



GRANULAR

KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER ACCELERATOR

Rural proofing: Making policies work for rural areas through data & Earth observation

HIGHLIGHTS REPORT

14 October 2025

Introduction

On 14 October 2025, [GRANULAR](#) partners from [P10](#) and the [European Association for Innovation in Local Development \(AEIDL\)](#) co-organised with partners from [RUSTIK](#) and [VALORADA](#) a workshop during the [European Week of Regions and Cities](#).

The event, titled “[Rural proofing: Making policies work for rural areas through data & Earth observation](#)”, focused on integrating rural proofing into policymaking and decision-making. The goal is to unlock the potential of all territories. This supports the right of people to live and thrive in rural areas, aligning with the [Commission's Vision on Agriculture and Food](#).

Jack van der Hoek, Mayor of Schouwen-Duiveland in the Netherlands, moderated the session, where key experts intervened, following three main guiding questions:

- “How can we make sure that rural proofing becomes more than a mechanism creating awareness?”
- Which insight can you share on the implementation of rural proofing in practice?
- Which level of governance supports each other in the application of rural proofing?”



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ONLINE



70 PARTICIPANTS



EVENT INFORMATION
[HERE](#).

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UK Research
and Innovation

Panel on Rural Proofing



Alexia Rouby
DG AGRI, European Commission

Alexia Rouby from the Commission's DG AGRI, presented the core message from the [Rural Pact policy lab on rural proofing](#), held in June 2025. Rural proofing should be embedded in every step of policy making, not just used as a check. She stressed that this total inclusion must explicitly cover both the way policies are **delivered** and how their success is **evaluated**.

For rural proofing to be effective and sustainable, several hurdles must be cleared, including changing political circumstances. Effective rural proofing, therefore, demands **cooperation across the entire government** (whole-of-government approach). This means breaking down departmental silos, as a coordinated strategy requires all agencies to work together.

She highlighted a major, long-term challenge in building long-standing rural proofed policies is the need to **build expertise and awareness** among government staff. This is a time-intensive process that becomes especially difficult when governments change. Furthermore, the role of local people is crucial, as **citizen mobilisation is vital for sustaining the necessary political commitment** over the long term.

To move beyond initial aims, rural proofing needs a clear, strong foundation. The process must accurately reflect and represent the vast **diversity of rural areas** across the continent. This requires a **unified view with clear goals** to guide action.

To gain traction across various policy departments, it is essential to highlight the **positive potential** and opportunities inherent in rural areas, making the concept a far more attractive proposition to other parts of government. Successful work also demands systems and tools that use the **right information**, which must be **sufficiently detailed**. These systems must actively **engage stakeholders** and ensure that results are **transparent** and accountable. Clear **roles and shared responsibilities** are also necessary, especially when dealing with specific sectoral policies.

She concluded her presentation by highlighting that the European Commission views rural proofing as a **useful process** (n.b., as it is part of the [EU Better Regulation system](#)). The Commission is actively taking up the challenge of making rural proofing a reality, including crucial collaboration with **Eurostat** to develop better data and supporting the **rural observatory**, **getting different government departments on board** and managing the complexities of **engaging with stakeholders** on their highly varied expertise.



Betty Ann Bryce
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

Betty-Ann Bryce from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) focused her speech on the system itself, arguing that even a mechanism that only raises awareness is a success. She underscored that **awareness is central to effective rural proofing**. Simply having a system that raises awareness already represents significant success, but this must be paired with concrete action.

Rural proofing is fundamentally a **process** focused on ensuring the **evidence used is correct** and available **before decisions are made**. This requires strategic timing: stakeholders must be involved during the critical **"window of action"**.

A key step is identifying the **'rural proofer'**, the person (often a bureaucrat) who will actually use the proofing tools. Stakeholder involvement must blend both **technical input** (expert knowledge) and **local input** (community experience). Bringing these different forms of input together creates crucial **rural proofing intelligence**, which then forms the foundation for the entire supporting system.

She highlighted the essential role **bureaucrats** play: *"You need to focus on bureaucrats because they will stay when the elected politicians leave, and by building a robust system with them, the process won't depend on unstable political will."* Building a **robust system** that involves government departments and their dedicated staff is the surest way to prevent the process from collapsing during political transitions.

Signals from higher levels, such as the **European Commission**, are helpful for underscoring the importance of the process. However, a frequently overlooked step is **connecting bureaucrats directly to the local community**. For success, it is vital to pilot and test materials, including data, with the very bureaucrats who will use them in their daily work.

Ultimately, rural proofing is not about charity; it fundamentally relates to **equality** and ensuring fair outcomes across all regions.



Christos Moutsios

Region of Central Greece

Finally, Christos Moutsios, Secretary General in the Region of Central Greece, provided an overview of how the **Region of Central Greece** is putting rural proofing into practice. This region encompasses five regional units and 25 municipalities, and its strategy relies on carefully managed **financial and human resources**, alongside specialised tools. The Region has adopted a **specific methodology** that is finely tuned to the **unique economic, social, and geographical characteristics** of its diverse territory.

The Region has developed a targeted strategy specifically for its mountainous areas, covering municipalities such as Karpenisi, Makrakomi, Agraga, Delphi, and Dorida. This comprehensive approach tackles key challenges by addressing **demographic, social, environmental, and economic needs**. The entire strategy is built on several key pillars, including **resilience, climate adaptation, protection of natural and cultural heritage, and social cohesion**.

Mr Moutsios provided practical examples of how their rural proofing policies translate into concrete actions directly benefiting their citizens:

- **Essential services access:** to guarantee stable access to vital public services, the Region offers monthly financial grants to permanent employees and medical staff working in rural areas.
- **Targeted healthcare:** they have implemented specialized provisions for medical care for pregnant women residing in mountainous municipalities.
- **Fighting poverty and isolation:** the 'Gefyra program' (meaning 'Bridge' in Greek) is a vital social initiative designed to combat poverty and strengthen social cohesion by providing a daily breakfast to students in isolated areas.
- **Utilising modern data:** the Region leverages modern technology and data, including specialized apps for hydrometeorological information, to manage resources and respond to environmental challenges.



Discussion Tables: Rural proofing exercises in EU projects

The second part of the event featured six dedicated discussion tables focused on reviewing and commenting on rural proofing procedures developed within the **GRANULAR**, **VALORADA**, and **RUSTIK** projects. These tables provided detailed insights into how rural proofing is being applied to diverse issues, from climate change resilience to social integration.

GRANULAR

The **GRANULAR** tables showcased the [rural proofing methodology developed in the GRANULAR project](#), applying it to policy and service design.

Kirsi Korhonen and **Anne Vanttinen** (representing the [Finnish Multi-actor Lab](#)), which focuses was on Archipelago and Island Policy. The lab is testing rural proofing against the **Archipelago Act** (under revision) and the **National Archipelago Programme 2024–2027** (under implementation). The initiative strongly promotes participatory governance, supports economic diversity (fishing, tourism, food), makes digital and physical accessibility central priorities, and emphasises environmental and climate resilience by encouraging local sustainable solutions.

In addition, **Monika Belhaj** from the [Lithuanian Replication Lab](#) covered the **Universal Design for Accessible Rural Services**. This local-level initiative in the Ignalina region focuses on assessing and practically implementing Universal Design (UD) principles to ensure all public services and infrastructure are universally accessible. Although not explicitly “rural,” the UD principles inherently target remote areas at risk of being left behind, strengthening social cohesion and liveability by supporting mobile libraries, youth engagement, and digital inclusion.

The report outlining the rural proofing assessments conducted by the GRANULAR multi-actor labs, including the Finnish and Lithuanian labs analyses, is available [here](#).

RUSTIK

The **RUSTIK** tables explored decentralised rural proofing techniques applied to specific socio-economic issues.

Francesco Mantino led a discussion table of the [Italian Living Lab](#), focusing on **Policy Coherence with Local Needs in Mountain Areas**. The core issue in this lab is aligning future forest sector policies with local needs, given critical challenges like land fragmentation, poor generational renewal, and lack of service access. The process involves comprehensive analysis of unmet needs, consultation with diverse stakeholders (forest producers, timber, tourism), and aiming for a short policy review document to **give local stakeholders a voice** to regional administration. This decentralised rural proofing is seen as complementary to national efforts.

Moreover, **Petri Kahila** ([Finnish Living Lab](#)) discussed the **Implementation of the Immigrant Integration Act at Local Level** in the North Karelia region. Facing demographic challenges (aging population, labour shortage), the region identifies **immigrant retention** as a focal challenge. The lab uses decentralised rural proofing to align with the upcoming 2025 reform of the Integration Act, providing crucial data to support efficient integration services and ensure immigrants become long-term contributors to regional growth.

VALORADA

The **VALORADA** tables focused on the use of data and Earth Observation for regional resilience.

Georgia Kalousi addressed rural proofing in the **Coastal Erosion**. The [Region of Central Greece](#), is highly susceptible to climate change challenges like coastal erosion, wildfires, and floods. The VALORADA team's actions here focus on assessing risks to the agriculture sector (from hot summers, water scarcity, and soil erosion) and analysing risks linked to **rising water levels** in the Mediterranean coastal zone.

Finally, **Cristobal Reveco**, led a table focusing on the rural proofing exercise led in the [five demonstration cases](#) from the VALORADA project. The discussion in this table centered on the **Data Catalogue**, drawing on expertise in Earth Observation, systemic innovation, and climate risk data to enhance rural and regional resilience.

Conclusion

Jack van der Hoek closed the session by highlighting the key takeaways from the different discussion tables. Making rural proofing work means creating **strong, reliable governance** structures, backed up by high-quality, detailed and granular data that we can actually use to take the right decisions at multiple governance levels.

Ultimately, the ongoing work from the **GRANULAR**, **RUSTIK**, and **VALORADA** project teams shows a shared commitment to **build the necessary tools and methods** to make rural proofing a reality. This effort will ensure policies accurately reflect the wide variety of rural areas, ensuring equality and fairness to ensure all rural areas across Europe can reach its full potential.

GRANULAR co-organised this event, as part of it [Knowledge Transfer Accelerator](#), which has recently partnered with the **Rural Pact Community Group** on ‘[Innovating Rural Public Policy](#)’. The group is a virtual space open to all interested stakeholders to exchange knowledge and solutions to accelerate the development of rural areas, which complements the KTA workshops presently carried out by GRANULAR, and will enable the KTA Community to continue engaging with itself and with other EU stakeholders after the GRANULAR project conclusion in September 2026.

