



GRANULAR

KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER ACCELERATOR

One, None, Thousands Ruralities: A New Vision Based on Functionalities

HIGHLIGHTS REPORT

23 February 2024

Executive summary

Historically, rural areas have been characterised primarily by population density and proximity to urban centres. However, **this approach oversimplifies reality and neglects the wide variety of rural areas**, encompassing various functionalities and rural-urban interactions.

In addition, territorial development policies, including EU Cohesion and Rural Development policies have been marred, by the reliance of administrative boundaries to understand territorial impacts and to target public resources. However, this tends to obscure the complex dimensions and dynamics within and across territories, hence the need for more detailed but also **more sophisticated understanding of local geographies beyond administrative boundaries**.

This call to deepen our understanding of rural diversity was also emphasised in the latest [EU Council conclusions on the EU's Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas \(LTVRA\)](#) as a milestone to foster place-based rural development and the delivery of EU's policies and strategies (e.g., Cohesion Policy, Common Agricultural Policy, EU's Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas).

To help address this gap, on 23rd February the European Association for Innovation in Local Development (AEIDL) organised the 2nd [GRANULAR Knowledge Transfer webinar](#). This meeting brought together leading academic researchers, public servants and practitioners on this field from over 22 EU Member States, UK, Switzerland, Turkey and several African countries. It is also testament of the growing partnership with our sister project **RUSTIK** and with the leading work carried out by the **EU Joint Research Centre**.

ORGANISER:



23 FEBRUARY 2024



ONLINE



82 PARTICIPANTS

(research, public authorities, advisors, business, producers, other EU-funded projects, etc.)



PRESENTATIONS AND RECORDINGS [HERE](#).

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UK Research
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In this webinar, we delved into the role of **rural (multi)functionalities** in offering an innovative perspective to **characterising rural areas** and understanding their **diversity**. **Serafin Pazos-Vidal**, European Association for Innovation in Local Development (AEIDL), opened this online event, highlighting the crucial momentum of this discussion into the wider EU's policy landscape and discussions on the post-2027 programming period. Precisely the High-Level Group on the Future of EU Cohesion Policy **reported** three days earlier that identifying spatially concentrated challenges and multiple dynamics is one of the key challenges for the future EU territorial development policies.

Mats Stjernberg, Nordregio, introduced the findings of the '**Scoping report on rural typologies across Europe**' (2023), a comprehensive state-of-the-art of territorial typologies at EU-level and across 27 European regions. While being a simplification of the reality, rural typologies are used to support territorial analyses and policy planning at different levels. Additionally, Henk Oostindie, Wageningen University, presented how the notions of **multi-spatiality and multi-functionalities** can be integrated into a **Rural Diversity Compass**, currently prototyped by the GRANULAR partners. The primary goal of this **Rural Diversity Compass** is to describe rural diversity through **four main functionalities** (residential, productive, recreational, environmental) and **24 components**. Additionally, this Rural Diversity Compass is a

concrete tool to investigate how different functionalities interconnect and (might) produce disbalances in rural areas.

Lewis Dijkstra, Joint Research Centre, provided an overview of the recently-developed **EU's definition for Functional Rural Areas (FRA)**. This definition, and its associated methodology aims to provide an analytical picture of rural territories and service provision. Functional Rural Areas are identified following five main rules and four iterative steps, and they can be visualised on the **dedicated webpage** hosted by the EU's Rural Observatory. This set of interventions was concluded with the contribution of **Francesco Mantino**, Council for Agricultural Research and Economics and author of the **RUSTIK's** report on "**Methodological framework to define Functional Rural Areas and rural transitions**". As Mr Mantino underscored, we need a new definition of "rural" to be based on rural "functionalities", neo-endogenous theories and the role of networks and connectivity beyond geographical proximity. Such a new definition should particularly address regional, geographical and demographic disparities affecting rural areas.

In a final round table, speakers reflected on how **redefining ruralities can improve rural understanding and rural policy making** in the EU. This webinar is part of the Knowledge Transfer Accelerator in GRANULAR, please consult [here](#) for more information.

Welcome & Introduction



Serafin Pazos Vidal

EU Association for Innovation in Local Development (AEIDL)

Serafin Pazos Vidal, Senior Expert and Director of the Rural and Territorial Development Unit at the European Association for Innovation in Local Development (AEIDL), welcomed participants of this **2nd GRANULAR Knowledge Transfer webinar**. As he pointed out, this webinar contributes to the ongoing post-2027 EU policy discussion and particularly on those policies affecting **rural and territorial development**.

Among the most recent milestones on this domain, he reminds the conclusions of the **High-Level Group on the Future of Cohesion Policy** which provides the launchpad of post-2027 Cohesion Policy debate and a **scholarly book on territorial cohesion**.

"In its conclusions, the High-Level Group on the Future of the Cohesion Policy shows that rural and rural-urban dynamics and spatial problems, such as the geography of discontent, are not sufficiently visible. Several dynamics escape the present classification and administrative borders".

The EU's post-2027 policy debate is just at the beginning, yet awaited contributions will be shared soon with the European Commission - DG AGRI's report on **the Implementation of the Rural Vision and the Way Forward** (expected in March), and the DG REGIO's **9th Cohesion Report** in April.

In this overall context, GRANULAR's webinar **provides frontier research to define new geographies** and make sure that these are used to perform better analyses on rural trends, needs and opportunities. These efforts have to be in continuity with what was already done through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)'s definition of depopulating areas and **TERCET**, the EU's initiative to harmonise territorial typologies.

Some of the GRANULAR's findings on how rural diversity can be addressed and integrated into the post-2027 EU policies are also summarised in the **Regional Studies Association Blog** by AEIDL's GRANULAR Project Manager Carla Lostrangio.

Overview of Rural Typologies in Europe



Mats Stjernber
NordRegio



Mats Stjernber, Senior Research Fellow at Nordregio, presented the main findings of the GRANULAR's '[Scoping report on rural typologies across Europe](#)'. Published in 2023, this report provides a comprehensive **analysis of 51 existing territorial typologies** across **27 European countries** as well as **EU-level typologies**.

"There is a need for more granular and nuanced understanding of rural areas Europe".

Rural areas are not a homogenous block, and this report addresses the ways different countries investigated these wide variety. This analysis will lead to the creation of a **GRANULAR multi-criteria rural typology** for Europe in 2026.

The report shows that existing typologies can be broadly divided into two categories: 1) typologies **delimiting rural areas**, 2) typologies **characterising rural areas**.

Rural and territorial typologies are mainly used to **support policy and planning** – both in general and specific terms (e.g. policy

evaluation, resource allocation) – and/or to **perform in-depth analysis** on various rural and territorial development issues.

Even though rural and territorial typologies are very different from one another, a **few patterns appear**. First, most typologies have evolved from being grounded on a single dimension into multiple ones. Thus, today only the majority of typologies combine a morphological component (e.g., population size or density) with accessibility, dependence of urban centres, land use/over, economic criteria, employment services or infrastructure. Second, there is a tendency to progressively move from more general to **fine-grained rural typologies**.

To conclude, Mr Stjernber acknowledged that **typologies are a simplification of reality**, therefore no typology can fully grasp territorial complexity and we should avoid single-method approaches. The **typology's aims, research and policy-alignment**, as well as **data availability, reliability and replicability** should drive the design of the typology and its potential replication and upscaling.

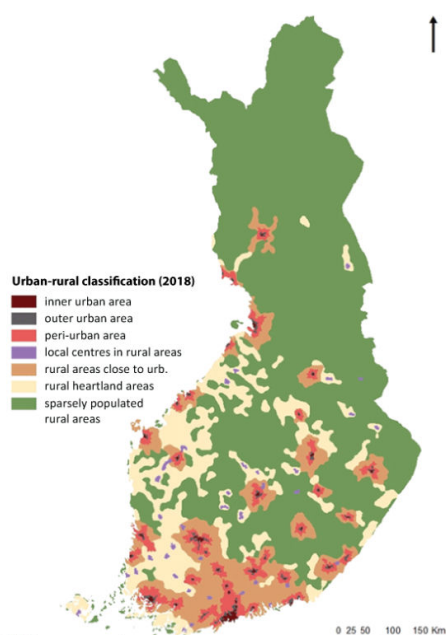


Figure 1. Finland: urban-rural typology
Source: [GRANULAR report](#)

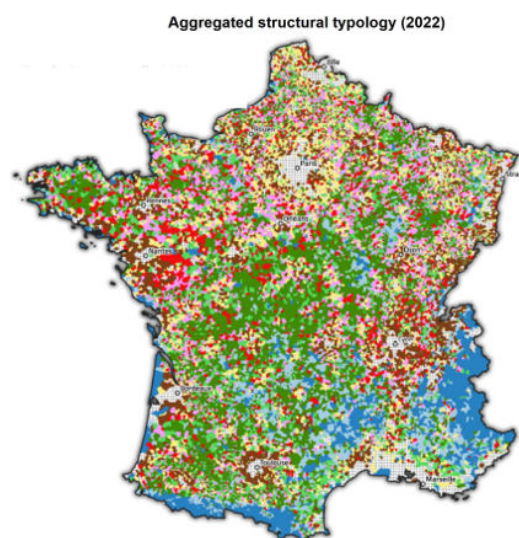


Figure 2. France: Typology of French rural areas
Source: [GRANULAR report](#)

Rural Multi-Functionalities



Henk Oostindie
Wageningen University



Henk Oostindie, Rural Sociologist at the Wageningen University and partner of the [GRANULAR](#) project provided an overview of how the project approaches rural diversity, which is summarised in the "[Synthesis report on the multi-spatial understandings of rural diversity and rural policy notions](#)".

In GRANULAR, rural diversity is an expression of the notions of **multi-spatiality** and **multi-functionalities**. According to Jones & Woods (2013), rurality has **multiple boundary orientations** in relation to different spaces emerge (absolute, circular, relational, relative). Rurality can also be analysed through the lenses of **four main functions** (residential, environmental, productive and recreational), whose togetherness might produce balances and disbalances in rural areas.

These two key aspects of GRANULAR's understanding of ruralities have been used to develop a [Rural Diversity Compass prototype](#). This Rural Diversity Compass is an analytical tool to characterise rural diversity based on **four functionalities and 24 components**. Components range from straightforward ones (e.g. agricultural land, resident population) to components with more challenging practical and theoretical conceptualisation (e.g. cohesion, wellbeing).

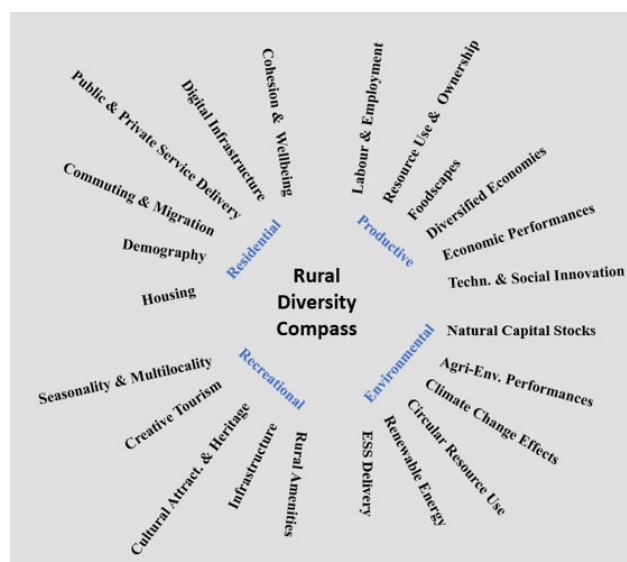


Figure 3. Rural Diversity Compass
Source: [GRANULAR report](#)

"Interdependencies and interconnections between components are crucial for our Compass, and particularly interesting in the view of the rural proofing and rural governance".

Mr Oostindie provided a practical example of how the [P10 network of rural municipalities](#) in the Netherlands is making use of the Rural Diversity Compass. In this territory, there is a strong attention towards the integration of well-being into rural development agenda. The Rural Diversity Compass allowed to analyse broadly the context and point out ongoing **dilemmas with national policymaking**. The GRANULAR's Rural Diversity Compass will be further tested and validated in all [7 Living Labs](#).

Developing a Definition of Functional Rural Areas



Lewis Dijkstra
Joint Research Centre



Lewis Dijkstra, Head of Territorial and Urban Analysis at the EU's Joint Research Centre, focused his intervention on the **EU's Functional Rural Areas (FRA)**. Functional Rural Areas allow a more **harmonised and functional view of territorial trends**, such as changes in population and density, as well as distance from basic services (e.g. schools, hospitals).

"The objective of a functional rural area is to define a daily rural system, i.e. an area which captures the vast majority of daily trips. These trips go beyond travel to work and include travel to services such as schools, hospitals, shops, sport and cultural facilities, as well as travel to friends and family." (Dijkstra, L. and Jacobs-Crisioni, C., 2023).

The proposal for EU's Functional Rural Areas was inspired by market towns, which are areas attracting public and private services from wider territory, and often serving also as the center of community life. Based on this notion, the Joint Research Centre has proposed a definition for Functional Rural Areas in the EU, mirroring the already existing Functional Urban Areas' definition (Dijkstra *et al.*, 2019), and its [draft methodology](#) consisting of **five rules** and **four steps** to determine FRAs.

FRA's Five rules	FRA's Four steps
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Contains at least one village or town 2. Contains at least 25,000 inhabitants, except if the closest town or village is more than an hour away. 3. FRAs more than 60 min. apart cannot be combined 4. FRAs less than 30 min. apart are combined. 5. Functional rural areas cover all territory outside functional urban areas 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Select all rural centres: biggest town or village in a 10-minute drive (outside Functional Urban Areas) 2. Create a catchment area around each centre 3. Combine catchment areas that are too small or nearby 4. Translate grid level FRAs (FRAGs) into LAUs (FRAUs)

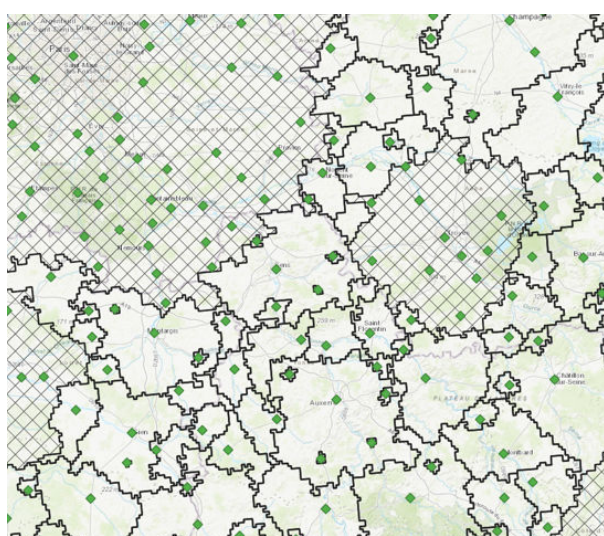


Figure 4. Local centre catchments in Functional Rural Areas
Source: Joint Research Centre

In the process of defining FRAs, the Joint Research Centre has been testing different threshold parameters, and further work will be done on moving from FRA to more grid-based FRAs (FRAGs) or Local Administrative Units-based FRAs (FRAUs). A visualisation of the FRAs in Europe is available through a [dedicated page](#) on the EU's Rural Observatory.

As Mr Dijkstra underlined, first results from testing the FRAs' approach are promising and though it has so far been limited to EU's countries, there is an intention to expand it to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and world countries. At this moment, the Joint Research Centre is in the phase of collecting reviews and feedback on the proposed methodology for further improvement.

Functional Rural Areas and Beyond: Other definitions



Francesco Mantino
Italian Council for Agricultural Research & Economics



Francesco Mantino, Senior Research at the Italian Council for Agricultural Research and Economics, reflected on implications of the Functional Rural Areas' approach on rural areas and the rural-urban continuum. As emerged in his co-authored "[Report on the methodological framework to define Functional Rural Areas and rural transitions](#)", **rural diversity should be considered as something more complex than rural-urban distances.**

Even though the functional approach could provide a better picture of rural diversity, it is **strongly biased in favour of the urban part** as it mainly focuses on how rural functions contribute to the nearby urban areas rather than for the broader society. Other main shortcomings on the existing functional approaches are: a definition almost uniquely based on socio-economic relations (and in particular community-to-work flows), strong differences in parameters and policy uses across EU countries.

To address these gaps, the [RUSTIK](#) project – of which he is part of – looked into ways to test a newer definition of rural areas which would embed neo-endogenous theories (i.e. rural areas can create development mechanisms themselves), the role of networks (in enabling connectivity between these areas going beyond

geographical proximity), and rural areas' provision of complex and diversified functions. Their work is carried out in close collaboration with their 14 Living Labs through a bottom-up and multi-step methodology.

Their approach has slightly changed to take stock of the Joint Research Centre's definition of Functional Rural Areas (FRAs). A definition that has been piloted in the 14 pilot regions, combining both quantitative and qualitative data. From their initial assessment, it emerged that **travel-time to the nearest settlement should not be the only approach to define FRAs** as it implicitly assumes that the nearest settlements can provide most services. This assumption does not consider the availability or quality of such services, and fails to acknowledge emerging regional, geographical, or demographic disparities across territories.

It also emerged a need to find intermediate level of data granularity between NUTS3 (, equivalent to provinces, counties or départements, too large and heterogenous) and LAU2 (municipalities or sub- municipalities, too small), as well as the need to test more carefully some combined criteria in selected pilot regions.

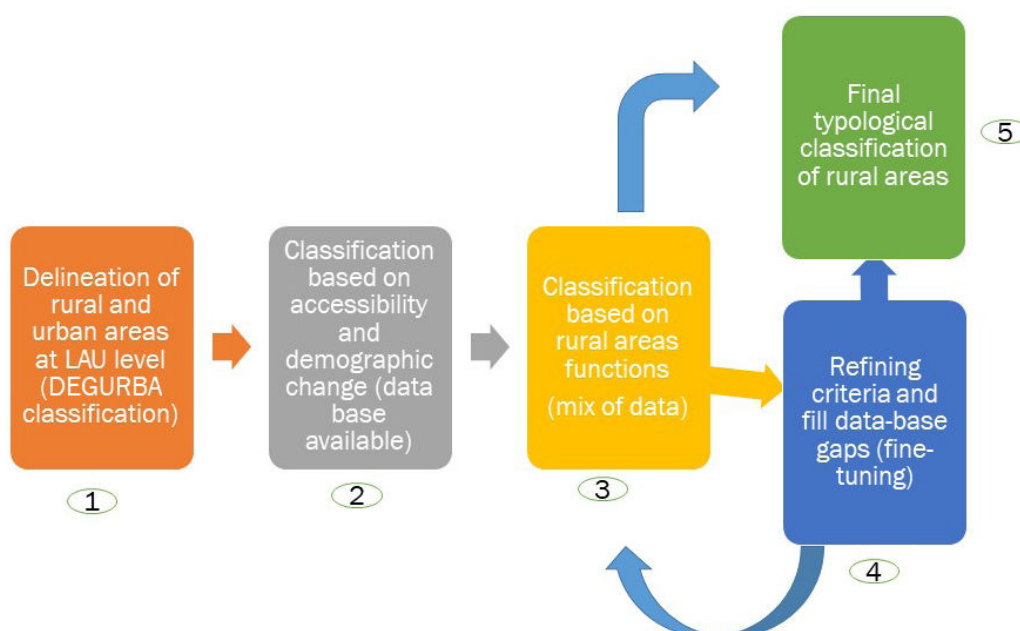


Figure 5. RUSTIK's steps to data provision.
Source: RUSTK

Discussion

with Lewis Dijkstra (Joint Research Centre), Mats Stjernber (NordRegio), Henk Oostindie (Wageningen University), Francesco Mantino (CREA). Moderated by Serafin Pazos Vidal (AEIDL).

Speakers reflected on how redefining ruralities can improve rural understanding and rural policymaking. They convened that such redefinition could help **move from the unclear box of “rural” towards a more adequate and multi-faceted, and indeed functional, picture of rural areas**, accompanying each type of “rurality” with more nuanced and granular data. A better understanding of service provision, demographic trends or other similar patterns in rural areas might contribute to tackle more adequately rural needs and unleash opportunities in these territories.

Mr Dijkstra also took the chance to underscore that the present Joint Research Centre’s work on Functional Rural Areas is for analytical purposes. Its main goal is to **highlight how people move across the territory and access basic services**. It is not likely that the Commission will use it any time soon to spatially target EU funds or to revise the present Eurostat official [TERCET classification](#) of urban and rural areas. As such, it is a **wake-up call to rethink the territory based on real-life functionalities**.

Additionally, there was a wide consensus, that **rather than thinking on “urban” and “rural” as distinct categories a functionality-based approach should be tested to support rural characterisation**. Such an approach would contribute to unveil and analyse needs and trends related to service provision and territorial dynamics beyond administrative boundaries.

The discussants agreed that further debate is needed to assess criteria towards the definition of an EU functional approach and whether the EU should move towards a **definition of “Functional Areas” at large**, overcoming the current separation between “Functional Rural Areas” and “Functional Urban Areas”.



Source: Freepik

