance when designing policies for rural areas, and subsequently of particular relevance when assessing potential impacts of a policy in a rural proofing

exercise. As the broadness of approaches outlined in sections 1 and 2 (different methodological approach, different territorial level, range of topics that can be covered) and the broadness of topics addressed in section 3 suggests that no “one size fits all approach” is feasible here, the implications for policy planning and assessment need to be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Rural regions, while facing many challenges that other regions are not facing, should also not be looked upon as disadvantaged from the outset. Firstly, what is a challenge from one perspective can be an advantage from a different perspective, e.g. a peripheral location which hampers accessibility, but supports the conservation of natural or cultural heritage. Fostering the potentials while overcoming or reducing the challenges in this case is a delicate balancing act. Furthermore, some challenges are inherent to a region due to e.g. geographical characteristics, or its location and not a result of policy choices and design. Finally, the notion of rural regions being inherently disadvantaged and in need for support by non-rural regions in policy design, economic support etc. can steer the public perception in that direction and accelerate existing negative trends (e.g. out-migration) (Shortall, Sherry 2019; ENRD 2017).

Academic research against this background argues, that rural proofing is thus not simply the assessment of impacts on predefined rural areas, but is an assessment of policy impacts against rural needs. These needs cannot be defined on a general level, but will depend on the legislative, geographical and socio-economic background of regions affected by a specific policy. Ideally, this means an inclusive process with stakeholder participation, the scope of which naturally is dependent on the geographical level as well as the policy concerned. This will safeguard, that the particular issues of the affected regions are adequately taken into account, and a targeted assessment can be conducted. Involving responsible stakeholders from both the “rural sphere” as well as the “policy sphere” will contribute to a joint idea and a sense of “ownership”. Ultimately such a notion will contribute to the uptake of rural proofing results into policy design. In the long run it might even contribute to broader knowledge about rural issues in general, improving future policies from the outset (Expert interviews 2022; Shortall, Sherry 2019; ENRD 2017)

Success factors related to the characteristics of rural areas for any tool or methodology used for rural proofing in a specific case thus are:

- Appropriate choice of classification (if any) for rural areas depending on geographical level, policy assessed, thematic areas covered, data needs etc.
- Comprehensive needs assessment of the rural areas affected by the policy
- Consideration of general trends in similar regions as examples, but not generalising trends across all rural regions.

- “Positive approach” towards rural areas, aiming at fostering their potentials (incl. their potential contribution to a policy's success) and improving positive impacts without a notion of “looking down” on them
- Inclusion of stakeholders from the “policy sphere” as well as the “rural sphere” in the assessment process

3.3 Types of rural areas

Europe’s rural areas are very diverse. Variations in natural and climatic conditions, geographic features, historic and cultural developments, demographic and social changes, national and regional specificities and economic prosperity mean that no two rural areas are alike (European Commission, 2021a). Nevertheless, there are approaches to classifying rural areas, either to distinguish them from urban and peri-urban areas or to distinguish among the different types of rural areas. A lot of indicators can be considered in such a classification: population density, presence of infrastructural facilities, commuter traffic, proximity and accessibility of urban areas, or the importance of sectors such as the agricultural sector or the tourism sector. Below three examples of such classifications are shown – one general approach used by the European Commission for all regions, one specified approach developed in an ESPON project for rural regions only, and one national approach covering all regions of a country with a finer differentiation and numerous classes.

The **Urban-rural typology (European Commission)** covers all regions of the EU on a NUTS 3 level and is defined based on a three-step approach. The first step is to identify populations in rural areas: “rural areas” are all areas outside urban clusters. “Urban clusters” are clusters of contiguous grid cells of 1 km² with a density of at least 300 inhabitants per km² and a minimum population of 5,000.

In the second step, NUTS 3 regions are classified on the basis of the share of their population in rural areas:

- “Predominantly rural regions” if the share of the population living in rural areas is higher than 50%
- “Intermediate regions” if the share of the population living in rural areas is between 20% and 50%
- “Predominantly urban regions” if the share of the population living in rural areas is below 20%

In a third step, the size of the urban centres in the region is considered: A predominantly rural region which contains an urban centre of more than 200,000

inhabitants making up at least 25% of the regional population becomes intermediate. An intermediate region which contains an urban centre of more than 500,000 inhabitants making up at least 25% of the regional population becomes predominantly urban (European Commission 2020).

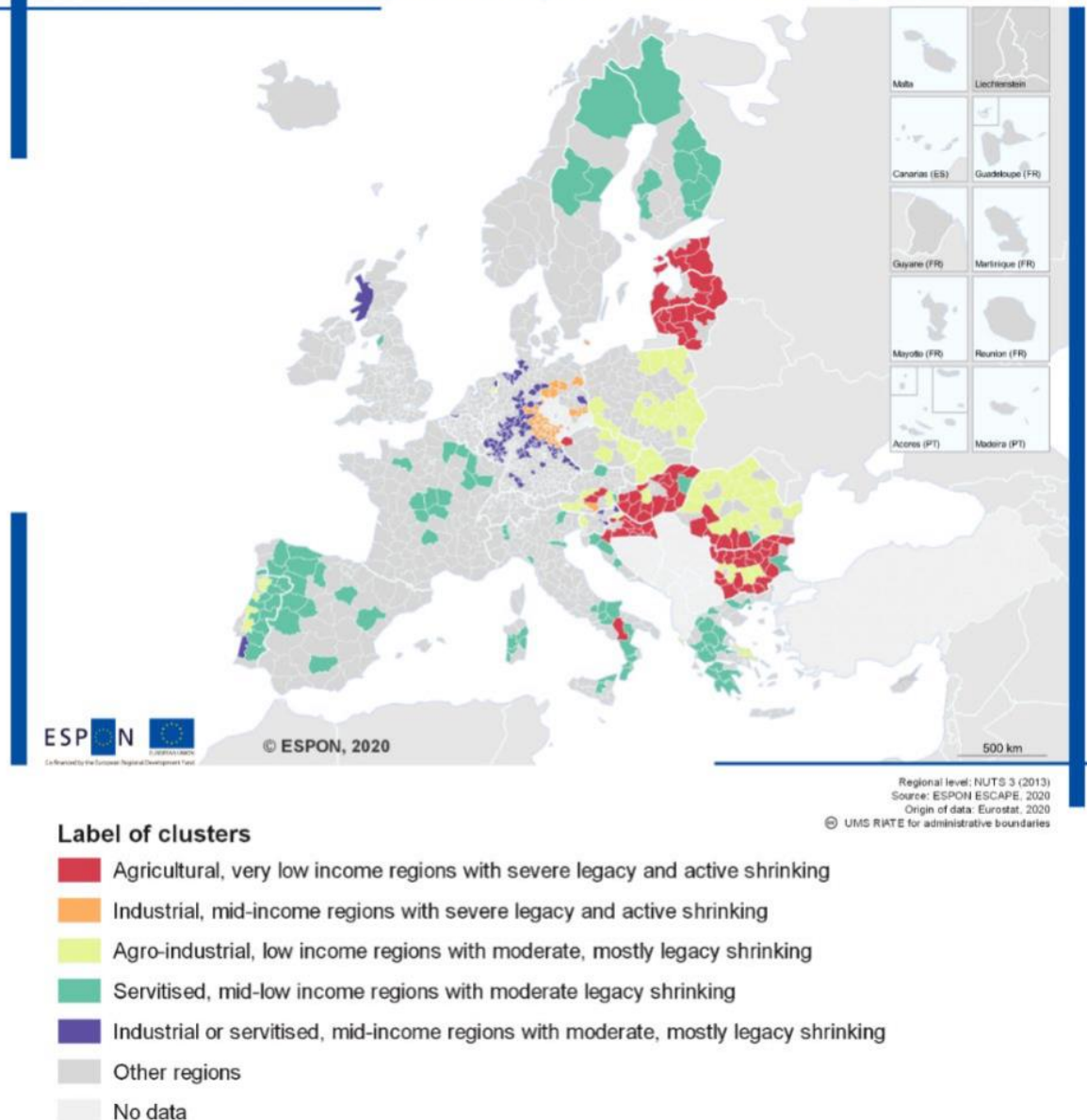
ESPON ESCAPE is an example of a typology differentiating only within rural regions. It distinguishes between rural populations which are currently being depleted by out-migration (active shrinking) and those which contract (often despite in-migration) due to their age structure and “natural decrease” (legacy shrinking). It also distinguishes between active shrinking driven by regional or national rural-urban processes, and those implicated in European-wide, or intercontinental (globalised) flows.

The typology of “complex shrinking” defined in the project consists of the five clusters:

1. **Agricultural, very low-income regions with severe legacy and active shrinking:** These regions are declining due to their disadvantage relative to national centres, which fuels outmigration, and they generally do not have a strong sector to rely on to reverse this trend.
2. **Industrial, mid-low-income regions with severe legacy and active shrinking:** This cluster is catching up through economic restructuring, which is reducing low-productivity jobs, but also damaging an already weak population structure. Thus, these regions are ranked worse than other, diverging but demographically healthier, ones.
3. **Agro-industrial, low-income regions with moderate, mostly legacy shrinking:** Being comparatively weak at national level, these regions are losing population through some outmigration besides natural decrease; however, they are more central, and with a relatively stronger economy than the first cluster.
4. **Servitised, mid-low-income regions with moderate legacy shrinking:** These regions have grown in the past despite a “difficult” territory and a weak secondary sector; although their economy is healthy enough to prevent massive outmigration, its state has been worsening, and the “distorted” population structures have resulted in “legacy shrinking”.
5. **Servitised, mid-income regions with moderate, mostly legacy shrinking:** These are regions with weaker-than-national-average, but still robust economies, which are shrinking due to distorted population structures and low fertility rates.

Figure 4: Typology of “complex shrinking” in rural and intermediate regions

Typology of complex shrinkage in shrinking rural and intermediate regions (5 classes)



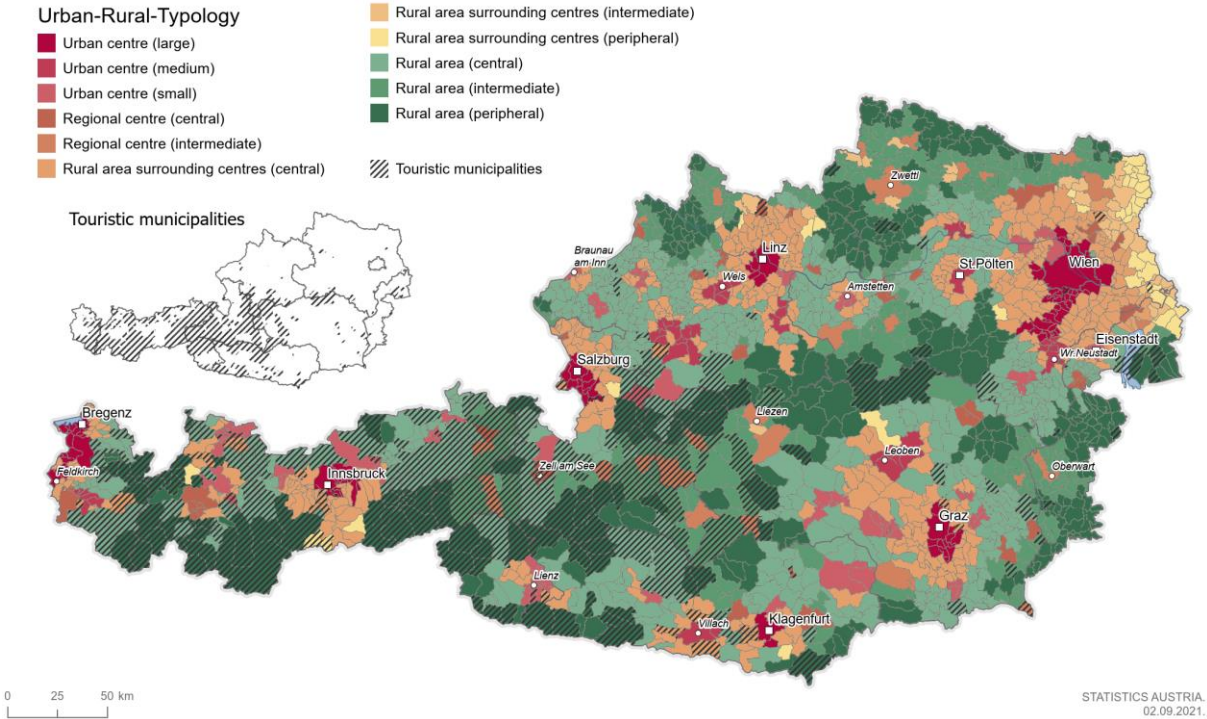
Source: ESPON ESCAPE

The map above shows their geographical distribution.

As a national example, a more differentiated approach **from Statistics Austria’s urban-rural typology** is presented here as well. It is based on the classification of the European Commission: highly densified areas are delineated based on 500m grid cells and urban and regional centres are defined on municipality level. For the definition of regional centres, the existence of infrastructure facilities is taken into consideration. In a next step, municipalities outside of centres are classified according to commuter interrelations and accessibility of centres. The results are 4 major classes: urban centres (urban regions), regional centres, rural area surrounding centres (urban regions outer zone), rural area. These classes are subdivided into a total number of 11 classes according to the accessibility of urban

and regional centres (central, intermediate, peripheral). Additionally, the importance of tourism is evaluated for each municipality (additional layer of information). (Statistics Austria, 2022)

Figure 5: Urban-Rural-Typology of Statistic Austria including Tourism



Source: Statistics Austria

As is evident, there is no “ultimate classification” for rural areas which is generally applicable across Member States and for all levels. While approaches on a supranational level usually have to operate on a more generalised level and a “rural region” defined on NUTS3 level still can include considerable urbanised or at least densely populated sub-regions, approaches on national or sub-national level can naturally differentiate on a higher spatial resolution. Furthermore, specific typologies can be needed for specific circumstances – e.g. for assessing impacts of some policies classifying based on population density can be the right approach, while for others further specific characteristics of a region (e.g. tourism sector predominance) have to be taken into account for adequate assessments.

4. Application and improvement of existing methodologies

A number of more or less sophisticated approaches and tools suitable for rural proofing (with little modifications) have been developed. The reviewed methodologies and practical application cases illustrated that, in practice, rural proofing exercises are oftentimes relatively simplistic. The analysis of rural specificities and corresponding implications for assessment instruments, however, revealed that the nature of rural needs is complex. Simple checklists and descriptive assessments conducted by small numbers of actors who not necessarily have the desired expertise to fully take stock of this complexity, will not suffice. Consequently, rural proofing exercises can be often perceived as “tick box” exercises by policymakers.

The analysis, however, also discovered a number of success factors for rural proofing based on stakeholder experience. Building on these success factors, the following cases shows how existing methodologies can be slightly modified and applied in a rural proofing exercise, taking into account the experience gathered from literature and expert interviews. The three cases are:

- ESPON TIA Quick Check;
- Territorial Foresight; and
- EATIA.

4.1 Rural proofing through Territorial Impact Assessment – TIA Quick Check

As outlined in section 2, TIA methodologies are, by nature, well-suited to capture potential impacts on specific types of regions. In many cases, this allows for addressing rural regions in particular and identifying specific effects compared to effects on other regions. Those differences in potential impacts can be used for assessing if a policy creates unbalanced or unwanted effects in rural areas, what the nature of this effects is, and if the policy has to be adapted to address them. The following case illustrates how the TIA Quick Check in its current form can contribute to rural proofing a specific policy. This is done by building on an application case of an actual territorial impact assessment on the topic of the EU climate targets for 2030 and the various policies contributing to achieving these targets¹⁸.

18 <https://cor.europa.eu/en/engage/studies/Documents/TIA%20ClimateTargets%20final.pdf>

4.1.1 Defining the frame of the assessment

First step in the assessment is to define the frame and scope.

- Which policies are actually taken into account?
- Which geographical level is the assessment taking place on?
- What is the knowledge need of the responsible institution?
- In which form will the exercise be conducted?

The **policies** taken into account should be linked to concrete actions. A broad high-level strategy without concrete measures linked to it will be more difficult to assess. In the example case, the assessment addressed the **EU 2030 climate targets** and the corresponding actions in EU policies.

The **geographical level** of the assessment depends on several factors. The extent of the assessment usually includes the area the policy is taking concrete actions in. In some cases, this scope is extended to the adjacent areas where territorial spill-over effects are expected. The resolution of the assessment depends on the level on which actions can be defined, on the data availability, on the need to single out specific types of regions etc. In the example case, the extent of the assessment is set at the **EU-27**, as the policies are put in place for the whole of the EU. The geographical depth is set at **NUTS 3** level, because the tool available for the quick-check by design allows for this level. It offers a balance between data availability (higher resolution usually means less comprehensive and comparable indicators) and concreteness of assessments. Furthermore, it crucially allows to differentiate between rural regions and other regions based on the urban/rural typology provided by DG REGIO.

The **knowledge need** defines how the assessment is approached, e.g.,

- which types of experts are invited to the expert workshop,
- which/if a thematic focus is put on the assessment,
- if several or only one scenario has to be addressed etc.

In the example case, the knowledge need is the **potential effects of the EU 2030 climate targets on rural areas**. The geographical focus put on those areas thus requires a targeted selection of experts. No thematic focus is set, therefore no restrictions or implications on expert selection are made in that regard. The policy in question includes only one scenario with specific targets set out, thus a single expert workshop addressing this one scenario is sufficient for the assessment.

The **form in which the exercise will be conducted** defines the implementation modalities, i.e. if it is done in an on-site workshop, in hybrid or online format. Different tools are required for preparing an online workshop than an on-site workshop. In the example case, the workshop is done **online via videoconference, making use of digital tools only**.

Based on those initial definitions, the facilitators of the assessment can start with technical and content preparation. This involves screening of the policy in question on potential effects based on expert experience, and, subsequently, screening sources for statistical indicators capable of capturing those effects. While EU-wide sources such as Eurostat or ESPON Database are already included for the most part in the TIA Quick Check tool, a particular policy or assessment will usually require specific datasets, e.g., from scientific studies.

For the example case, several additional indicators were researched and developed linked to the topic of climate targets. Those are prepared for upload into the tool, and prepared for the expert workshop making available the definition and further metadata.

Table 1: Additional indicators added to the TIA Quick Check

Thematic field	Indicator	Description	NUTS level	Year	Source
Land use and conversion	Artificial areas	Share of artificial areas (e.g. urban fabrics, industrial and commercial units) on total regional area	3	2018	Corine Land Cover, OIR calculation
Accessibility	Composite indicator: Accessibility by air and road	This composite indicator consists of summing the normalised indicators “accessibility by air” (weighted with the factor 2/3) and “accessibility by road” (weighted with the factor 1/3).	3	2014	S&W Spiekermann & Wegener, Urban and Regional Research, OIR calculation
Employment	Employment in energy intensive sectors	Share of employment in energy intensive sectors (e.g. manufacture of coke and refined petroleum products, chemicals and chemical products, basic metals)	2	Ref. 2018	Eurostat, OIR calculation

Source: ÖIR 2021

The need for comprehensive statistical data can be challenging when researching such indicators. In some cases, proxy indicators or application of gap mitigation techniques are required to produce a complete dataset at NUTS 3 level.

Potential effects and respective indicators are identified for the fields of “Economy”, “Society”, “Environment” and “Governance”.

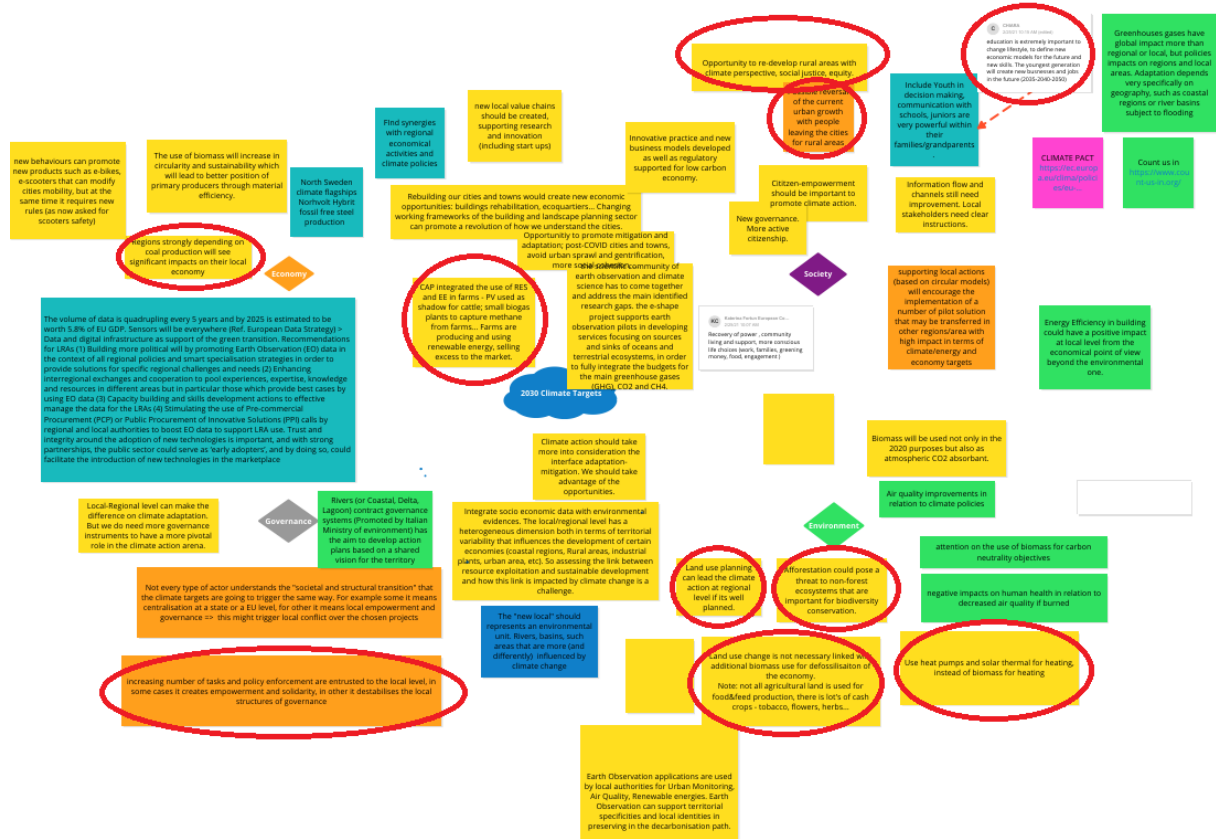
In parallel with the technical and conceptual preparation, the experts of the participatory workshop can be selected and invited. Selection of the participants should be guided by the initial frame definitions. In general, a balanced group representing various perspectives, from diverse backgrounds regarding gender, geographical backgrounds, or thematic expertise are preferred. In some cases, it can be necessary to tilt the selection a particular way, e.g., in case impacts to be assessed concern mainly rural regions in the context of a rural proofing exercise. Generally, participants should fall into at least four different groups:

- Participants with in-depth knowledge of the policy assessed, e.g., someone involved in drafting of the policy who can provide relevant input during the workshop.
- Stakeholders whose interests will be affected by the policy, e.g. representatives of EU level institutions, Member States, regions, cities, specific types of regions (islands, rural regions).
- Experts representing fields relevant to the topic of the policy proposal to be analysed.
- In case of a dedicated rural proofing exercise: Experts on rural issues and challenges which do not necessarily fall into one of the groups above.

4.1.2 Systemic picture of effects

The systemic picture is the core element of the impact assessment, translating the content of the policy into cause-effect relations. It is drawn up in a workshop in a moderated discussion setting. Participants are asked to outline potential effects of the policy on the fields of economy, environment, society, and governance. All effects are discussed in the group and can be amended by the experts if necessary. An example of such a systemic picture can be seen below. In an online workshop, it is drawn up making use of an online whiteboard software, in an in-person workshop it can be drawn on a flipchart or regular whiteboard.

Figure 6: Systemic picture TIA Quick Check



Source: Consortium based on CoR workshop on climate targets

Marked in red are aspects which are identified to be particularly relevant for rural areas. In the example case these refer to:

- Pull-factors of cities increasing out-migration for rural areas
- Mobility and energy costs
- Financing and support for energy efficiency in buildings and decentralised renewable energy production
- Governance burden implementing climate actions put on local administration potentially lacking expertise
- Land use changes
- Agricultural issues linked to biomass production and other renewable energy
- Afforestation

It needs to be determined, if the effects are following a similar trajectory in rural regions, or if the impact direction is different. For example, while mobility costs due to rising energy prices might be more important for rural areas, they will in general follow an upward trend for all regions. On the other hand, looking at migration effects, the different relevance of mobility costs per type of region can

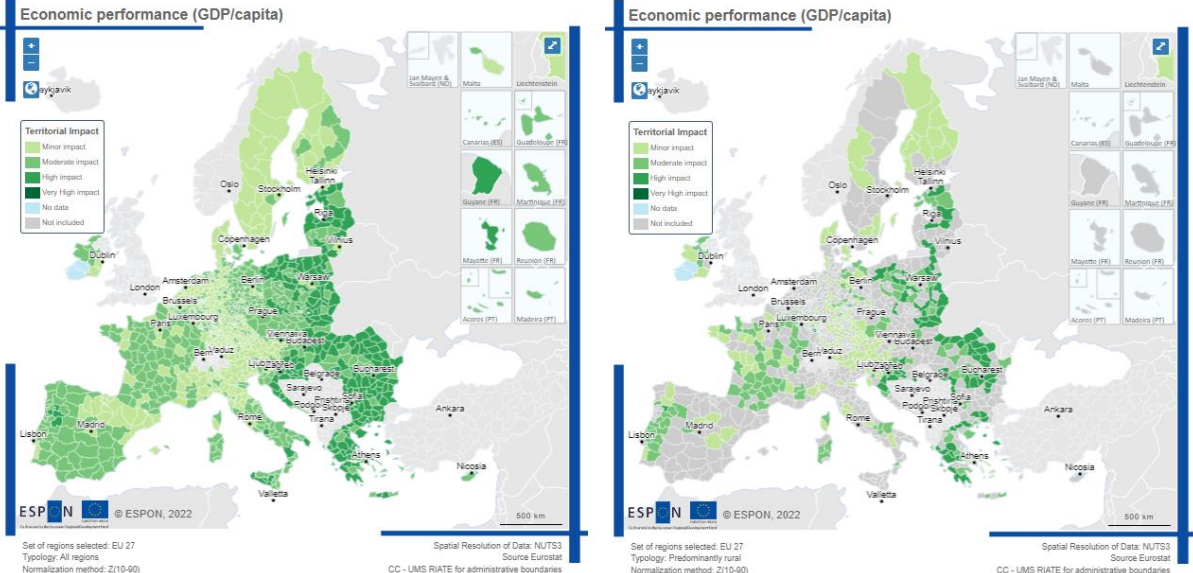
create a negative trend in some regions (commonly rural areas), while creating a positive impact trend in other regions (commonly urban areas).

For each effect, where this is possible, an indicator from the TIA Tool is selected by the participants which is deemed suitable to depict the respective effect. Participants vote on the expected direction and strength of effects due to the policy implemented (if necessary, differentiating between types of regions). The indicators are used to create maps of potential impacts which steer the subsequent policy discussion.

4.1.3 Assessment of potential impacts

The impact maps created in their current form allow for an assessment of all regions in parallel, or selecting a specific typology (e.g., rural regions) and visualising impacts only on them.

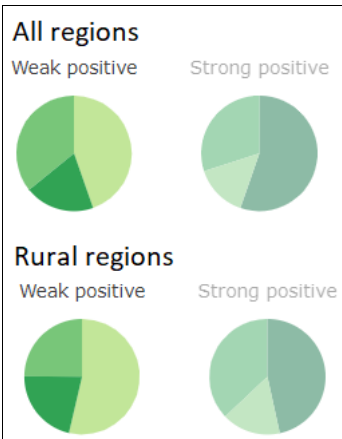
Figure 7: Impact on all regions (left) vs. rural regions (right)



Source: Consortium 2022

Based on the patterns emerging from the maps, participants are encouraged to discuss the policy implications. Regions which are particularly affected along their type of territory, their geographic location or their Member State are identified. Furthermore, for the defined typologies (e.g. urban-rural typology), a comparison of overall impacts can be visualised (i.e., how many regions would see a strong positive impacts for a given indicator, how many regions would see only minor positive impacts, etc.). Based on these patterns and visualisations, participating experts can determine if particular effects are problematic for rural areas and potentially detrimental to their development. Particular focus is put on those effects which were already identified as having particular relevance for rural areas in the systemic picture exercise.

Figure 8: Impact classes for all regions (top) vs. rural regions (bottom)



Source: Consortium 2022

The example above indicates that rural regions experience in general more minor impacts than other types of regions. However, they are not experiencing detrimental effects or lagging considerably behind their counterparts. This information likely will lead to the assessment that no particular actions are required for policy design.

Depending on the effects identified, the experts can draft suggestions to adapt the policy, e.g., including additional provisions, shifting the focus of proposed measures etc. The results of such a workshop can be taken up in the policy design. It is important to stress however, that such an assessment consists of external expert input– it is not to be considered a political exercise. As any other impact assessment, it should only lay down the potential impacts and related evidence alongside of recommendations on how to take those impacts into account.

4.1.4 Suitability and improvements

The particular advantage of this approach is its combination of qualitative and quantitative aspects. The assessments are not solely based on expert judgement, but embedded in a methodology including impact calculations leading to concrete maps. Due to the participatory element of the expert workshop and the systemic picture exercise framing the quantitative calculations, it is, however, flexible enough to accommodate all types of policies and policy topics. Furthermore, the methodological approach can be transferred to lower geographical levels, as long as quantitative data on regional level is available and a sufficient number of regions are included in the assessment.

While the tool is developed for TIA, it can be easily used to contribute to rural proofing exercises. The nature of the process, in particular quick assessments and quick feedback to the policy drafting, allows it to be used early in policy development. It is suited to work with multiple scenarios, which is another characteristic of early policy stages. Finally, it already incorporates the possibility to use typologies of various nature, including the option to define typologies individually. Against the background of ongoing discussions on how to demarcate rural areas, this allows for flexibility in the assessment.

Potential improvements to the methodology and tool to make it more versatile for rural proofing could be easily implemented. The suggestions based on the above assessments are:

- Include a functionality to highlight rural regions (or any type of regions) in the produced maps. This would allow an assessment for all regions in parallel, focusing on the rural regions but not limiting the assessment to rural regions only.
- Include a functionality to visualise impacts side-by-side in the tool. Specifically the following would simplify the visualisation of impacts on rural areas: allowing side-by-side visualisation of the maps, allowing for the visualisation of two scenarios at the same time, and including an option to put graphs on impact values side-by-side. This would be particularly relevant where different impact directions are identified on a particular indicator
- Amend the guidance on the TIA tool in order to outline the steps necessary for rural proofing exercises
- In particular for assessments on a lower geographical level, improving the flexibility of databases and shapefiles in the tool to handle data from different nomenclatures. An example is LAU¹⁹ regions with the functionality to group regions into one overarching entity would allow for maximum flexibility and application of the tool on national and regional level without constraints.

¹⁹ local administrative units (LAUs) are used to divide up the territory of the EU for the purpose of providing statistics at a local level. (EUROSTAT 2018)

4.2 Rural proofing with a territorial foresight touch – the hypothetical case of the REPowerEU plan

Policy making is about shaping the future – rural proofing is about ensuring the future of rural areas. The future, however, is not in the numbers and data available. A territorial foresight approach helps to incorporate the uncertainty and various future perspectives and arrive at more future-wise rural proofing. This will help to make sound policies for desirable futures for all places and people, incl. rural areas. Looking at a hypothetical territorial foresight based rural proofing of the REPowerEU plan illustrates how important future thinking is.

REPowerEU is a Joint European Action for more affordable, secure and sustainable energy and less dependence on foreign gas and fossil fuels, earlier than 2030. The main objective lies in two key elements:

- **Diversifying gas supplies**, via higher LNG imports and pipeline imports from non-Russian suppliers, and higher levels of biomethane and hydrogen.
- **Reducing faster our dependence on fossil fuels** at the level of homes, buildings and the industry, and at the level of the power system by boosting energy efficiency gains, increasing the share of renewable and addressing infrastructure bottlenecks.

4.2.1 Defining the foresight question

The clear definition of the foresight question is the key starting point of the territorial foresight method. The foresight question, or “What if” question needs to be comprised of a number of elements so that is future oriented and specific enough. To start with, the question should entail the future or forward-looking element, e.g., in the sense of future outlook or future pathways. That should be followed by the territorial element, i.e., which territory is concerned. In the case of rural proofing, the relevant territories are the rural regions. The next element in the question is the policy that needs to be examined. For the purpose of this case study, the policy in focus is the REPowerEU policy. Last but not least, it is important to add a time element, indicating the time horizon of the future outlook of the rural regions with the implementation of that policy.

The text box below gives an example of such a foresight question for rural proofing.

Foresight question

What future outlooks would rural regions have, if that REPowerEU is put into place, by 2030?

4.2.2 Collecting relevant trends, wild cards & challenges

Based on desktop research relevant development trends, wild cards and challenges will be identified to understand the evolution of the future context in which REPowerEU will be implemented. This means, the desk research – at this stage – does not concern the expected impacts of the policy, but developments that are contextual to the policy. A particular focus in the example case is put on rural areas.

This needs to concern all five STEEP categories, i.e., Societal, Technological, Economic, Ecological and Political. The table below presents a possible example of how such an assessment could look like.

Table 2: Selection of relevant trends, wild cards and challenges (hypothetical examples)

	Trends	Wild cards	Challenges
Societal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Ageing population – Population shrinkage in rural areas – Changes in energy consumption 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Collapse of digitalisation and robotisation – Water scarcity in Europe – Wave of climate refugees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Provision of services of general interest in rural and sparsely populated areas – Funding of pension and healthcare systems
Technological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Increased e-mobility – Higher energy self-sufficiency of buildings – Increased renewable energy – Increased nuclear energy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Cold fusion – Free energy access 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Storage of renewable energy – Prosumer-energy network infrastructure – Global fragmentation of the Worldwide Web
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Circular economy – Energy price increases 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Breakdown of global value chains – Shortage of raw-materials for constructing new energy networks and powerplants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Rural regions lagging behind
Environmental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Climate change effects and more natural disasters – Urban farming – No-Net-Land-Take policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Solar storm disrupting energy networks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Public objection to new wind farms
Political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Increasing energy independency of EU member states 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Russia joining the EU – The end of OPEC 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Lack of political commitment to change

4.2.3 Identifying possible future pathways in a participatory process

The next important step is to run the participatory approach. The participatory approach starts with a first stakeholder mapping, i.e., with identifying relevant players to take part. Examples of possible players, who are relevant in the case of REPowerEU assessed at European or transnational level, are provided in the following indicative list:

- Local authorities' representatives from rural areas;
- Local authorities' representatives from neighbouring urban areas;
- Representatives from the LEADER programme;
- European Commission relevant DG officials;
- Representatives from the Rural Development programmes;
- Representatives from the National Rural Networks;
- Representatives of Local Action Groups;
- Energy producer companies;
- Ministry of Energy representatives;
- Energy associations;
- Non-governmental organisations;
- Energy transmission and distribution companies.

Examples of possible players, who are relevant in the case of REPowerEU assessed at local or regional level, are provided in the following indicative list:

- Local authorities' representatives from rural areas;
- Local authorities' representatives from neighbouring urban and rural areas;
- Representatives of Local Action Groups;
- Civil society organisations;
- Local energy providers/initiatives;
- Relevant national representatives;
- Local/regional academia;
- LEADER beneficiaries;
- Local/regional business associations.

Based in the desktop analysis the participatory process will develop a series of possible development pathways. For each of these possible implications of the REPowerEU proposal on rural areas will be discussed with the stakeholders. Discussion formats depend on the number and types of participants and can be e.g., a workshop setting with a full group moderated discussion, thematic working groups etc. The pathways will be developed by selecting relevant trends and drivers and connecting them into different systemic pictures showing how they

affect each other. Once this is done implications for different types of rural areas will be discussed, e.g., for rural areas with high potential to produce renewable energy, rural areas with high energy dependency for their local economies, peripheral rural areas with high need of long-distance transport, shrinking rural areas with difficulties to invest in transition processes etc.

Table 3: Possible relevant future pathways and their implications on rural areas (hypothetical examples)

	Rural areas with high potential to produce renewable energy	Rural areas with high energy dependency for their local economies	Peripheral rural areas with high need of long-distance transport
Fast-forward transition to a carbon-neutral society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fast increase of renewable energy production in rural areas ↑ - Risk of competition of land for food and energy production ↓↓ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Start of green transition process of rural enterprises ↑↑ - Increasing energy costs especially in the transition period reducing competitiveness of rural business ↓↓ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increasing transport costs especially in the transition period ↓↓ - Increasing infrastructure and use of sustainable transport means ↑↑
Temporary energy shortage and energy poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increase in renewable energy production and distribution in and from rural areas ↑↑ - Risk of competition of land for food and energy production ↓↓ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Risk of bankruptcies of energy intensive business in rural areas ↓↓ - Increasing energy poverty especially in less well-off rural areas ↓↓ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Isolation of rural areas due to reduced connectivity. ↓↓ - Speeding up digital transition to bridge the physical connectivity gap. ↑↑
Return of the nuclear age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Loss of economic potential of rural areas as renewable energy exporters ↓↓ - Small scale renewable energies production in rural areas, making them more energy sufficient ↑↑ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No major disruption for energy intensive rural industries ↑↑ - Industrial decline & aging in rural areas no push for transitions ↓↓ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nuclear energy does not fully solve the issue of long-distance transport ↓↓ - Speeding up digital transition to bridge the physical connectivity gap. ↑↑

The above pathways can be use as first steppingstones towards possible future scenarios and policy impact discussions.

4.2.4 Analysis and post-processing of possible pathways

In the analysis phase, the trend analysis and the inputs coming from the participatory approach are put together and cross-checked with the key objectives of the policy in focus. This post-processing results in possible final future pathways.

The synthesis of the future-wise rural proofing could be presented in a form of a table (see below). For each priority area of a policy possible negative and positive implications for different types of rural areas and different possible future developments could be summarised.

Table 4: Future-wise rural proofing – Summary table

		Diversifying gas supplies, via higher LNG imports and pipeline imports from non-Russian suppliers, and higher levels of biomethane and hydrogen.	Depending on the future development scenario this object might play out differently for different types rural areas.
Rural areas type xyz	Positive impacts	– ..	– ...
	Negative impacts	– ..	– ...
Rural areas type xyz	Positive impacts	– ..	– ...
	Negative impacts	– ..	– ...
Rural areas type xyz	Positive impacts	– ..	– ...
	Negative impacts	– ..	– ...

The method of territorial foresight helps to see the wider picture of different possible future pathways and their implications for the policy discussed (e.g. REPowerEU in this case).

An advantage of the method is that it can deal with high complexity and uncertainty, by exploring different possibilities. This helps in avoiding big surprises in the future and rather think and consider them from the very beginning to be not only rural, but also future proof. The territorial foresight approach to rural proofing can help to overcome the bias of the present (right now/right here). By considering different possible future developments it helps to see how a policy may affect rural areas in different possible futures. Sticking to the example of REPowerEU, a discussion based on a non-foresight oriented rural proofing would have looked differently in January 2022 than it does today.

On the other hand, the approach is a time-consuming approach, requiring efforts and resources to collect trends and inputs, run the participatory approaches and then thoroughly post-processing all material. It also requires participants to think out of the box. Future thinking is particularly relevant and necessary for sound

policies. Policy makers often need to take decisions with mid- to long-term implications, without having sufficient evidence. Territorial foresight is a method that engages policy makers in a more focused thinking about the future and an improved understanding about the present, by providing different possible pathways for the future to avoid future dystopias. This way, policy makers have the tools to develop future-oriented and relevant policies, asking what-ifs rather than later confronting ‘what now-s’, to build better for the next generations to come.

4.3 Rural proofing through Territorial Impact Assessment – ESPON EATIA

The following case illustrates how the ESPON EATIA methodology can contribute to rural proofing a specific policy. It builds on an exercise done in the context of the original ESPON EATIA project²⁰, however it should be noted that the original exercise was not conducted as dedicated “rural proofing” and any matrices or visualisations are only used for illustrative purposes. The methodological approach has also been modified to account for the different requirements of a local/regional case as compared to the original national approach of the EATIA project. The case itself as presented here is hypothetical and developed by the project team. The EATIA methodology is very flexible regarding territorial levels to be applied as well as for the determination and visualisation of impacts. The case presents a hypothetical exercise on the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) conducted with regional authorities in Portugal and applying purely qualitative approaches²¹.

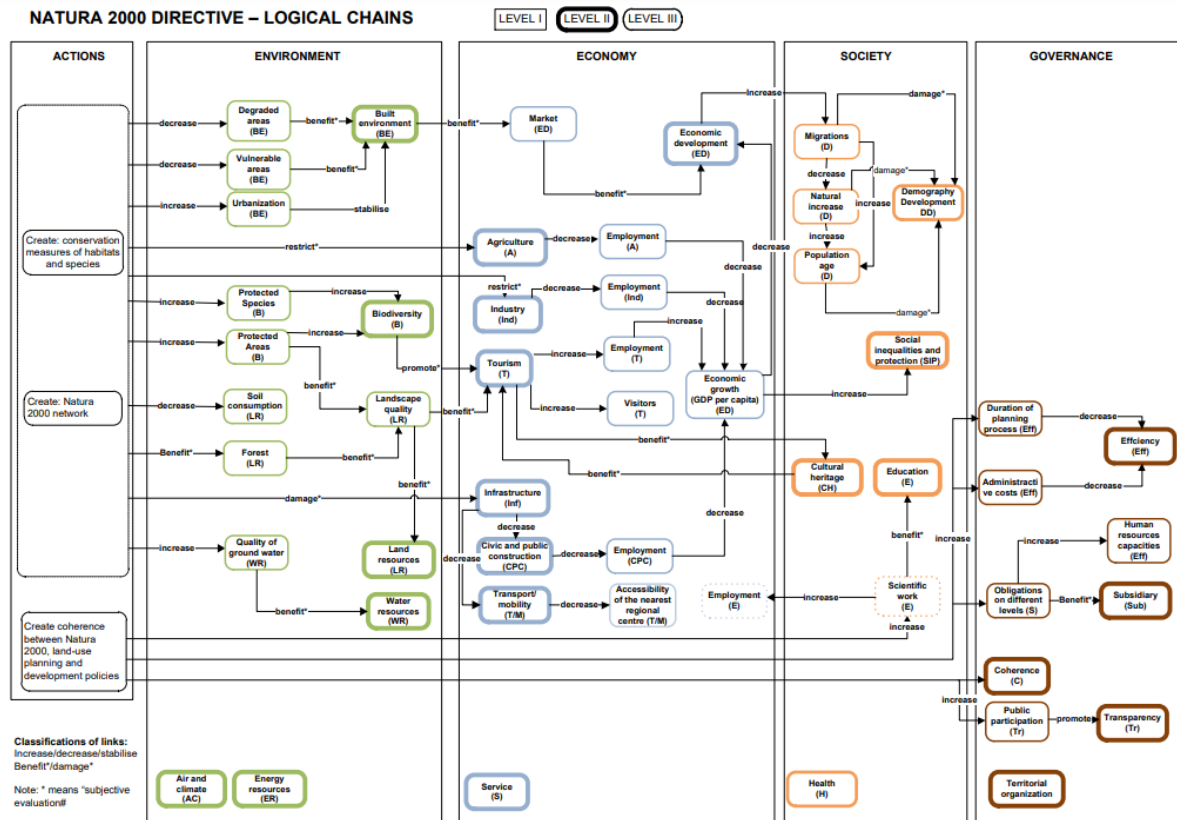
4.3.1 Screening

In the screening stage it is usually determined whether a TIA/rural proofing exercise is necessary. The methodology offers a structured approach to determine if and where (in which fields) impacts are likely based on a logic chain linked to the policy actions. Thus, even if it is decided that a rural proofing exercise should be done in any case, the screening stage allows to get a first overview of the potential impacts. It is usually done at the authority level and does not involve local or regional experts in order not to overburden them. An example of such a logic chain is presented below:

20 <https://www.espon.eu/sites/default/files/attachments/EATIAFinalGuidance.pdf>

21 <https://www.espon.eu/sites/default/files/attachments/FinalReportEATIA28June2012Afinal.pdf>

Figure 9: EATIA logic chains



Source: ESPON 2012

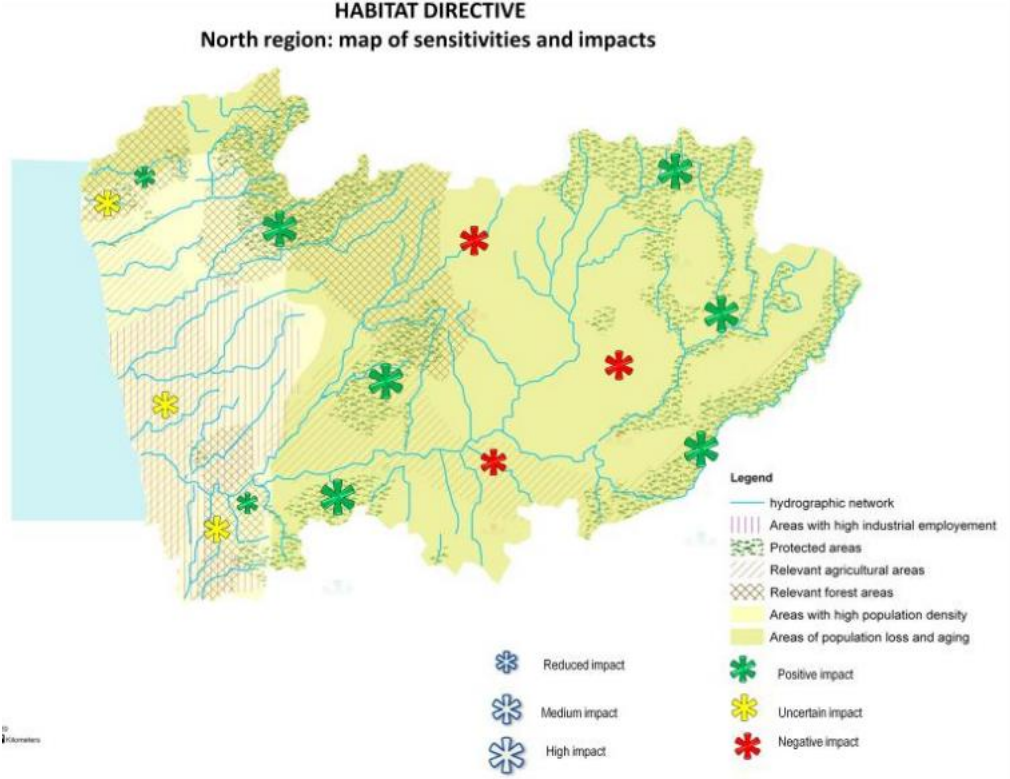
The identified logic chain in relevant impact fields should be further refined in the later stages. The impact fields are grouped along the known assessment categories environment and territory, economy, society and territorial governance. For each of those categories it is assessed, if impacts based on the impact fields are likely to materialise, if they are negative or positive and if they are direct or indirect. Based on this assessment, the relevant authority determines the necessity of a rural proofing exercise (i.e., if multiple direct effects are likely, conducting a full assessment is advised). In the example case it was determined, that impacts were indeed likely, with the most affected category being environment and territory. It is thus decided to proceed with the assessment.

4.3.2 Scoping

In the scoping phase the potential impacts are further detailed and, crucially, are linked with types of territories where they are likely to materialise. This step can be conducted either by the respective authority in charge or can be conducted with stakeholder participation. In case of a regional exercise, it is suggested to tap onto the regional knowledge regarding sensitivity of regions and locations of potential impacts. This can entail inviting regional experts in a workshop setting. Based on a moderated group discussion, the scoping matrix can be filled and a map of potential impact locations can be drawn together with the participants. In a

qualitative assessment process, a map localising relevant regional traits (e.g., extent of protective areas, type of land use etc.) can be used as a basis for participants to regionalise their assessments. An example is presented below visualising areas of particular concern (i.e., high negative impacts) and areas of moderate or low concern (i.e., reduced impact). Such a map is prepared with the respective regional traits visualised from the outset, and participants asked to mark locations/areas and strength of impacts in the workshop setting.

Figure 10: Regionalised impacts
HABITAT DIRECTIVE
North region: map of sensitivities and impacts



Source: ESPON 2012

As can be seen in the example, this approach treats the concept of “rural areas” very flexibly. It does not depend on administrative boundaries and defined “rural areas”, but it visualises specific traits, e.g., population density on a grid basis, predominance of agricultural areas etc., against which the assessments can be made. This is particularly relevant in case of low geographic levels of assessment where no administrative typologies are defined.

Such impact visualisations are drawn up for all effects where this is possible, accompanied by a scoping matrix detailing and describing those effects and rationale behind judgements on impacted locations.

4.3.3 Assessment and evaluation

Based on the results of the scoping workshop, the scoping matrix, and the developed maps, the next step consists in the detailed description and grading of potential impacts per assessment criterion and policy element. This step is ideally undertaken in a moderated expert workshop setting, bringing together an interdisciplinary group. For each assessment criterion identified, the “Impact Assessment Matrix” is filled per policy element. The policy elements can be flexibly defined in the process, allowing for an easier assessment in case of larger policies with multiple impact mechanisms. The impact assessment matrix contains information about the orientation and magnitude of impacts (on a – 2 to + 2 scale), temporal relevance (short/medium/long term) and a justification of impacts. For a rural proofing exercise, the focus should be put in particular on rural areas, either by committing the full assessment to rural impacts, or by adding a field outlining rural impacts. The example below shows an impact matrix by assessment criterion and policy element as an overview.

Figure 11: Impact assessment matrix

POLICY ELEMENT	A	B	C
Assessment criteria			
Land resources	+1	+1	0
Biodiversity	+2	+2	0
Built environment	+1	+2	0
Agriculture	0	0	0
Industry	-2	-2	0
Civic and public building	-1	-1	0
Tourism	+1	+1	0
Demography	-1	-1	0
Social inequalities and protect.	-1	-1	0
Coherence	0	0	+2
Subsidiary	0	0	+2

Source: ESPON 2012

Based on this matrix, the judgements and justifications, it can be determined if rural areas in general are particularly affected. Furthermore, the visualisation maps from the scoping exercise allow to identify those rural areas, where impacts are particularly likely to materialise. All material developed is then used to draft recommendations from the expert group. In the example case, regional authorities are conducting an assessment of a policy outside of their direct sphere of influence. As such the result of an assessment can be twofold:

- A report outlining to the relevant bodies the observations and recommendations, e.g., modifications to the policy, specific provisions to be included etc. Through institutions on the EU level or the national level,

those recommendations can be communicated to the responsible bodies for implementation. Furthermore, they can be used in the public consultation phase of the policy design for issuing statements on behalf of a region.

- Recommendations for local and regional authorities to act within the given frame of the policy to mitigate negative effects or foster positive effects.

4.3.4 Suitability and improvements

The EATIA method is very flexible to adapt to a number of circumstances, thus does not require formal modifications (e.g., as for the TIA Quick Check webtool). The approach described in this case study is already modified for a purely regional assessment and includes a particular focus on rural regions.

The materials developed in the context of the EATIA project can be readily used and modified for use in a rural proofing exercise, as it is the focus of the outcome and final reports rather than the assessment steps and materials that define such an exercise.

Main advantages for applying EATIA are the flexibility regarding geographical levels and non-dependence on administrative regions. Based on expert knowledge and regional data (e.g., grid data on land use and population density), in principle any geographic level can be the extent of the assessment. Furthermore, the method is not dependent on significant volumes of regional data, therefore, can overcome respective gaps.

On the other hand, the process relies significant expert involvement and several regional workshops, thus, can be quite resource intensive. This can be challenging for assessments at an early policy stage, where quick inputs on potential impacts are needed in order to shape the policy.

5. Guidance for better rural proofing

Rural proofing can take many different forms as has been shown in the study. There are numerous approaches implemented by the national level which are specifically labelled “rural proofing”. However, there are also a lot of activities ongoing which are contributing to better policies for rural regions which are not explicitly put into this category. Several explicit methodologies have been developed, which take the form of toolboxes, checklists or more sophisticated assessment tools. While checklists in general seem to be the most frequent approach to rural proofing methodologies, they are sometimes dismissed as “checkbox exercises” reducing an important aspect of policymaking to a merely administrative task.

The range of interviews conducted revealed that, while the question of methodology used is important, rural proofing in general is much more than application of a pre-specified methodology. Rural proofing has to be embedded in the policy process and it has to be recognised as an important task by policymakers and not as a burdensome exercise. It requires both awareness and knowledge about rural issues, and it requires active engagement by bodies developing a certain policy. At the same time, it requires scrutiny and verification of its application, as cases have revealed that otherwise there is the risk of it “getting lost” over time.

The following sections address the main success factors and challenges for implementing rural proofing in policy development, provide guidance on selecting methodologies for rural proofing exercises and finally give recommendations for the different governance levels on how to implement rural proofing. All assessments and recommendations were synthesised by the project team from desk research, the developed cases and particularly from the interviews. The interviewed experts represented various governmental bodies with experience in implementing rural proofing approaches in their respective countries. They highlighted good experiences and challenges alike, and provided important input to the report. As almost all of the interviewees asked not to be cited in the report, and some, due to government policies, asked also not to be named, no direct references to the interviews are made. A list of interviewees who were at liberty to be named is included in the annex.

5.1 Factors for implementing rural proofing

5.1.1 Success factors

Several factors were identified which were contributing to success of rural proofing approaches in multiple countries covered by the study. They can be split in two categories, one related to the methodology itself, and one related to the wider implementation in policy development. Crucially, many interviewees stated that the concrete methodology for assessing impacts is not the most important aspect when developing policies for rural areas – it is the fact that rural areas are considered at all in the development. At the same time criticism about “checkbox exercises” is frequent, thus the methodology applied seems not to be trivial after all.

Methodology

A range of factors have to be taken into account by the authority responsible for implementing a rural proofing exercise to **select an appropriate methodology** for rural proofing a specific policy. These include inter alia:

- geographical level,
- policy stage,
- policy content, and
- data availability.

Concrete guidance on which methodology is suited for specific circumstances is provided in the following section. Apart from the scientific soundness of assessments, a methodology also profits from being easy to understand and producing policy relevant outcomes. In case of non-mandatory rural proofing, policymakers are more likely to conduct such an exercise if they understand the approach and the value of outcomes right from the outset. This is particularly relevant for local and regional exercises with stakeholder participation.

For each methodology and setting, there needs to be an **appropriate classification of rural areas**. There are numerous approaches for defining rural areas, taking into account e.g., population density, remoteness, population distribution, sectoral split etc. None of those approaches represents a universally agreed definition, as depending on the geographical level, the methodological approach, and partly even the policy in question, such a definition varies. It is, however, important to define for the purpose of each rural proofing exercise, what is to be understood as a rural area in that specific frame.

Finally, a **“positive approach” towards rural areas** is considered one of the key success factors. Such areas are not to be seen as inherently disadvantaged in all circumstances, but are areas with specific and individual challenges, however, also with potentials others do not possess. Any rural proofing approach must therefore not only look at mitigating the disadvantages, but also consider the advantages and ultimately the potentials to contribute to a given policies goals.

Wider implementation

Rural proofing can be a voluntary or mandatory element of policy development. In case of it being voluntary, it is necessary to convince policymakers of the positive aspects while also making sure it is **not seen as “overburdening” the process**. In case of mandatory rural proofing, experience has shown it is still important to make policymakers see the advantages and create the capacity to conduct effective assessments, to avoid the exercise becoming merely an administrative task. Targeted application is therefore considered an important factor, e.g., by including a screening process for rural issues in early policy development. In case such a screening identifies relevant issues, a more in-depth approach is warranted. Otherwise, it can consist of a reduced approach.

While targeted approaches which are seen as valuable exercise by policymakers are a factor, at the same time **sufficient resources** have to be reserved for the implementation. Both personnel to conduct and facilitate the exercise as well as budget for potential actions (e.g., resources for regional events, participants fees, external methodological experts, moderation etc.) are important. Ensuring the availability of time and budget will usually be the responsibility of the authority or body implementing the exercise.

Experience has shown that rural proofing is not an external process (e.g., an external impact assessment), but has to be embedded in policy design. It is therefore crucial that a body responsible for development of a particular policy is also the one responsible for rural proofing their policy. Nevertheless, **targeted support** for these bodies is very important, as it reduces barriers and encourages conducting such exercises. Several countries consider the establishment of a “core group”, “centre of expertise” or similar entities with methodological knowledge, acting as a coordinator in the process as a key success factor.

Finally, as with all similar exercises **timing** is important for achieving results. While at an early stage of policy development there might be a lot of uncertainties, it is also the stage where the most influence can be exerted. The inclusion of rural considerations when shaping the general direction of a policy is crucial, as in most cases later considerations are only able to influence smaller details. The respective assessments, therefore, should be able to cover the main impacts and subsequent

recommendations in a quick manner, allowing for early input to the policy process.

5.1.2 Main challenges

In implementing the various rural proofing approaches, interviewees stated a number of challenges. Some were linked to the specific circumstances of the country, e.g., specific properties of the policymaking process. Others can be considered more general and could also apply in other countries or at the EU level.

The main challenge identified lies in the **voluntary nature** of most approaches. In most cases, rural proofing was implemented as an optional part of policymaking, oftentimes leading to it being disregarded by authorities responsible for implementing policies. Furthermore, even in cases where rural proofing was implemented as a mandatory part of policymaking, however not enforced by the scrutinizing authorities, the overall exercise was disregarded in many cases. This challenge was even greater where a **lack of funding** for non-mandatory assessments and actions in the policy drafting process could be identified. While it was comparably easy for authorities to justify expenses for mandatory procedures, it could be a challenge to set aside resources for a voluntary process.

Lack of understanding of the need also led to slow uptake of rural proofing, with authorities either being convinced that there were no relevant impacts on rural areas created by their policy, or certain that already enough was being done. Combined with a non-mandatory approach and a lack of funding, the incentive for authorities to conduct rural proofing activities was low. In some cases, this was also linked to a **lack of methodological knowledge**, with authorities stating that they would be in favour of taking up rural proofing but simply lacking the methodological knowledge as well as lacking the capacity for acquiring it.

Finally, especially in countries where rural proofing was implemented as mandatory part of policymaking, challenges were linked to the **scrutiny of the activities**. The already mentioned “check-box exercise” meant that as long as any form of rural proofing was conducted, the scrutinizing authorities were satisfied without verifying the quality of the process. Authorities in charge of the policy on the other hand oftentimes tried not to “gold plate” and did not overfulfil the requirements.

5.2 Selecting methodologies

As outlined above, rural proofing does not consist of simply applying a methodology assessing impacts, but is a philosophy of policy drafting and requires a holistic approach implemented throughout policy design. Nevertheless, assessment methodologies can shed a light on how particular aspects of a given policy influence rural areas, improve the understanding and thus enable policymakers to address challenges in a more targeted manner. The following section provides an overview of important factors when selecting a suitable methodology and outlines the advantages and disadvantages of individual methodologies for each one.

Geographical level

The geographical level determines if a specific tool can be used or not. An assessment covering the local level only will rarely support a data-driven assessment thus has to lean on qualitative methods. On the other hand, a rural proofing exercise conducted for an EU-wide policy could be difficult to apply when a large number of stakeholders for regional input have to be involved.

Methodology	Suitability
TIA Quick Check	The webtool available is particularly suited for assessments covering larger individual countries, multiple smaller countries, or the EU level. The methodology is transferable to the regional level, however, the webtool has to be adapted.
Foresight methods	The methodologies are in principle independent of the geographical level. The approach involving broader trends is better suited for larger geographical areas, however the methodologies are transferable to lower levels as well.
EATIA	EATIA is flexible regarding the geographical level and can cover everything from the EU level down to the local level. Assessments at a higher geographical level require more efforts in terms of regional consultations. Thus, the method is particularly suited for national and sub-national approaches.

Data availability

An important role in all evidence-based assessments is data. Depending on the methodological approach, however, the completeness, resolution, administrative boundaries etc., play a different role. Regardless of the approach – qualitative or quantitative – all assessments can profit from better data quality.

Methodology	Suitability
TIA Quick Check	The webtool requires NUTS3 level data to work, thus is highly dependent on datasets being available in this resolution. In case such datasets can be provided or created, the methodology is well suited. In case of assessments on lower geographic levels, the methodology is still well suited. However, the tool needs to be adapted to accommodate for the different nomenclatures. In cases where assessments cannot be made based on predefined regions or where no data is available, the methodology is not advised.
Foresight methods	The methodologies are independent from detailed datasets on the regional level, however, require some information on general trends and directions in order to conduct a proper assessment.
EATIA	EATIA is independent from detailed data. Expert judgements can be made even in the complete absence of regional data. Still, all assessments benefit from more detailed data being available as evidence base.

Timing in the policy process

While rural proofing in general should always start as early as possible in policy development, assessment methodologies lend themselves to different points in time. Main determining factor is both what needs to be available as basis for the assessments and what is the desired output.

Methodology	Suitability
TIA Quick Check	The TIA Quick Check requires a certain amount of clarity on how a policy is going to be implemented in order to draw up proper logic chains. The webtool is well equipped to deal with different scenarios, i.e., it can be applied early in policy development.
Foresight methods	Foresight methods are well equipped to deal with vagueness and “fuzziness”, thus are particularly suited for application in early policy development stages in order to shape the general approach and strategy.
EATIA	The application of EATIA in the way it was done for the purpose of this study requires more detailed information of the policies, as e.g., detailed geographical assessments of impacts require fundamental knowledge of the impact mechanisms.

Those considerations can give some orientation when selecting a methodology for assessing rural impacts in the context of rural proofing. However, all methods require considerable expertise in their implementation, which is an important factor for their success. A method for which expertise is available can outdo a method for which no expertise in implementation can be accessed, regardless of other factors.

5.3 Recommendations

The recommendations developed based on the study results can be grouped into those for methodological developments, those for policy development, and further, those for supporting measures. Considerable input was gathered from the expert interviews which provided insights into their own national or cross-cutting perspectives. While the individual national backgrounds can be different, the recommendations also do not address solely the EU level, but rather aim at improving rural proofing on all governance levels. The recommendations are drafted in a general manner, thus making them suitable for the broad range of legislative systems and different distribution of competences across the EU. Nevertheless, some of the recommendations will address different levels in different countries, as e.g., federal states or autonomous regions might have the power to re-shape policy processes in some countries, while in other countries only the national level can implement some of the measures.

5.3.1 Methodological developments

Some recommendations for methodological improvements are based on the project team's knowledge and experience in applying assessment methodologies, others are based on the expert interviews. The aim of the following section is not to provide one universal methodology, nor is it to develop completely new methodologies for rural proofing. It is rather aiming at improving existing approaches and including some adaptations and tweaks to make them more suitable for rural proofing.

5.3.1.1 Improvements to the ESPON TIA Quick Check

The ESPON TIA Quick Check is already mentioned in the better regulation toolbox tool #34 where TIA and rural proofing are covered. It provides a solid basis for assessing impacts on rural areas. However, some improvements could be made to allow for better visualisation and results regarding rural proofing:

- Include a **functionality to highlight rural regions** in the maps produced. This would enable assessments for all regions in parallel, focusing on the rural regions but not limiting the assessment to rural regions only.
- Include a **functionality to visualise impacts (maps/graphs) side-by-side** for different types of regions in the tool. This would simplify the visualisation of impacts on rural areas.
- Amend the **guidance on the TIA tool** in order to outline the steps necessary for rural proofing exercises.

- Improve the **flexibility of databases and shapefiles** in the tool to handle data from different nomenclatures, such as LAU²² regions, with the functionality to group regions into one entity. This would allow for maximum flexibility and application of the tool on national and regional level without constraints.

5.3.1.2 Improvements to qualitative methodologies

Qualitative methodologies profit from their generally higher flexibility regarding data availability, scenarios where impacted regions do not necessarily correspond to administrative regions etc. Nevertheless, there is a need for better guidance and modification of approaches to improve rural proofing exercises.

- Improve the **targeted guidance for use in rural proofing** scenarios, in particular for the different governance levels. While methodologies oftentimes are transferrable to different geographical levels, they are showcased only on particular levels. Furthermore, the higher flexibility can lead to stakeholders being overwhelmed or not sure, if such an approach is suitable for their circumstances.
- Add **approaches for specific typologies and comparisons** to qualitative methodologies, i.e., outlining steps necessary to include comparative elements between rural- and other areas.
- Adapting **templates to explicitly address rural areas** and comparison elements. In many cases, templates provided for qualitative methodologies are more flexible and open. Thus, it can be unclear to people looking to apply a certain methodology on how to do this. Templates guiding the process are common and can be adapted to improve guidance in those cases.

5.3.1.3 Improvements to checklist approaches

“Checklist” approaches are the most common among the countries already applying rural proofing. They include varying degrees of details, and usually consist of a brief questionnaire on potential impacts of the policy on rural areas. The general issues with checklist approaches have been addressed already, however, when applying them some recommendations can still be made:

- It is important to **be bold** when including checklists in policymaking processes. Several approaches have failed to achieve the intended results,

²² local administrative units (LAUs) are used to divide up the territory of the EU for the purpose of providing statistics at a local level (EUROSTAT 2018)

as they were implemented without ensuring proper scrutiny, or by reducing the effort necessary when assessing impacts to a minimum.

- Provide **clear guidance to all questions**, in order to enable the people conducting the assessment to properly do so. In particular, specifying exactly what is expected under a specific question, providing example answers or specify categories of answers.
- Provide **examples of how this has been conducted**, e.g., a complete assessment process (fictional or real) including comments and explanations.
- Provide **targeted training** to public servants expected to conduct such assessments with the use of a checklist.

5.3.2 Policy developments

Rural proofing is not simply a “method” to be applied, but a way of designing policies. Assessing impacts of a given legislation or policy on rural regions is an important part of it, end methodological guidance on how to do this has been provided by the study. Nonetheless rural proofing requires actions at different stages of policy development, and does not consist of a single feedback loop. Without addressing a specific governance level, the following recommendations can be made for including rural proofing in policy development in general:

- Rural proofing has to be **required in the policy process in a formal or explicit manner**. Formal requirements not only create awareness, but oftentimes the availability of funding of an exercise is linked to its requirement. Voluntary exercises can be a first step, however are likely to be overlooked, left out in order to reduce the administrative burden, or even impossible to implement due to a lack of resources available.
- Selecting the **right timing** is crucial, as steering policies towards better impacts on rural areas is possible mainly early in the process. Respective assessments of potential impacts should be done at such an early stage, that the policy is already outlined regarding general direction and activities, however not yet inflexible towards changes.
- Involvement of **persons feeling responsible for rural proofing in policy development** is crucial. Linked to recommendations about the establishment of a responsible body in the following section, which could provide the staff and resources for this.

- Rural issues are not the only issues requiring attention in policymaking. In order not to overburden the policy process and, thus, reduce the time and resources available for specific issues, **rural proofing should be conducted in a targeted manner**. This can be done, e.g., by including a necessity check similar to the one already applied for TIA at the EU level for each initiative, or by a responsible governmental by following policy developments and identifying initiatives which would require a more in-depth involvement, and others where no or only little activities and scrutiny is needed.
- In a multi-level governance structure, framework policies are oftentimes developed on higher levels, while impacts materialise on low geographic levels. **Governing bodies on lower levels should therefore have the possibility to “monitor” developments on higher levels**, and feedback information on potential impacts from their point of view early on. A mechanism that **ensures such feedback loops before the formal public consultation** on policies would be beneficial to establish.

5.3.3 Supporting measures

Supporting measures are not policy or methodological measures per se, however, can be important for the successful inclusion of rural proofing in policymaking.

- A **group/department/agency (depending on the respective governmental organisation) with the methodological and thematic knowledge necessary for including a rural perspective in policy processes should be established**. Their staff should be able to follow policy developments from other departments, agencies, ministries etc., and should be able to request inclusion into working groups responsible for a specific policy. They are able to provide targeted support, raise awareness of the issues, however, their inputs should not be considered as external but rather part of the overall policy drafting process. **Countries which established such groups reported it to be one of the key success factors**.
- Raising awareness and **creating a feeling of responsibility** within policy drafting bodies is crucial. Rural proofing cannot be seen as an external process or assessment, but rather part of policy development. To that end, capacity building for people involved in policy development is important.
- Even though **bodies responsible drafting a specific policy should be responsible to ensure the consideration of rural issues, they should be supported in doing so**. A core group with the thematic and methodological knowledge about rural proofing policies can also provide targeted support

to individual bodies responsible for a policy. “Quick and easy access” to such resources has been reported as another crucial success factor.

- For actual application of specific methodologies, **clear methodological guidance** should be made available. For example, at EU level, tool #34 should be expanded in order to address, how TIA can serve rural proofing exercises, and how the methods currently included can be used in practice.

6. Conclusion

Over the course of the research conducted it has become clear that not one universal methodology is likely to fit the requirements of rural proofing. Rather, similar to TIA there are different approaches suited best for different application cases. It is evident that methodologies suitable for rural proofing at local and regional level differ from rural proofing at EU level. However, even on the same territorial level there are differences in methodological requirements. Furthermore, it has become clear that rural proofing is not simply an assessment and the application of a methodology providing concrete results, but it is a process for better policymaking. **“Rural thinking” in policymaking cannot be done only at the impact assessment stage, but has to become part of the policy spirit**, being relevant from early strategy design over detailed provisions to impact measurement and assessment.

- Part 1 of the study, **state of play of rural proofing** has shown, that while rural proofing as an idea is already included in a number of toolboxes at EU level, the actual inclusion in policymaking has yet to be picked up. Furthermore, it became evident in the review of existing approaches, that in most countries where rural proofing was seen as the application of an assessment only, the overall goals could not be reached. Particular success could be identified in those countries, where rural proofing included assessment aspects and guidance on them was included as a wider strategy and approach in policy design. Considerable importance was identified in “rural proofing agencies” being able to support with methodological questions as well as acting as an exchange platform, for awareness raising and for providing training to public officials.
- Part 2 of the study, **existing TIA tools** concluded, that TIA methods are in most cases well suited to support with rural proofing exercises. Both qualitative and quantitative tools which were able to work on NUTS3 level and below are able to produce meaningful assessments. Some methodologies, due to their geographical scope, cannot be used for rural proofing, and due to their method are also unlikely to be transferred to lower levels. In most cases modifications either to existing tools, templates or at least methodological guidance has to be updated in order to support rural proofing.
- Part 3 of the study, **the specificities of rural areas** present the crucial challenges for rural areas which are oftentimes considered the reason for a need for rural proofing. The implications for policy planning and in particular rural proofing tools are addressed as well. While some general

trends relevant for many rural regions could be identified, specificities and challenges are not universal and differ between different types of regions.

- Part 4 of the study, **application and improvement of existing methodologies** implemented three rural proofing exercises in the form of case studies to showcase how those methodologies can be used. The rural proofing application of ESPON TIA Quick Check, Foresight methods as well as EATIA were presented based on three example policies. The cases may provide examples for stakeholders looking to implement rural proofing approaches. They also helped in identifying some shortcomings and potential methodological improvements in those methodologies in order to support better rural proofing.
- Part 5 of the study, **guidance for better rural proofing** synthesized the preceding parts and provides recommendations for various aspects:
 - Success factors and challenges for implementing rural proofing
 - Selecting proper methodologies for rural proofing exercises
 - Methodological recommendations for further developing existing methodologies
 - Recommendations for broader integration of rural proofing in the overall policy cycle

The study concludes that there is no need for a completely new rural proofing tool, but rather identified a number of key improvements to existing methodologies. Furthermore, it is to be stressed that those methodologies only form a part of the overall rural proofing process. The following recommendations were developed:

- **Existing tools provide great value for rural proofing** and territorial impacts in general. They are able to accommodate a wide range of circumstances, deal with issues in data availability, work on all geographic levels and can cover all types of policies. The focus should be laid on further refining such tools instead of developing new ones from scratch.
- **Territorial Impact Assessment in general provides a good basis for rural proofing**, addressing inter alia rural regions. TIA, however follows a slightly different approach than what is needed for rural proofing, lacking the explicit focus on rural areas but rather trying to address all regions similarly. Improvements regarding the overall visibility of rural regions and respective impacts when applying TIA methodologies can be made and are outlined in detail in the study.

- There are a number of tools and templates which are used in the application of those existing methods. As is, they are developed with TIA in a broader sense in mind, however **they need upgrading to cater to rural proofing needs.**
- Rural proofing is **part of the policy design**, not a "checkbox" after everything is already finalised. It is a philosophy of how to draft policies and how to take into consideration issues of specific regions at all stages and on all levels of policy drafting. Implementing it is not simply applying a methodology for external verification, but has to be mainstreamed into policy drafting processes.

6.1 Recommendations for the EU policymaking process

To conclude this study the following overall recommendations for the EU level policymaking process may be stated:

- It has to be acknowledged that the legislative process of EU legal procedures is already scrutinising quite a lot of effects of legislative proposals (environmental, economic, social, SME etc.). Still, **what seems to be lacking at the very beginning of any legislative process is the territorial angle of the proposals.** This should – however not be misunderstood as yet another layer of checks, but as horizontal pre-check embracing all sectoral effects at the same time and “translating them into EU territories” (preferably regions). Such a horizontal “necessity check” may then also include the differentiation of potential effects on different territorial typologies (including explicitly rural areas).
- In this respect the status of rural proofing has to be better clarified – i.e. the “necessity check” (as foreseen in the legislative process in the preliminary impact assessment) will have to include rural proofing elements.
- Like this a screening for territorial and rural impacts will become a mandatory element of the policymaking processes.
- Within the European Commission, territorial impact assessment and rural proofing should be established within every interservice consultation of new proposals. DG Regio and DG Agri with their respective expertise on TIA and rural proofing/rural issues can act as “custodians” of potential methodological applications (e.g., suggestions for specific methods to be applied). By such an approach the overburdening of the process with yet another “expert-body”

acting as methodological pool may be avoided. The prerequisite will be – however – that the Commission's personnel will have enough overview on existing methods.

- By such an integration of territorial impact assessment and rural proofing the scrutiny for both elements in the decision-making process including the two co-legislators shall be ensured.

6.2 Recommendations for local, regional and national authorities

Local, regional and national authorities are working in heterogenous legislative systems and policymaking traditions. Against their respective backgrounds, local regional or national authorities looking to implement rural proofing for a specific policy or on a general level will have to consider their legislative powers, their position in drafting the policy and their potential influence and possibilities. The following general recommendations can be given to them:

- Rural issues should be considered **early in policy drafting** and already in first policy design. Methodologies to assess potential impacts at an early policy stage are described in the report and allow to shape measures to take into account rural needs.
- In order to be effective and efficient in implementing rural proofing exercises, it is helpful to **decide where rural proofing is necessary and relevant as early as possible**. This will allow to concentrate the efforts on those policies where impacts on rural communities are relevant and should be addressed.
- As rural proofing should be a recurring element of policy design, it is important to **develop capacities and methodological knowledge** for respective exercises and application of methodologies within authorities. While external support, e.g., from specialised departments or from external experts is oftentimes necessary, internal knowledge and capacities are highly valuable for good results.
- On a national or regional level, a **centre of expertise** with the purpose of supporting authorities in implementing rural proofing in their policy drafting should be established and funded. Monitoring upcoming legislation and actively encouraging rural considerations, as well as

providing a contact point for questions and ad-hoc support for authorities has been reported as key success factor for rural proofing.

- The **availability of sufficient resources** should be ensured both in terms of personnel and time as well as funding for specific actions (e.g., external support, conducting events etc.).
- When deciding on the approach and methodology for rural proofing for a specific policy, an authority should **check which support mechanisms from national level or other authorities within the government are available**. Guidance, past experiences or ideally direct support by experienced departments and colleagues will positively contribute to the results. Permanent links for exchange and cooperation between the levels of government can support the early detection of rural impacts of national or regional legislation.
- For application of specific methodologies of assessments, **oftentimes external support is valuable or needed**. The report indicates for the assessed methodologies references and contact points which can contribute to the successful implementation with their knowledge.
- In case an interactive approach including stakeholder participation is selected, it is important to **make sure sufficient time for stakeholder consultation is reserved**. Such processes, especially in cases where stakeholders are not familiar with a particular methodology take time, and involved persons should be granted enough time for preparation and contributing.
- Apart from activities directly related to specific policies, authorities, regions, local governments etc. should also strive to **engage in networking efforts** related to policy design for rural areas. The study has discovered several similarities and complementary approaches to overcoming joint challenges, which can be a starting point for engaging in exchange activities. This can further rural proofing methodologies and approaches, but can also contribute to specific policy assessments and policy design efforts.

List of interviews

The following interviewees agreed to be mentioned in the study:

Alexia Rouby (DG AGRI)

Evelina Selander (Swedish agency for Economic and Regional growth)

Betty-Ann Bryce (OECD)

Olivia Silverwood (Ministry for primary industries New Zealand)

Three further interviewees asked to remain unnamed due to their government policies on comments that could potentially be traced back to their respective country, government or agency and thus are not mentioned in the study.

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