



GRANULAR & RUSTIK FINAL CONFERENCE

HIGHLIGHTS REPORT

24–25 June 2026 | Brussels



GRANULAR & RUSTIK Final conference highlights report

Date: 24 & 25 June 2026

Venue: Fondation Universitaire, Brussels

Participants: 114 participants

Presentations available [here](#).

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FOREWORD

The joint final conference of the GRANULAR and RUSTIK Horizon Europe projects took place on 24-25 June 2026 at the Fondation Universitaire in Brussels. The event was co-organised by the two projects, with the European Association for Innovation in Local Development (AEIDL) organising the first day, and Euromontana organising the second day, in close cooperation with the **two project coordinators**, the Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Montpellier (GRANULAR) and the Institute for Rural Development Research (RUSTIK) and the respective projects cosortia.

This conference report summarises two half days of dialogue between researchers, practitioners, and high-level policymakers from the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Committee of the Regions. This gathering marked a milestone, translating four years of transdisciplinary research from both projects into actionable evidence to support the Long-Term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas (LTVRA).

The conference sought to move beyond the presentation of new datasets and indicators towards a broader discussion of what four years of evidence tell us about the realities, trajectories and diversity of rural Europe.

A key objective of the conference was to contribute to a renewed understanding of rural Europe, moving from narratives based primarily on deficit and decline towards a more differentiated understanding of rural diversity, resilience, innovation and development potential.

Rather than focusing exclusively on evidence generation, the conference provided an opportunity to reflect on what four years of research reveal about contemporary rural Europe, emerging territorial trends, and the implications for future policy and governance. The goal over the two days was thus to move from defining and measuring rural territorial complexity to examining how that knowledge can inform governance, rural proofing and decision-making.

The conference brought together **114 participants**, representing a diverse and highly representative group of territorial and rural development stakeholders from across Europe. An analysis of the registered attendees shows a balanced sectoral distribution, with educational institutions and public authorities and policy-makers accounting for the largest shares of participants at 14% each, followed by research and innovation networks (13%), civil society organisations (11%), EU institutions (10%), NGOs (10%), and the scientific community (8.2%).

Geographically, participants came from **22 countries**, demonstrating a strong international reach and broad European representation. The largest delegation was from Belgium, largely representing EU-level institutions and networks, followed by Spain, Italy, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Poland, Finland, the Netherlands, Austria and Sweden, as well as from Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, Lithuania, Slovenia, North Macedonia, Hungary, Portugal, Estonia and Ireland.

The conference also succeeded in extending its outreach beyond the immediate project consortium, with 45% of registered contacts representing external stakeholders who were new to the GRANULAR and RUSTIK projects, demonstrating that the conference was effective in attracting and engaging a wider community.

Additionally, the conference coincided with the European Union's negotiations for the post-2027 budget and a new generation of rural policies and funds.

The interaction between project outputs and the contributions from DG AGRI, Joint Research Centre, OECD, European Parliament Research Service, the European Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee representatives illustrated how project findings are informing wider conversations linked to the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, the Rural Pact, rural proofing and preparations for the post-2027 programming period.

As the definition and measurement of "rurality" remain critical issues in legislative discussions, the event provided a platform to showcase how fine-grained data and functional analytical frameworks can replace "one-size-fits-all" approaches.

By bringing together ministry officials and local actors, the conference aimed to bridge the gap between high-level EU policy goals and the grounded territorial intelligence necessary for effective place-based policymaking and rural proofing.

The event also utilised **Living Labs, Replication Labs, and pilot regions** as "experimental governance spaces". Through these multi-actor settings, GRANULAR and RUSTIK have co-designed tools to address the "rural definition problem" and fill data gaps regarding social, climate, and environmental dynamics.



DAY 1

EVIDENCE, DATA & TOOLS TO MEASURE RURAL TERRITORIAL COMPLEXITY

The first day of the conference, **organised by AEIDL**, focused on “**Evidence, data & tools to measure rural territorial complexity**,” and sought to address persistent knowledge gaps in how rural areas are defined, measured, and analysed. The sessions challenged traditional administrative perspectives, advocating instead for a **functional view** defined by the actual flows of everyday life, such as commuting, service access, and labour markets. The discussions highlighted the limitations of existing “one-size-fits-all” data and established a need for more **granular and context-sensitive evidence** to capture the true diversity of rural Europe. The first day connected the state of rural and territorial data at EU level with the challenges of defining and measuring rurality, gaps affecting territorial cohesion analysis and the role of EU-level instruments such as the EU Rural Observatory.

Throughout the day, researchers and practitioners showcased a suite of **methodologies and tools** designed to turn raw data into shared territorial intelligence. These included the use of **unconventional data sources** (such as web-scraping, crowdsourcing, and social-media mobility data) alongside multidimensional frameworks like the **Rural Diversity Compass** and new quality-of-life indicators. This technical and analytical foundation served as a prerequisite for the conference's second day, providing the necessary evidence base to support **decentralised rural proofing** and the delivery of more effective **place-based policies**.

Welcome & Introduction

Serafin Pazos Vidal, AEIDL

Serafin Pazos-Vidal (AEIDL) opened the joint conference by highlighting the **collaboration between the GRANULAR and RUSTIK** projects, emphasising their shared goal of addressing rural challenges through a combination of fine-grained data, resilience tools, and sustainable transition frameworks.

He further noted that the conference coincided with the **European Union’s negotiations for the new National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPP) 2028-2034**. Given the new focus on holistic interventions in each Member States across various EU funds, the notion of what is “rural” becomes even more relevant. On the positive side, because the new Plans can make holistic interventions in the territory more integrated, with less silos and gaps. However, if the definition of rural is not sufficiently precise, the rural dimension of the new Plans risk being overlooked. This is why the present legislative negotiations are devoting a significant amount of time to narrow down the rural dimension of the new NRPPs. Therefore, by bringing together ministry officials, researchers, and local actors, the conference aimed to bridge the gap between methodological advancements from GRANULAR and RUSTIK, and the practical realities of **place-based policymaking**.

OPENING: Understanding territorial complexity in Europe

Michelle Marshalian, Joint Research Centre

The opening remarks of the conference were provided by Michelle Marshalian from the Joint Research Centre, European Commission. Michelle Marshalian is a researcher and territorial analyst at the JRC where her work focuses on territorial analysis and defining functionality in rural places. She started her speech by challenging traditional perspectives on how we define and govern rural space. She argued that while policymakers typically view territories through administrative boundaries, these "tidy, fixed boundaries" often fail to account for how people actually live and move. As Ms Marshalian noted:

"We govern by lines on a map, but people live across them in functional relationships that administrative boundaries often fail to capture. To make policies truly fit for purpose, we must shift toward a functional view that reflects the real geography of everyday life."

To operationalise this functional view, the JRC, in collaboration with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), has developed a definition of **Functional Rural Areas (FRAs)**. Unlike Functional Urban Areas (FUAs), which centre on densely populated cities and their commuting zones, FRAs are constructed by identifying local centres (the largest settlements reachable within a 10-minute drive) and connecting them to their hinterlands based on travel times. This methodology groups settlements together until an area is large enough that people are less likely to travel outside of it for basic needs, creating **"the real geography of everyday life"**.

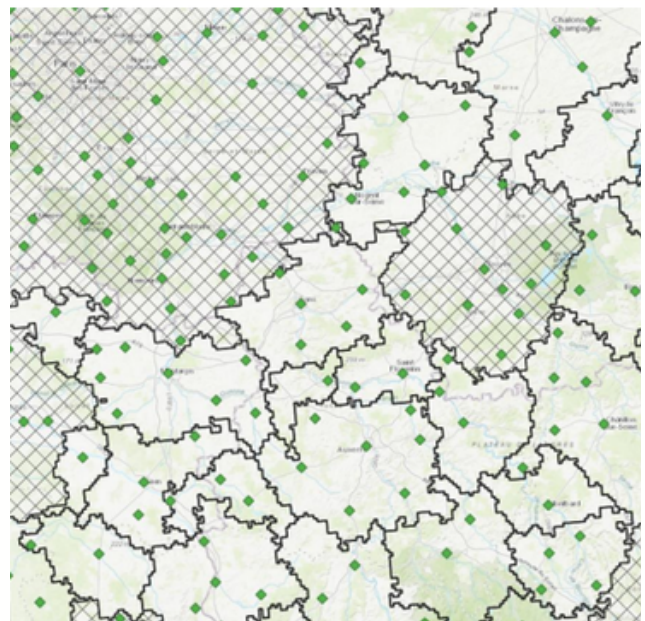


Figure 1. Functional area: the real geography of everyday life. Source: Joint Research Centre.

The research findings presented by Ms Marshalian highlighted a stark divide: between 2011 and 2021, **FUAs in Europe grew by 3.3%, while FRAs shrunk by 2.4%**. In exploring what explains these differences in population change, the JRC found that **demographics account for 67% of the gap**. Michelle Marshalian stressed that the age, gender, and migration structure of a community are the primary drivers of growth or decline, noting that if these demographic factors were equalised, the growth gap between urban and rural areas would shrink by approximately 45%.

Beyond demographics, she highlighted the critical role of service provision.

“People are very intolerant in rural places and in urban places from being away from primary schools. But tolerance increases if we provide more services, a group of services and a bundle of services. So, bundling buys tolerance.”

For example, the distribution of social care services was found to actively reduce the population growth gap between urban and rural areas. Interestingly, the research also suggested that digital connectivity could partially offset poor physical infrastructure, with over-performance in broadband linked to less negative population trends in areas with mid-range road performance.

Ms Marshalian also addressed the specific role of tourism in rural development, revealing a “proximity paradox” regarding accommodation. Unlike in urban centres where hotel capacity is more closely linked to demographic change, Airbnb capacity is positively associated with growth in rural areas. This suggests that tourism policies must be territorially differentiated, as the factors that drive attractiveness and retention in a remote mountain village differ fundamentally from those in a city suburb.

Looking ahead, the JRC aims to delve deeper into the heterogeneity within rurality, examining how income and remoteness affect these functional dynamics. Michelle Marshalian concluded by stating that the ultimate goal is to establish minimum-service standards that consistently support population retention. By using increasingly granular data, the Commission intends to prepare rural territories for upcoming technological, demographic, and geopolitical changes through robust, evidence-based policy action.



Questions and Discussion

The Q&A session following the presentation touched upon the practical and political implications of the JRC's functional mapping.

To start with, moderator Serafín Pazos Vidal observed that these maps are sometimes shown to mayors in a provocative way, as mayors may mistake them from "Brussels" attempt to consolidate their bundled into a larger functional area. Dispelling those fears, Michelle Marshalian confirmed that the intent is not to erase local identities but to provide evidence-based arguments for local governments to demand better service provision from national authorities by demonstrating the actual distances residents must travel to meet basic needs.

A significant portion of the discussion focused on the weighting of specific services, particularly education. One participant from Scotland questioned the finding that primary schools might not seem to "matter" in some statistical models. Ms Marshalian refined this point, highlighting that while primary schools are administrative and do not always react quickly to population change, education is a foundational pillar of rural viability.

"The tolerance for primary schools and secondary schools is really low. That means if you are not around a 10-to-15-minute driving time to a primary school, then population change decreases faster."

The audience also probed the logic of excluding urban areas from rural functional catchments. Ms Marshalian defended this methodological choice by explaining that if a rural resident lives within a 30-to-60-minute driving range of a city, they are functionally integrated into that urban area's economy and service network. While this creates an overlap where urban residents use rural functions and vice-versa, the FRA model seeks to identify territories that are not served by major cities to highlight where service gaps are most acute.

Finally, the discussion addressed the limitations of purely theoretical or cross-national models. Michelle Marshalian admitted that while the JRC can observe broad European patterns, it cannot always capture the national institutional context that drives local outcomes. She concluded by emphasising that this is precisely why projects like GRANULAR and RUSTIK are vital: they supplement the JRC's top-down data with local knowledge and "collective sense-making". This synergy between European-wide data and bottom-up territorial intelligence is the necessary next step for implementing meaningful rural proofing across the EU.

Introduction to GRANULAR & RUSTIK: scope, gaps and complementarities

Tristan Berchoux (GRANULAR Coordinator) and **Simone Sterly (RUSTIK Coordinator)** presented the introductory session, framing the two "sister projects" as a unified effort to overcome the limitations of uniform EU policy frameworks. Both initiatives were established under the same Horizon Europe call to address a fundamental problem: the reliance on uniform EU policy frameworks that often overlook the specific challenges rural areas face during ecological, digital, and social transitions.

As Tristan Berchoux highlighted:

“A lot of policies are quite uniform in their understanding of rural areas, and they hide a lot of specificities of rural areas.”

The coordinators highlighted that current rural policies are frequently hampered by a rural definition problem, where simple population density metrics fail to capture multi-spatial dimensions and territorial specificities. By utilising transdisciplinary, multi-actor methodologies such as Living Labs and Replication Labs, the session established how GRANULAR and RUSTIK work in tandem to fill critical knowledge gaps and provide the evidence-based tools needed for effective place-based policymaking. The introductory remarks also situated the projects' original ambitions, thematic areas and complementary conceptual approaches alongside their key findings and results.



Introduction to GRANULAR

Tristan Berchoux, GRANULAR Coordinator

Tristan Berchoux from the Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Montpellier explained that GRANULAR was established to address the problem of uniform policy frameworks that often fail to account for the specific ecological, digital, and social challenges faced by diverse rural territories. He identified four primary causes for this gap: traditional rural theories that fail to capture multi-spatial dimensions, existing data that is at spatial scales too broad to capture local specificities, a lack of tools to process evidence into policy, and insufficient engagement of local stakeholders in development processes. To counter these, the project utilises a multi-actor approach through seven Living Labs and nine Replication Labs, serving as the engine for co-designing tools that incorporate local knowledge and ensure outputs are relevant to specific places.

The conceptual backbone of this approach is the Rural Diversity Compass, which categorises rural functionalities into four dimensions: productive, recreational, environmental, and residential. Dr Berchoux noted that the Compass helps make diversity and territorial trade-offs visible before indicators or policies are designed. To fill persistent data gaps, GRANULAR explored unconventional data sources, such as web-scraping for niche signals in housing and tourism, crowdsourcing via platforms like OpenStreetMap to map local services, and using Earth observation combined with AI for dynamic baselines of land use. These methods allow for near-real-time insights, such as monitoring transport poverty risks triggered by energy price fluctuations.

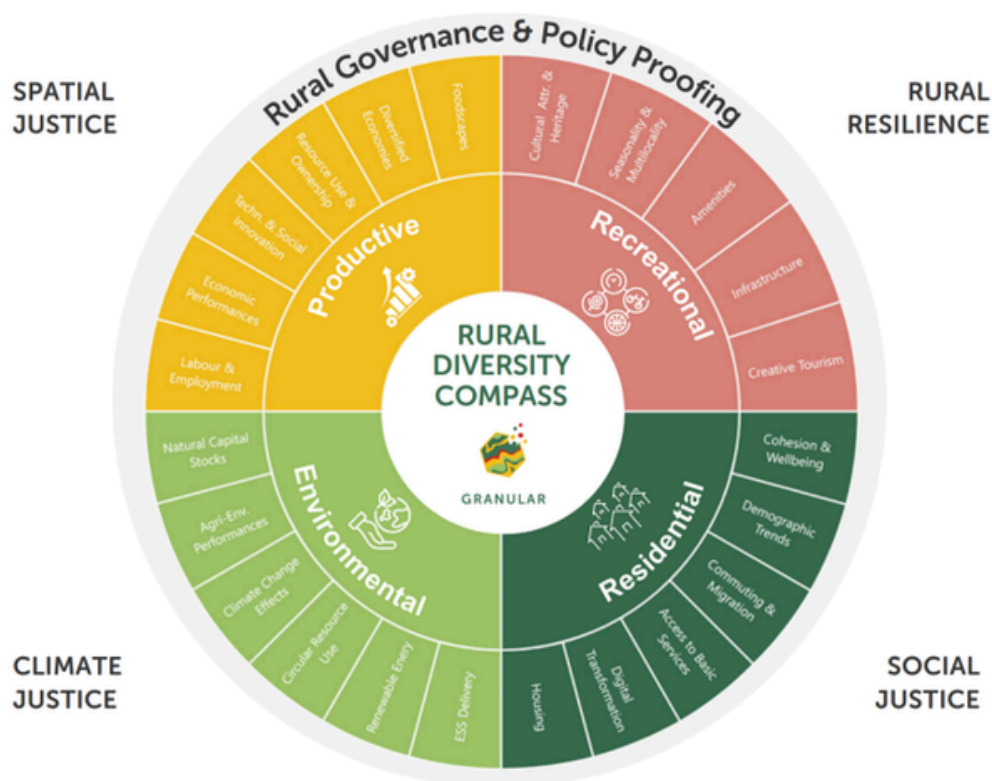


Figure 2. GRANULAR Rural Governance & Policy Proofing. Source: GRANULAR project

Tristan Berchoux also shared critical analytical and contextual insights, emphasising that access to services remains the essential foundation for rural wellbeing and attractiveness. While research found a "rural wellbeing advantage" in social ties, this advantage is uneven and highly dependent on how rurality is measured. He argued that data should serve as an objective anchor for collective sense-making between researchers, practitioners, and citizens, noting:

"We should use data to open conversation, not to close them, in the sense that they are useful anchor points, but we need to then incorporate local knowledge within that data in order to understand it."

Finally, he addressed the capacity gap, noting that "open data does not mean usable data". He highlighted that rural territories face hidden costs in data governance (including infrastructure, software, and specialised personnel) that must be funded to translate data into actionable evidence. Dr Berchoux concluded that the goal is to integrate evidence directly into the "Data and Policy cycle," advocating for the co-definition of policy and research agendas to ensure that scientific findings are available precisely when policy windows open.

Introduction to RUSTIK

Simone Sterly, RUSTIK Coordinator

Simone Sterly from the Institute for Rural Development Research (IfLS), opened her presentation by framing RUSTIK as a response to the major transitions currently reshaping rural Europe, including socio-economic and demographic shifts, climate pressures, and digital transformation. She identified critical knowledge gaps that the project aims to bridge, specifically the fragmented nature of existing rural data, the weak integration between science, policy, and practice, and a persistent lack of effective place-based policy tools. Reflecting on these gaps, Ms Sterly remarked that "the real challenge is not better data, but better governance," arguing that a system's capacity to work with evidence is what determines policy success. The core objective of the project is to provide the evidence base and methodologies required to help rural communities contribute to and benefit from these transitions rather than being left behind.

The project's methodology is built on a transdisciplinary approach involving 31 partners and 14 diverse pilot regions across Europe. She described the Living Lab approach as the project's central research "vessel," where researchers and local practitioners engage in iterative cycles of envisioning, planning, and collective learning. These labs are organised around five key thematic clusters: strengthening rural businesses, sustainable food and forestry systems, social inclusion, land and resource use, and digital socio-spatial governance.

Key outcomes presented included the **RUSTIK Information System and interactive Viewer**, which integrate European-level data with granular local evidence collected through regional data experiments. Simone Sterly also highlighted several innovative policy tools, most notably the framework for Decentralised Rural Proofing (DRP), which complements top-down assessments by bringing the policy lens closer to real territories and actors. She concluded by demonstrating real-world impact, such as using RUSTIK evidence to inform regional integration reforms in Finland or mapping short supply chains to boost local food systems in Serbia and Bulgaria.



Figure 3. RUSTIK results and outcomes. Source: RUSTIK.

Conclusion

Finally, both Coordinators noted that the synergy between the two projects would continue through the final months of their respective durations. They announced plans to collaborate on **joint policy briefs** that synthesise findings from both projects, aiming to provide a unified voice and clear, actionable evidence for the ongoing **post-2027 EU policy and budget negotiations**.

ROUND TABLE | Data & evidence to characterise rural and territorial challenges in Europe

Moderated by Alessandro Sorichetta, University of Milan

The roundtable "Data and evidence to characterise rural and territorial challenges in Europe" addressed critical gaps in data granularity and comparability across diverse rural contexts. By showcasing **innovative methodologies from GRANULAR and RUSTIK**, the session demonstrated how to capture lived realities that traditional classifications often miss. The focus was on assessing data availability, granularity and comparability across EU, national and municipal levels, and on examining where existing classifications fail to capture differences between rural contexts.

Data Collection in Rural Areas

Michael Kull, LUKE & Ian McCallum, IIASA

Focusing on the science-policy perspective, **Michael Kull from the Natural Resources Institute Finland (LUKE)**, highlighted that the primary challenge for rural policy is not necessarily data availability, but "collective sense making" – the process of helping policymakers find, interpret, and use data effectively. He framed rural proofing as a central tool for this, viewing it not as a simple checklist but as a "process of collective interpretation" and "policy-science co-learning".

He noted that maps and indicators do not speak for themselves and require local knowledge to explain what the data truly means for a community. His work in the Finnish Replication Lab applying rural proofing to the national island and archipelago policy demonstrated that while official statistics effectively measure decline, they often miss temporality, such as seasonal population expansions that radically change service needs and infrastructure pressure.

He further argued that for data to become "shared territorial intelligence," research must be embedded in inclusive governance processes that allow rural voices to counter traditional urban biases. A key lesson from his work was the value of pragmatism, where the collective reflection on policy impacts mattered more than achieving "perfect completion" of every data set. Michael Kull identified Leader Local Action Groups as vital intermediaries in this process, as they possess the unique capacity to combine cross-sectoral knowledge and translate scientific evidence into local realities. This approach has already shown tangible results in the Finnish context, where the outcomes of these sense-making exercises are directly informing the co-design of the region's new local development plan, ensuring the research has a lasting institutional legacy.



Figure 4. Rural proofing in practice. Source: LUKE.

Ian McCallum from the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) emphasised that the core challenge for rural policy is not merely data availability, but discovery, interpretation, and "collective sense-making" – the process of helping policymakers find and effectively apply evidence. He detailed how GRANULAR is filling critical knowledge gaps through unconventional methods, such as utilising Facebook "Data for Good" mobility records to reveal everyday and seasonal flows. These datasets go beyond simple counts to identify the specific geographic origins of people traveling into rural areas, providing vital insights for tourism planning and monitoring cross-border employment travel. He also showcased advances in accessibility and travel-time modelling, which now allow for nuanced comparisons between car, bicycle, and public transport speeds, such as measuring the specific time required for school children to reach their classes.

A key innovation presented was the Transport Poverty Risk Index (TPRI), a near-real-time tool that monitors how fluctuating energy and fuel prices disparately affect peripheral rural regions. Ian McCallum noted that this index is particularly sensitive to geopolitical shocks, such as the war in Ukraine or Middle East conflicts, which trigger cost-of-living spikes in remote areas that are often invisible in traditional statistics. Other innovations include AI-driven text-to-satellite imagery, which uses Vision-Language models to allow non-experts to explore rural Europe through simple text prompts like "Mediterranean olives" or "seasonal contrasts". He also showcased a landscape attractiveness model built on a crowdsourcing campaign, which captures perceived aesthetic values across different European rural and coastal territories to inform regional planning.

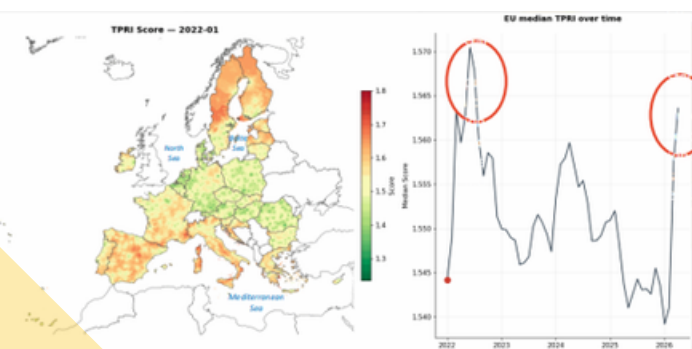


Figure 5. Transport poverty risk index. Source: Nordregio.

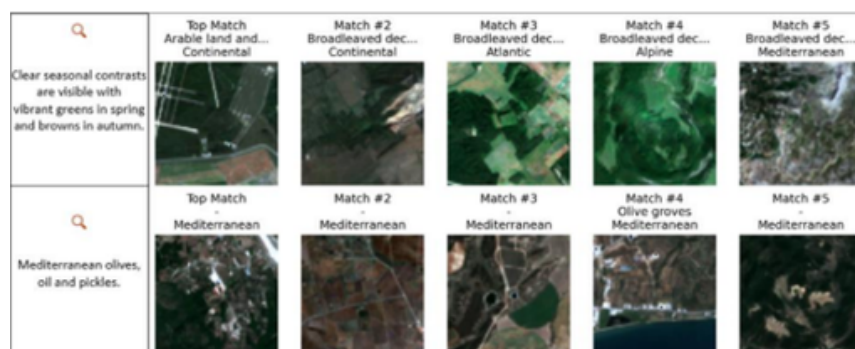


Figure 6. Text-to-image retrieval using a Vision-Language model. Source: CIHEAM, Tetis.

To fill gaps where formal data are thin, GRANULAR leverages crowdsourcing via OpenStreetMap and web-scraping for niche signals in housing and tourism. Ultimately, the project argues that turning raw data into shared territorial intelligence requires building institutions and platforms that foster constant dialogue between researchers and practitioners. By prioritizing scalability and open data, these tools are made accessible through repositories like Zenodo and the GRANULAR digital platform, ensuring they can be re-used to provide a consistent view of rural dynamics across Europe. This approach ensures that data collection is integrated into local development cycles (such as the preparation of new Leader local development plans), thereby strengthening the legitimacy and responsiveness of place-based policies.

RUSTIK Monmouthshire Living Lab

Demelza Jones, Monmouthshire County Council

Demelza Jones, representing the Monmouthshire County Council in Wales as part of the RUSTIK Living Lab, addressed the "demographic challenge" in Monmouthshire, a rural county experiencing a steeply aging population and high levels of youth outmigration. The presentation illustrated how Living Labs can provide a structured mechanism for capturing local voices and lived experiences that are often invisible in conventional datasets.

The Living Lab sought to strengthen the citizen-voice evidence base by engaging younger working-age residents (aged 18-44) to understand the qualitative reasons behind their migration decisions. Findings revealed that while housing costs and low local wages were major drivers for leaving, social factors (such as a lack of inclusive leisure options) deeply affected their sense of belonging.

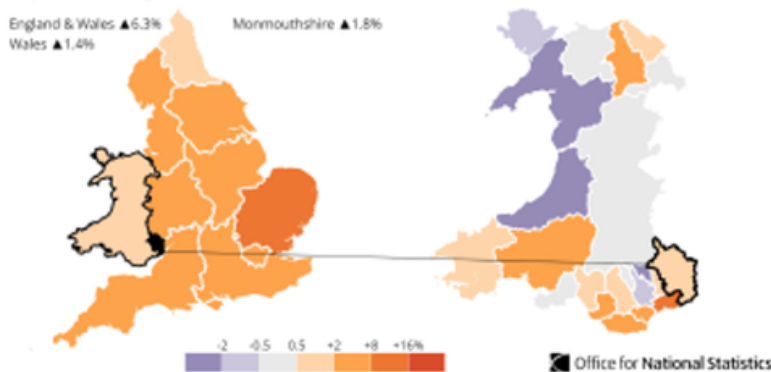


Figure 7. Population change in Monmouthshire, from 2011 to 2021. Source: Office for national statistics.

To translate these insights into policy, the project developed a prototype dashboard that integrates official census data with deprivation indices and original "Maptionnaire" survey results. This tool is designed to inform well-being of future generations assessments and support local strategies for affordable housing and post-16 education. She concluded that attracting and retaining younger residents requires a holistic approach that places their lived experiences and aspirations at the center of policy design.

GRANULAR French Living Lab

Louise Chasset, Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée

Louise Chasset shared the practical experience of managing the Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée area, a region where the population in coastal municipalities can multiply by 10 during the summer peak. This experience demonstrated the added value of combining scientific analysis with local knowledge, a key objective of the Living Lab methodology.

The GRANULAR Living Lab investigated tourist travel habits to help local stakeholders anticipate service needs, such as rescue services and hospital capacity during peak periods. By liberating internal municipal phone location data and combining it with web scraping and quantitative surveys, they provided a collective, objective view of regional dynamics that was previously unavailable.

Ms Chasset emphasised that data to inform decisions is essential for taking an objective view of territorial change, especially in the context of climate change and seasonal shifts. However, her experience shows that even when data is free, it is not always accessible or usable for local decision-makers without specialised facilitation and visualisation tools. She thus advocated for better support to bridge the gap between scientific experts and local rural decision-makers to foster a culture of evidence-based planning.



Reflections from the OECD

Marc Bournisien de Valmont, OECD

The roundtable concluded with some reflections from **Marc Bournisien de Valmont**, representing the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), where he is a Policy Analyst in the Regional Development and Multi-level Governance Division in the OECD Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions, and Cities. In his presentation, he argued that better evidence fundamentally shifts the rural narrative from managing decline to building resilience. He stressed that averages are no longer sufficient; policymakers need granular, functional data that distinguishes between "rural close to cities" and "remote rural areas". While areas near cities face housing pressure and commuting dependency, remote areas deal with professional shortages and higher service delivery costs.

He introduced the "*proximity paradox*," noting that rural towns close to cities often suffer from "service hollowing out" because planners assume nearby urban services are sufficient, even if they are practically inaccessible to rural residents. Data on travel times and service quality is therefore essential to reveal these hidden vulnerabilities. Conversely, he points out that innovation is not purely urban; rural areas are hubs of social and community-led innovation that significantly support national productivity.

"The OECD highlights a proximity paradox. Only 35% of towns within 30 minutes of a city have a hospital, compared with 78% of metropolitan areas and 47% of other remote areas. So these places may appear well connected in a map, but in practice they can experience service hollowing out because policy planners assume that nearby urban services are enough."

Mr Bournisien de Valmont further highlighted the critical role of rural territories in national resilience, particularly regarding food security, energy production, and environmental transitions. He noted that rural areas are the primary sites for renewable energy, yet data is needed to ensure local communities benefit economically from these transitions rather than just hosting the infrastructure. Without granular data on job creation and local benefit, the green transition risks creating new territorial inequalities. He also stressed that biodiversity conservation and sustainable management of natural resources are increasingly becoming central dimensions of rural resilience and territorial attractiveness.

Resilience, he noted, is built not just through physical infrastructure but through community capacity and robust institutions. Better data reveals not only vulnerabilities but also local strengths, such as social capital and natural assets, which can be leveraged for growth. He highlighted that in many countries, rural regions have actually outperformed national GDP per capita growth, challenging the universal story of decline.

Differentiated policy frameworks are necessary because a "one-size-fits-all" approach fails to address the unique bottlenecks of different rural types. Data helps identify the real barriers to attractiveness, whether they relate to healthcare access, digital connectivity, or affordable housing. Local actors play a vital role here by validating whether services are practically accessible, rather than just existing on a map.

He concluded that the value of projects like GRANULAR and RUSTIK lies in their ability to connect high-level evidence with local practice. By making diversity visible instead of relying on averages, these projects help policymakers move toward highly targeted, place-based interventions. This synergy between top-down data and bottom-up knowledge is the necessary foundation for achieving the Long-Term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas.

Collectively, the contributions revealed that rural challenges are best understood through functional relationships, local knowledge and context-sensitive evidence rather than through traditional administrative classifications alone.



Questions and discussion

The interactive portion of the roundtable began with a Mentimeter poll, where the audience identified social cohesion and depopulation as the most critical rural challenges that current data currently fails to capture adequately. When asked about the primary obstacles to using rural data, the audience highlighted time constraints and a lack of functional knowledge as the biggest barriers for policymakers. These insights reinforced the session's core theme: that the "data gap" in rural Europe is not merely a lack of information, but a lack of capacity and time to find and interpret existing evidence.



Figure 8. Participants' views on the rural challenges that current data fail to capture adequately



Figure 9. Participants' views on the main barriers to using rural data for policymaking



During the live Q&A, moderator Alessandro Sorichetta (University of Milan) challenged the panel to explain how researchers can avoid producing "meaningful" data that ultimately goes unused by decision-makers. Michael Kull responded by advocating for the creation of national "one-stop shops" or dedicated institutions that centralise data from various projects, providing a single point of entry for officials seeking evidence on economic, environmental, or social issues. He noted that this approach, currently being explored in Finland, helps overcome the fragmented nature of rural knowledge.

Demelza Jones added that the key to uptake is aligning data tools directly with mandatory policy assessments. By showing resource-constrained local government officers that granular data can simplify statutory tasks, such as the "well-being of future generations" assessments required in Wales, researchers can present evidence as a tool that reduces administrative burden rather than an additional "difficult thing" to manage. The discussion concluded that the most effective way to support policy is not just to produce more data, but to facilitate constant interaction between those who produce the evidence and those who must act on it.

The discussion showed that effective rural proofing is not a single methodology but a broader governance capacity that combines evidence, stakeholder participation and policy learning.

Rural diversity and complexity: analytical approaches for rural areas

Moderated by Serafin Pazos Vidal, AEIDL

This session explores the characterisation of **rural diversity** through the lens of territorial typologies and their practical application within policy frameworks. Moving beyond traditional and often oversimplified "urban vs. rural" binaries, the discussion examines the concept of **territorial complexity** from a functional perspective developed in the RUSTIK project, alongside the operationalisation of diversity through new GRANULAR classifications. The session also considered multi-functionality and rural-urban linkages as ways of structuring territorial complexity.

Characterising territorial diversity in Europe's rural areas

Francesco Mantino, CREA

Francesco Mantino opened the discussion by addressing the long-standing challenge of classifying rural areas, arguing that traditional morphological approaches based solely on population density often overlook functional realities. He introduced a three-step analytical framework developed within RUSTIK that combines morphological data with functional indicators such as labour market flows and access to essential services. A central innovation of this work is the concept of "Rural Hubs", which are small and medium-sized towns that act as vital nodes in labour catchment areas, providing jobs and services to their surrounding rural hinterlands.

Applying this classification to pilot regions in Italy revealed that rural hubs and their connected areas can account for over 50% of the total population in certain territories. The findings highlighted that rural hubs often show positive trends in employment and net migration, serving as local "engines of development" and resilience. In contrast, peripheral rural areas with weak external connections face more acute demographic decline and shrinking labour markets, though Dr Mantino emphasised that these areas still possess significant development potential if their localised interactions are better understood.

The policy implications of this functional approach are immediate, particularly for the design of **National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs)** for the 2028–2034 programming period. Francesco Mantino concluded that because rural-urban interactions are highly complex, **no single model applies across all regions**. Instead, policymakers must move toward using real mobility data and differentiated functional models to ensure that the distribution of European funds truly reflects the diverse territorial configurations across the EU.

GRANULAR Rural typology

Carlos Tapia, Nordregio
& Theona Morrison, Scottish Rural Action

Carlos Tapia presented GRANULAR's efforts to develop a multi-dimensional territorial typology that moves beyond the simplified urban-rural binary. The GRANULAR typology contributes to a renewed understanding of rurality by revealing forms of diversity hidden within existing classifications.

After reviewing more than 50 existing typologies across Europe, his team identified that for a classification to be sustainable, it must be **technically robust and anchored in policy demand**. The resulting typology focuses specifically on refining existing rural classes through a data-driven, automatic classification method (K-means clustering) to avoid subjective bias in naming or grouping territories.

The methodology utilises six key dimensions measured at a **granular 1 km² grid level**, including topography, human modification of the landscape (Hemeroby index), building volume, and population dynamics. A critical component is the **accessibility index**, which calculates the travel time to various urban centres, revealing how proximity to cities reshapes rural functions. This approach allows researchers to uncover "hidden" layers of diversity, such as very low-density cells that are functionally integrated into urban regions versus those that remain isolated.

Dr Tapia noted that the **GRANULAR typology** ultimately complements and verifies the utility of **DEGURBA**, but provides the necessary nuance to distinguish between **intensifying peri-urban rurality and remote hinterlands**. To ensure long-term utility, all data and coding used to generate the typology are open-source and reproducible, allowing local planners to update the classification as new census data becomes available. This modular system enables policymakers to tailor territorial lenses to specific transitions, such as land-use management or social service delivery.

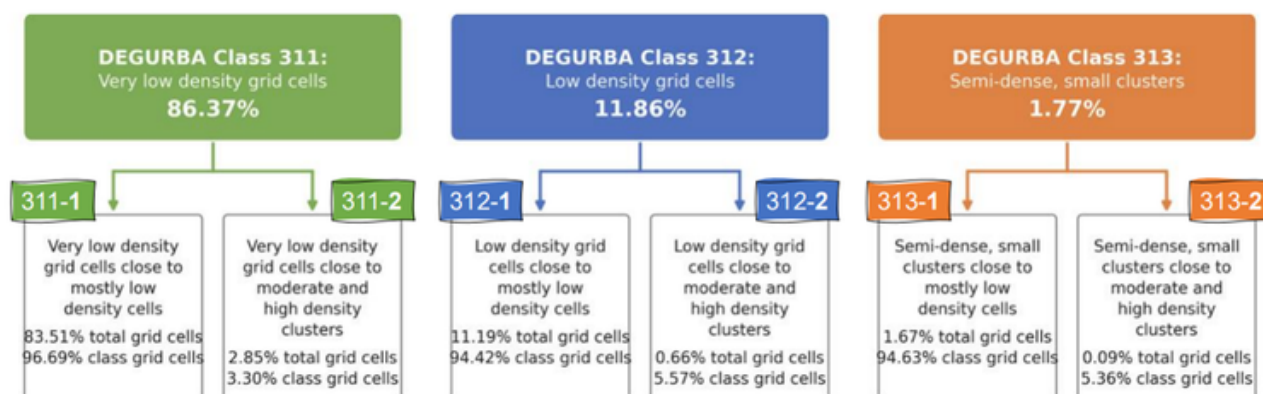


Figure 10. GRANULAR rural typology - new classes. Source: Nordregio

Theona Morrison, representing the Scottish Rural Action, brought a human-centric perspective to the technical debate, emphasising that labels used in research and policy have a profound impact on how communities perceive themselves and their future. She shared a powerful quote originally authored by **Catherine MacPhee**, the archivist for the Isle of Skye, which directly challenges the use of the word "remote" to describe rural territories:

“Remote... that word sidelines our communities, as if we exist at the edge of the world looking in. We are not remote, we are rural. Our culture is not peripheral; it is powerful. Our voices are not distant; they are here, loud and clear. Rural, not remote: that is who we are.”

She used this statement to emphasize that **naming matters**, as the language used to describe a place shapes how governments act, how resources are allocated, and how the future of those communities is imagined,. She argued that defining places based on their distance from urban centers effectively erases their **strength, resilience, and central role in cultural identity**.

She illustrated this point by highlighting that regions often labeled as "isolated" are frequently **alive with Gaelic song, tradition, and story**, serving as vital hosts for biodiversity and innovative local solutions. In the Scottish context, the lack of nuanced data can lead to a narrative of deficit, which fails to recognise the pluralistic lives and active contributions of rural citizens who often hold multiple roles to sustain their communities.

Ultimately, Mrs Morrison contended that **naming matters** because words shape how governments act and how resources are shared. She urged researchers and policymakers to ensure that data-driven typologies do not accidentally reinforce "colonial" perspectives of measuring everything from the capital. Instead, analytical frameworks should empower local residents by **validating their lived experience** and recognising their voices as "loud and clear" participants in the European transition.





Reaction from the EPRS

Vasileios Margaras, EPRS

Vasileios (Vasilis) Margaras provided a reaction from the perspective of the **European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS)**, where he is a Policy Analyst specialising in EU Cohesion Policy and regional/local development issues. He highlighted the vital role of projects like **GRANULAR** and **RUSTIK** in providing impartial advice to MEPs. He emphasised that the timeliness of the conference, as the EU is currently engaged in a **"big bargain" over the future budget and resources**. In this competitive environment, rural areas must put forward a strong, evidence-based discourse to secure necessary funding against contrasting priorities.

Dr Margaras noted that the concept of **"Rural Hubs"** and nuanced typologies are increasingly appearing in parliamentary reports across various committees, including **Agri (Agriculture)**, **REGI (Regional Development)**, and **Culture**. He pointed out that rurality permits all areas of life, and the added **geopolitical value** of rural border regions and islands is a growing theme in security and defence debates. Furthermore, rural territories are central to the Green Deal, food security, and energy autonomy, which are top priorities for the current Commission.

Looking ahead, he flagged several upcoming policy opportunities, including the review of the Rural Action Plan and the development of the Right to Stay strategy. He observed that the current parliamentary term is marked by volatile and unpredictable majorities, which makes it even more critical for researchers to **proactively share their piece of research with politicians and MEPs**.

He concluded by encouraging the consortium to keep providing the "flesh on the bones" for concepts like **rural proofing** to ensure they do not become mere "sexy topics" without concrete steps or indicators. By demonstrating the **costs of non-rurality** – the high price society pays when rural services fail and people are forced to move – researchers can help make the case that investing in rural areas is a fundamental requirement for a vibrant Europe. To conclude his presentation, Vasileios Margaras pleaded with the audience:

"I would like to make a plea to all of you to keep an eye on the European Parliament, to talk to your policymakers, to share all these great pieces of research with your member states, your politicians, your MEPs, and to talk about the added value of rurality more."

He framed this as a necessity because the European Parliament needs "input from academia, from researchers, but also from people living in the ground" to understand the realities of European regions. By establishing this "vertical link," research from projects like GRANULAR and RUSTIK can effectively **"fit in into the work of the European Parliament overall"**.

Questions and discussion

The interactive portion of the session centered on a Mentimeter poll that asked the audience to identify the most important policy benefit of adopting functional approaches. The results showed a clear consensus around the need for **"place-based" and "place-sensitive"** interventions. This reinforced the session's overarching theme: that for policies to be effective, they must move away from uniform, density-only definitions and instead reflect the actual ways people live and move within rural territories.

Moderator Serafín Pazos-Vidal (AEIDL) provided a concluding "sense check," noting that while researchers strive for rational and technically robust methodologies, the ultimate uptake of these tools depends on their **alignment with political realities**. He highlighted that because high-level policy making is often transactional, the added value of rural diversity must be framed in a way that resonates with political majorities and budgetary constraints.

The discussion highlighted a critical synergy between the technical typologies of researchers and the lived experience of local actors. The interaction concluded that adopting a functional lens is the most viable path to ensuring rural areas are viewed not as stagnant "museums" but as **vibrant, essential contributors** to the broader European transition.



Tools and Frameworks to Understand Rural Complexity

Moderated by Serafin Pazos Vidal, AEIDL

This session, **Tools and Frameworks to Understand Rural Complexity**, explores the multidimensional nature of **rural wellbeing** and the diverse forms of evidence required to understand what supports or constrains it. By integrating quantitative European-wide analysis with place-based insights from GRANULAR Living Labs and complementary findings from RUSTIK, the panel examines how factors such as social environments, psychological needs satisfaction, and access to amenities vary across different rural contexts, helping stakeholders and researchers prioritise actions that effectively improve the quality of life in rural communities. The session considered the methodological robustness of the tools, their transferability between territorial contexts, lessons from cross-country testing and Multi-Actor Lab applications, and their maturity for broader analytical use.

Frameworks and tools to measure subjective wellbeing & quality of life in rural Europe

Gundi Knies, Thünen-Institute of Rural Studies

Gundi Knies from the Thünen-Institute of Rural Studies opened the session by exploring the "rural happiness paradox," the phenomenon where rural residents often report higher subjective wellbeing despite facing structural disadvantages like limited service access. Her research on Wellbeing and Quality of Life for GRANULAR found that while a rural wellbeing advantage exists across Europe, it is far from universal. Specifically, this advantage disappears for younger age groups (15–25) and those over 50, and it is highly sensitive to how "rurality" is defined; for instance, the advantage often vanishes when the definition includes small towns rather than just villages and open countryside.

To capture these nuances, Dr. Knies presented a **multi-dimensional subjective wellbeing framework** that moves beyond simple life satisfaction to include affective wellbeing, psychological functioning, and social wellbeing. Using European Social Survey data, the analysis revealed that **social wellbeing and community ties are significantly higher in rural areas**, whereas urban areas tend to score higher on the satisfaction of basic psychological needs. This distinction suggests that different settlement types offer unique "wellbeing profiles" that policymakers must understand to tailor local interventions.

To make these findings actionable, Dr. Knies introduced an online digital tool hosted on the GRANULAR platform, which allows users to **explore and compare these multi-dimensional wellbeing profiles** across different European countries and welfare state modules. She noted, however, that the tool is **"only as good as the survey coverage behind it"**; for example, the Bulgarian data set lacked sufficient respondents from the countryside to support detailed rural wellbeing estimates, illustrating a broader challenge for data reliability in certain regions.



Figure 11. Digital tool to compare findings across Europe. Source: GRANULAR Digital Platform

The research further identified that the drivers of wellbeing differ fundamentally by territory: in rural areas, **the lifestyle and consumption patterns of the local population** are the most influential factors, while in urban areas, wellbeing is more closely tied to **access to services and levels of deprivation**. Gundi Knies concluded by stressing the critical need for longitudinal panel data and better survey coverage in Eastern Europe. She argued that consistent, granular measurement of local contexts is essential to move from merely describing wellbeing to identifying the specific policy levers, such as supporting local social infrastructures, that can actively improve quality of life.

GRANULAR Dutch Living Lab

Kimberly Wevers, P10

Kimberly Wevers shared the perspective of the GRANULAR Dutch Living Lab, a partnership between Wageningen University and P10, a network of 34 large rural municipalities in the Netherlands. The Lab focused on how access to basic services and housing policies directly impact rural wellbeing, matching available open data with qualitative interviews to capture **lived experience**. Ms Wevers emphasised that while the Netherlands is densely populated, its rural areas face service-provision challenges similar to more remote European regions.

A key finding of the Lab was that **statistical proximity does not always equal functional access**. For example, when a primary school closes in a small village, data might show another school remains within a 10-minute drive, but the community loses a vital social hub. This leads to "social hollowing out," where children from the same village attend different schools, weakening the **local volunteering networks** and sense of belonging that sustain rural life.

Kimberly Wevers also challenged rigid, "one-size-fits-all" national policies, specifically citing the Dutch **"30-40-30" housing rule**, which mandates a fixed percentage of social and affordable housing in new developments. Although, in theory, it is a good rule to ensure that not only expensive houses can be built, she reminds us that **"local contexts matter."** She argued that building social housing in tiny villages without public transport or local jobs can be counterproductive, as lower-income residents may not be able to afford the cars necessary to reach essential services. Hence she highlighted that **housing and service policies must be integrated and tailor-made** based on constant dialogue between policy officers and their communities. The discussion highlighted that local actors are not merely users of evidence, but co-producers of knowledge and policy solutions.

Mapping local food system through GIS: the example of TAU

Petya Slavova, Sofia University

Petya Slavova presented the RUSTIK experience in the Troyan-Apriltsi-Ugarchin region of Bulgaria, where the Living Lab investigated a "rural food paradox". Despite a significant increase in tourist interest and high demand for local food, both visitors and residents struggle to identify or access local products. This imbalance is compounded by a declining number of registered farms and a **critical lack of processing facilities**, which forces many producers into informal economic practices.

The Lab's research uncovered deep **policy tensions**, noting that centralised national food safety regulations often clash with local cultural initiatives, such as food festivals. Furthermore, agricultural policies frequently operate in a silo, separate from food policies, leaving local food systems without a coherent governance framework. Dr Slavova noted that this centralised, top-down approach often prevents local producers from having their voices heard in the design of instruments that affect their livelihoods.

To address these gaps, the project developed a **Geographic Information System (GIS) platform, "On the Way of Local Food,"** featuring 10 thematic maps designed for different users. The platform allows tourists to find markets, while enabling policymakers to track the impact of funded projects and identify where new processing infrastructure is most needed. The data has already been used to co-design the region's new Local Development Strategy, proving that even small "grassroots steps" can begin to solve complex territorial paradoxes when powered by actionable evidence.

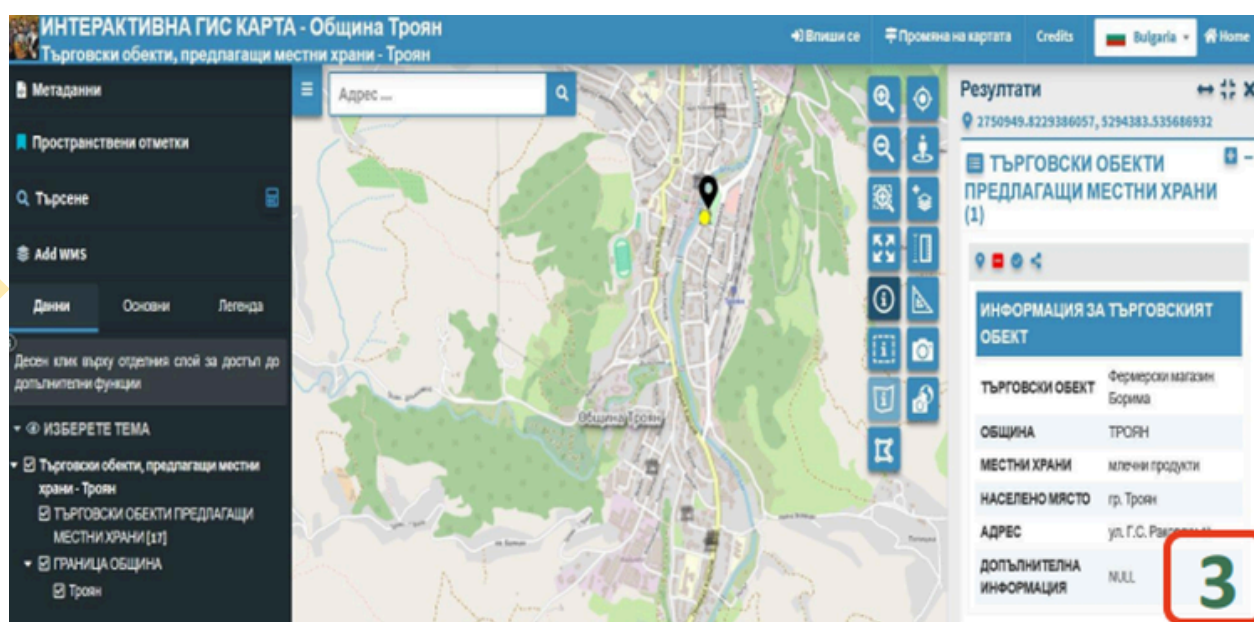


Figure 12. GIS platform On the way of local food in Troyan, Apriltsi and Ugarchin.



Reaction from DG AGRI

Carole Esclapez, DG AGRI, European Commission

To conclude the session, **Carole Esclapez**, Policy Officer at DG AGRI (European Commission) specialising in European public policy and policy analysis. She highlighted the growing importance of the **Multi-Actor Approach (MAA)** in EU research and innovation. Since 2019, the MAA has been extended to all sectors in **Horizon Europe Cluster 6**, representing 47% of topics and over 41% of the budget. Ms Esclapez praised **GRANULAR and RUSTIK** for successfully implementing this model through their Living Labs, noting that involving practitioners from the start leads to more **co-owned, demand-driven, and society-relevant outcomes**.

She noted that the project results so far were "very impressive" despite the fact that implementing the multi-actor approach faces persistent challenges, particularly **language and perception barriers**. The initial setting-up phase of Living Labs often takes significant time to align the distinct interests and timelines of researchers and local actors. In the same vein, Carole Esclapez was particularly pleased to see the **"cross-fertilisation"** between the two sister projects, as collaboration between Horizon projects is a high priority for the Commission.

Looking ahead, she flagged **replication and sustainability** as the two most critical challenges for both projects' final months. She urged the consortium to ensure that their tools (like the wellbeing indicators and food system GIS) are **anchored in relevant policies** at European, national, and local levels. She noted the strong link between Living Labs and **Local Action Groups (LAGs)** as a promising pathway for ensuring these results live on beyond the project's duration.

Finally, she invited the participants to contribute to the Commission's upcoming **Strategic Approach for R&I in Agriculture and Rural Areas**, which will be the focus of the major EU Agri 2040 Conference, taking place in September 2026. This strategy aims to bridge the gap between scientific evidence and the **Vision for Agriculture and Food**, focusing on how research can deliver impactful follow-up actions. Carole Esclapez concluded by emphasising that the Commission is keen to see that present and future projects have solid "vertical links" between Multi-Actor Lab evidence on the ground all the way to the emerging Brussels policy discussions.



Questions and discussion

The interactive segment of the session, moderated by Serafin Pazos-Vidal, highlighted the friction between standardised national policies and the diverse realities of rural life. A central piece of the discussion involved the **Dutch "30-40-30" housing rule**, which mandates a specific mix of social and affordable housing in new developments. An audience member questioned whether better data could have prevented the application of this policy in small villages that lack the necessary jobs or public transport to support social housing residents. **Kimberly Wevers** responded by emphasising that while data on job and transport locations is often available, it frequently misses the "functional" layer – such as whether bus schedules actually align with working hours. She argued for a **"tailor-made" approach**, noting that communities themselves often have the best knowledge of what is realistically needed.

The public also expressed significant interest in **informal economies**, which are perceived as vital indicators of rural wellbeing but are often "hidden" from official statistics. In response to a query about methodologies for capturing this data, **Petya Slavova** shared that her research in Bulgaria revealed these informal links as a byproduct of mapping food systems. She noted that even when local restaurants use local suppliers, many of these relationships remain informal and thus excluded from official brochures or registers, demonstrating a significant gap in how rural economic resilience is currently measured.

Finally, the discussion turned toward the **future of rural research**, with the audience probing for the next logical steps in data-evidence integration. **Gundi Knies** advocated for a shift toward **longitudinal panel data** and more robust survey coverage in Eastern Europe. She pointed out that it is currently difficult to report reliable results for countries like Bulgaria due to small sample sizes in European-wide surveys, and urged Member States to invest in infrastructures that capture the true heterogeneity of rural living conditions. The session concluded with a shared consensus that data should be used to **open conversations rather than close them**, serving as a starting point for deeper engagement with local knowledge.

A key lesson from the session was that wellbeing, service provision and territorial attractiveness are interconnected and highly dependent on local context.

Closing of the day

Tristan Berchoux, GRANULAR Coordinator
& Simone Sterly, RUSTIK Coordinator

To conclude the first day of the conference, coordinators **Tristan Berchoux (GRANULAR)** and **Simone Sterly (RUSTIK)** celebrated the **diversity and collaborative spirit of their respective consortia**.

The final takeaways of the day focused on the transition from **data production to "collective sense-making."** Tristan Berchoux emphasised that while the projects have successfully generated vast amounts of qualitative and quantitative data, the next hurdle is **digesting this evidence** through the lens of local knowledge to ensure it is usable for decision-makers. Simone Sterly reinforced this by noting the persistent **mismatch between top-down EU data supply and specific local needs**, calling for better institutional capacity to translate research into practical policy relevance. They concluded that the "real challenge" moving forward is not just collecting better data, but **fostering better governance** and overcoming language barriers to ensure local voices are heard in the policy design process. These insights provided the basis for the second day's examination of governance, rural proofing and decision-making. The scientific findings on data and methods were thus considered alongside their implications for pilot regions.



DAY 2

FROM EVIDENCE TO ACTION: DELIVERING PLACE-BASED POLICIES AND RURAL PROOFING IN THE EU

Organised by **Euromontana**, the second day of the conference, themed “**From evidence to action: delivering place-based policies and rural proofing in the EU**,” shifted the focus from data production to policy implementation. The objective was to demonstrate how the granular evidence and functional tools showcased on the first day could be integrated into **effective governance structures** to support just ecological, digital, and social transitions. Keynote speaker **Alexia Rouby (DG AGRI)** framed the discussions within the evolving EU policy landscape, highlighting the need for these research insights to inform the **post-2027 budget negotiations** and the development of National and Regional Partnership Plans.

The day was structured around three core pillars: making **rural proofing** operational through both top-down and decentralised methodologies, scaling **place-based solutions** from Living Lab experiments to wider replication, and empowering **community-led approaches**. Participants explored how to move beyond “checking boxes” to create a genuine “capacity to think rural” across all government departments. By facilitating a direct dialogue between local practitioners – such as **Local Action Groups (LAGs)** – and EU policymakers, the sessions aimed to establish the **vertical links** necessary to ensure that rural residents are not merely passive receivers of policy, but active architects of their own vibrant futures. The policy-oriented discussions were framed around the original ambition of both projects to achieve policy impact, including their relevance to rural development and territorial governance in the current European policy landscape.

Keynote speech

Alexia Rouby, DG AGRI, European Commission

Alexia Rouby (DG AGRI), Team Leader for the implementation of the **Long-Term Vision for the EU’s Rural Areas (LTVRA)**, delivered a keynote connecting the research roots of GRANULAR and RUSTIK to the evolving EU policy landscape. Her intervention highlighted the need for policy frameworks capable of recognising the diversity of contemporary rural Europe rather than relying on generalised assumptions about rural decline.

She reminded the audience that these projects were born from 2020 calls aimed at achieving territorial cohesion and ensuring that ecological and digital transitions do not decrease rural wellbeing. Mrs Rouby highlighted that the **post-2027 EU budget proposal** marks a significant shift by proposing a single fund, a **single plan (the National and Regional Partnership Plan)**, and a **single set of rules** to improve synergies for rural territories.



Addressing the specific challenge of **rural proofing**, Alexia Rouby admitted that while formal ex-ante Territorial Impact Assessments (TIAs) of major legislation are often perceived as "heavy" and "scary" by Commission departments, **"softer" mechanisms** are successfully building the capacity of services to "think rural". She noted that the future of rural proofing lies in broadening its application to include improved data collection, collaborative departmental work, and deeper stakeholder engagement through the European Rural Pact.

Alexia Rouby identified a critical need for **better analytical frameworks** that balance pan-European comparability with the granularity required to show **intra-country differences**. She specifically pointed to **Functional Rural Areas (FRAs)** as a vital tool to bridge the gap between noisy geospatial datasets and administrative boundaries that do not reflect lived reality. These frameworks must incorporate temporality to capture dynamic changes rather than just static snapshots.

A central theme of her speech was the need to **change the rural narrative** from one of universal decline to one of **"pockets of growth"** and positive futures. Mrs Rouby urged researchers to promote "weak signals" – such as the rise of rural startups – to generate political interest and inspire effective programming. She emphasised that documenting successful initiatives through the Rural Pact good practice database is essential to show what public authorities can actually achieve on the ground.

Concluding with a call to action, Alexia Rouby challenged the two projects to spend their final months formulating specific and actionable policy recommendations. She noted that instead of generic calls to "invest in services," the Commission needs precise proposals, such as tax incentives for commercial services, regulatory frameworks for multi-service points, or legal **minimum-service standards** for rural schools and post offices.

From rural evidence to policy impact

In the session "**From rural evidence to policy impact**," coordinators Simone Sterly (RUSTIK) and Tristan Berchoux (GRANULAR) examined the transition from data collection to policy influence in their respective projects. They highlight that because rural change is non-linear, effective policies must be **cross-sectoral and place-based** rather than siloed. By positioning **intermediary organisations** as the "missing links" to translate raw data, the session outlines how **modular typologies** and **flexible rural proofing** can structurally integrate grounded evidence into European and national legislative processes.

RUSTIK Policy impact

Simone Sterly, RUSTIK Coordinator

Simone Sterly, RUSTIK Coordinator, emphasised that rural change is non-linear and place-specific, meaning "one-size-fits-all" solutions are ineffective for sustainable transitions. Her first key lesson was that **policies must be cross-sectoral and place-based** to reflect how rural assets create value across multiple silos. She illustrated this with local food systems in Bulgaria and Serbia, which may begin as agricultural issues but rapidly expand to touch upon tourism, gastronomy, and local identity, necessitating an integrated territorial approach.

She further argued that **governance determines whether evidence actually matters**, noting that data does not automatically influence policy unless the governance system is capable of accepting it. She identified three enabling conditions for impactful evidence: a clear policy entry point (such as an ongoing reform), strong intermediary organisations, and sufficient resources for analytical capacity. For example, in North Karelia in Finland, a migration survey was successfully adopted for long-term use because it was directly aligned with a specific Integration Act reform.

A central pillar of her remarks was that **local knowledge is indispensable**, describing it as "essential, not optional" for revealing the diversity hidden in national statistics. This grounded evidence fills gaps where formal data is thin and validates quantitative findings, such as in Osona (Spain), where a local index revealed neighbourhood inequalities invisible to standard metrics. She identified intermediaries – including Local Action Groups (LAGs), regional councils, and development agencies – as the "missing link" required to translate these local insights into policy language and sustain momentum.

In her final takeaway, Simone Sterly concluded that the **real challenge for rural transitions is not better data, but better governance**. She noted that the limitation is often not the availability of information, but the capacity of institutional arrangements to digest and work with it. She urged a policy shift toward strengthening coordination mechanisms and learning processes to ensure that rural evidence is systematically integrated into decision-making at the local, national, and EU levels.

GRANULAR Policy impact

Tristan Berchoux, GRANULAR Coordinator

Tristan Berchoux, GRANULAR Coordinator, detailed the practical implications of the project's findings for European rural policy. A central theme was the shift from rigid, single-classification systems to **modular typology systems** that can be tailored to specific transitions, such as land-use management or social service delivery. He argued that while authoritative classifications like DEGURBA are useful, they must be supplemented by functional lenses that map **"territorial tensions"** to ensure that funding is allocated to the areas where needs and trade-offs are most acute.

Addressing the persistent issue of policy silos, Dr Berchoux emphasised that **rural proofing** must evolve into a binding, cross-sectoral, yet flexible mechanism. He shared examples from GRANULAR Multi-Actor Labs where successful sectoral policies – such as digital nomad visas or tourism promotion – unintentionally created negative side effects like housing shortages or seasonal labour imbalances. By embedding rural proofing into the policy cycle, decision-makers can better navigate these spatial trade-offs and ensure that interventions do not inadvertently harm the very territories they aim to support.

Tristan Berchoux also highlighted a critical "capacity gap," noting that **open data does not automatically equal usable data** for local authorities. He identified significant hidden costs in rural data governance, ranging from hardware and software infrastructure to the specialised personnel needed to digest complex datasets. To bridge this gap, he advocated for dedicated **funding for local data capacity** and the formalisation of participatory data collection within policy cycles, ensuring that local knowledge remains the anchor for any data-driven decision.

Finally, he called for a better alignment between research and **policy timelines**, **proposing that policy and research agendas be co-defined** from the start. This synchronisation is essential to ensure that scientific evidence is available when policy windows open and that monitoring indicators are results-based and society-relevant. He concluded that the goal should be to move toward **"collective sense-making,"** where raw data is translated into shared territorial intelligence through constant interaction between researchers, practitioners, and citizens.



PANEL DISCUSSION | Making rural proofing operation: from methodology to policy impact

Moderated by Petya Slavova, Sofia University

Panellists: Bettina Bock (Wageningen University), Giulia Martino (Ecorys), Petri Kahila (University of Eastern Finland), Francesco Mantino (CREA), Nicoletta Merlo (EESC), Betty-Ann Bryce (OECD), Alexia Rouby (DG AGRI, European Commission)

The second day's first panel, moderated by **Petya Slavova (Sofia University)**, focused on the "hot topic" of **rural proofing**. The session aimed to explore how to move beyond theoretical debates to tailor policy implementation to the actual problems faced by rural inhabitants while ensuring local actors are deeply involved in the process. The panel considered rural proofing in relation to its purpose and timing in the policy cycle, the evidence appropriate to the task, and a workable process with clear roles. This framed rural proofing not only as a technical assessment but also as a governance and learning process shaped by data, local knowledge and experience, institutional actors and policy context.

Giulia Martino (Ecorys) presented the **GRANULAR approach to rural proofing**, which frames rural proofing as a practical, place-sensitive assessment process. This approach is built on a triangle of three interacting elements: the selected initiative, a set of rurality elements, and local territorial knowledge. By examining policies through this lens, the project aims to surface hidden or indirect impacts – such as how a mobility strategy might disparately affect children or gender dynamics – that often remain invisible in standard assessments.

A key innovation in the GRANULAR method was the creation of a framework combining the **Rural Diversity Compass** with the building blocks of the **Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA)**. This combined structure utilises over 30 elements (e.g., access to services, community-led approaches, and sustainable land use) to provide a nuanced map of occurring or likely impacts. Ms Martino highlighted that this framework successfully identified "pockets of growth" and **positive narratives**, countering the typical deficit-based view of rural areas.

Petri Kahila (University of Eastern Finland) introduced **Decentralised Rural Proofing (DRP)**, an approach developed by RUSTIK to complement conventional top-down proofing. DRP works through place-based micro-assessments of how specific policies operate within particular rural contexts, asking not just what a policy intends but who benefits and who is excluded. Its primary value lies in turning rural evidence into "signals" that allow for the adjustment of strategies and legal reforms while policy windows are still open.

He emphasised that for DRP to be effective, it requires institutional anchoring and a credible intermediary organisation to translate local findings into policy language. The project tested this logic across five diverse pilot regions, ranging from the implementation of Finland's Integration Act to forestry policy mixes in Italy. These pilots demonstrated that while DRP is transferable, its immediate impact depends heavily on governance readiness and the availability of usable data and stakeholder trust.

Bettina Bock (Wageningen University) argued that effective proofing must be an **ongoing interaction between policymakers, rural actors, and scientists rather than a one-off check**. She warned that without a genuine commitment to invest in rural futures, rural proofing risks becoming a **technocratic exercise** that fuels further local discontent. She stressed that rural areas should be seen as contributors with much to offer for national and European policy solutions, not merely as "problem areas" requiring intervention.

From the **OECD** perspective, **Betty-Ann Bryce** defined rural proofing as a form of **"organised intelligence"** that must be tailored to its specific audience. She highlighted the need for a distinction between **reactive proofing** (responding to the constant supply chain of new policies) and **proactive proofing** (engaging local leaders early to set the agenda). She urged researchers to be strategic about who they target, treating policymakers' agendas and constraints as part of the intelligence needed to make them more sensitive to rural issues.

Ms Bryce also introduced a useful categorisation of actors in the proofing process: **generators** of data, **translators** who make sense of it, and **validators** (often civil servants or political advisors) who can confirm if a proposal is practically feasible. She advocated for bringing validators into the process early to avoid creating overly complicated or unworkable recommendations. Additionally, she provided a practical perspective on the development of rural proofing mechanisms, noting:

"You're never going to get rural proofing right the first time. You have to think about it as an iterative pilot process".

Betty-Ann Bryce, OECD

Nicoletta Merlo shared the views of the **European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)**, emphasising that rural proofing must defend the Right to Stay. She argued that while Europe has long prioritised the "right to move" for better opportunities, it has been silent on the right of residents to have access to services and opportunities in their own communities. She called for the appointment of **"rural proofing champions"** within institutions, dedicated individuals with a mandate to link dots across sectors and overcome policy silos.



Francesco Mantino (CREA) reflected on the RUSTIK experience in Garfagnana, where the proofing process served as a vital learning exercise. He noted that local knowledge of existing policies is often fragmented, making the role of a translator essential for helping communities understand what is actually being implemented. In this pilot, the process revealed a significant **misalignment between ongoing policies and local needs**, which directly led to the proposal of new, more relevant actions.

The public interaction highlighted a sense of **frustration** among local activists that research often fails to filter up to influence high-level policy design. Participants expressed that if responsibility and power were devolved to the most local level, the need for rural proofing would diminish because decisions would inherently reflect local realities. The discussion concluded that establishing **vertical links between Labs and legislative halls** is critical to ensure local residents are active participants in policy creation rather than just receivers of it.

In her concluding remarks, **Alexia Rouby (DG AGRI)** acknowledged that the two projects have successfully "put flesh on the bones" of different proofing methodologies. She noted that the GRANULAR tools are particularly promising for the **initiative-based assessments** required in EU policy, while RUSTIK's decentralised approach offers a model for **deeper stakeholder engagement**. She emphasised that the ultimate goal is to build the long-term **"capacity to think rural"** across all government departments.



PANEL DISCUSSION | From Experimentation to Replication: Scaling Place-Based Solutions for Rural Transitions

Moderated by Aimee Morse, Countryside and Community Research Institute

Panellists: Mirta Sutter (Local Action Group Montagnappennino), Ingrid Machold (Rural and Mountain Research – BAB), Jonathan Hopkins (James Hutton Institute), Chen Wang (James Hutton Institute)

The session, moderated by **Aimee Morse (Countryside and Community Research Institute)**, explored how to move beyond Living Lab experimentation to scale local findings. The discussion focused on identifying the conditions that matter for replication, the specific elements of place-based solutions that can be scaled, and the practical enablers and barriers to doing so. The sessions hoped to look at how Living Labs use data, participation and local partnerships to support transition pathways, and how shared understanding enables local actors to identify challenges, co-create solutions and shape those pathways.

Beyond the individual tools presented, the session offered an opportunity to reflect on the strengths and limitations of the Living Lab methodology itself. Speakers emphasised that Living Labs are most effective when they create long-term relationships between researchers and communities, allow for iterative learning, and generate tangible value for local actors rather than simply extracting information.

Ingrid Machold (BAB) provided a synthesis of the **RUSTIK Living Labs**, highlighting that they utilised a **mixed-method approach** specifically adapted to local transition challenges. She categorised these methods into four groups: integrating stakeholder perceptions through surveys, co-creating local knowledge, using **observational tools like web-scraping and GIS**, and developing translational tools, such as dashboards, to make data more accessible to non-experts.

Ingrid Machold further identified four primary purposes for these data experiments: **making invisible diversity visible**, gathering insights from **overlooked groups** (such as youth and immigrants), improving data usability for local decision-making, and evaluating solutions to enhance existing transition-driven strategies. She emphasised that the **scientific-practice partnership** was a critical success factor, ensuring that the research was co-designed to meet the specific needs of the pilot regions.

Mirta Sutter (LAG Montagnappennino) shared the experience of the RUSTIK Garfagnana Living Lab in northern Tuscany, an area that is 88% forest. The Garfagnana experience illustrated how Living Labs can strengthen community ownership of development strategies and make territorial knowledge more visible within public decision-making.

The Lab collected over 100 surveys from workers and small enterprises, providing a systemic view of the territory that had never been documented in such a way before. These results directly informed the region's **2023–2027 strategy**, leading to a renewed focus on supporting the forestry sector, including wood production and recreational projects.

She argued that the "real change" was not just the data, but the **participatory mindset** fostered by the Living Lab. The project supported community initiatives by co-designing projects with civil society, public entities, and local actors. She highlighted the role of **Local Action Groups (LAGs)** as vital intermediate bodies that can coordinate these stakeholders, interpret their needs, and help remote communities apply for European funding.

Chen Wang (James Hutton Institute) discussed how the GRANULAR Scottish Living Lab used granular data to reveal rural diversity at a much finer resolution than conventional datasets. This approach allowed actors to move beyond broad rural-urban categories and understand the unique combinations of opportunities and constraints facing different territories. He noted that the most impactful part of the process was the synergy between **data visualisation and stakeholder "sense-making"**.

Jonathan Hopkins (also from the James Hutton Institute) shared specific examples from Scotland where data served as a "prompt" for people to rethink local services. For instance, talking about mobility data encouraged residents to consider whether the mainland-to-island ferry network should be reconfigured to include more **island-to-island links**. He also noted that analysing **Facebook mobility data** revealed how people's actual movements often overlap and contrast with traditional official classifications.

Regarding replication, Chen Wang argued that a **"process logic"** should be transferred rather than a fixed model. This involves starting with local questions, identifying useful data, testing interpretations with stakeholders, and connecting those lessons to existing decision-making processes. Ingrid Machold added that any scaled approach must fit the **contextual and institutional setting** of the target region to deliver relevant answers to its transition challenges. The transferability discussion therefore concerned how approaches developed in one place can be adapted to other territorial and institutional contexts, rather than reproduced unchanged.

The panel offered key recommendations for future Living Lab implementation. Jonathan Hopkins stressed the importance of time, noting that researchers must ensure they are genuinely **non-extractive** and inclusive of groups that are usually outside of traditional networks. Chen Wang emphasised that the value of a Lab lies in the process of **building a shared understanding** between researchers and practitioners rather than just the tools themselves.



Ingrid Machold recommended not underestimating the **"local arena of complexity,"** urging planners to involve different sectors early to break down siloed thinking. Mirta Sutter added a final recommendation to always **give the results back to the community**. She noted that stakeholders must be aware of how their work impacts local strategies, such as Leader programs, so they remain conscious of the value they bring to the process.

During the Q&A, the importance of **"cross-visits"** between diverse regions like Scotland, Sweden, and Italy was highlighted as an **essential tool for scaling**. These visits allowed communities to see how others deal with common challenges like depopulation and climate change. Public discussion also emphasised the role of **"community champions"**, enthusiastic individuals who are necessary to maintain these long-term processes when official project funding ends or staff leave.

The public interaction concluded with a discussion on how to reach communities **"lagging behind"** that are not currently engaged in Horizon projects. Participants expressed a concern that grounded evidence often fails to "filter up" to influence high-level policy. Mirta Sutter responded that intermediate bodies like LAGs are the solution, as they can **interpret and replicate** research results in a way that is understandable and useful for even the most remote communities.

PANEL DISCUSSION | Place-based policies in practice: the role of community-led approaches

Moderated by Valentine Neirinck-Fauvelle, Euromontana

Panellists: Tom Jones (European Rural Community Alliance – ERCA) Piotr Sadlocha (European LEADER Association for Rural Development – ELARD) Niklas Johansson (North Sweden European Office)

The final panel of the conference, moderated by **Valentine Neirinck-Fauvelle (Euromontana)**, addressed the critical role of community-led approaches in delivering effective place-based policies.

Tom Jones (ERCA) opened the session by emphasising that **"people make places and places make people,"** highlighting the unique pride and resilience found in small-scale community initiatives. He argued that while high-level policy teamwork is vital, the work of projects like GRANULAR and RUSTIK must be sustained to bridge the gap between Brussels and the everyday activities of rural citizens. The panel's focus was on how participatory approaches shape local visions, strategies and investment priorities; how engagement strengthens ownership, legitimacy and long-term resilience; and how these approaches can be embedded in regional, national and EU governance frameworks.

Tom Jones stressed the **importance of intermediaries** in ensuring that community groups and local hubs remain inclusive, sustainable, and properly resourced. He noted that many rural residents lead **pluralistic lives** – often performing multiple roles as postmen, hall managers, and caretakers – and argued that these individuals could deliver much more if they were provided with the necessary support and training. By helping these local actors build capacity, policymakers can support the sense of pride and belonging that is essential for retaining talent within rural territories.

Piotr Sadlocha (ELARD) provided a strong message on the link between local engagement and democracy, stating that **democracy is about engaging people** with decision-makers before politicians finalise choices about the future. He argued that as a manager of a **Local Action Group (LAG)**, implementing bottom-up approaches is the most effective way to identify the needs of a community. He expressed hope that in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), LAGs would be granted a stronger position across all European countries to influence **National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs)**.

Drawing from his experience in Poland, Mr Sadlocha illustrated how **national-level data can often misrepresent local realities**. For instance, while official government statistics showed women as the primary unemployed group in most of rural Poland, a local investigation in his specific region revealed that men were actually the group most affected. This discrepancy reinforced his point that **effective policy must combine quantitative data with qualitative community information**, as statistics alone can often be incorrect at a granular level.

Niklas Johansson (North Sweden European Office) shared the perspective of **sparsely populated regions** currently undergoing massive **green industrial transitions**. He explained that while his region has abundant land and clean energy, the primary bottleneck is a **lack of staff** to support hydropower, mining, and battery factories. Mr Johansson highlighted that successful place-based approaches in this context must move beyond traditional agriculture to focus on making regions attractive enough to recruit and retain international talent.

To illustrate the importance of local social infrastructure, Mr Johansson described a Swedish municipality that recruited experts from Asia who requested a place for their children to play cricket. Despite having no prior experience with the sport, the municipality secured funding to build a court and set up teams, eventually developing one of the best cricket teams in Europe. He used this unique example to argue that **local municipalities are the primary facilitators of industrial success** because they provide the social services and amenities that make people choose to stay.

A central theme of the interactive discussion was the "power game" between urban and rural territories. Public participants observed that urban areas often lead cooperation because they possess more resources and specialised officers to dedicate to drawing up policies. Piotr Sadlocha responded by noting that in Poland, urban areas often receive ten times more funding per inhabitant than rural areas, and he urged for **stronger Community-Led Local Development (CLLD)** instruments to ensure that rural citizens feel supported by the European project.

The panel also discussed the potential role of **LAGs as vital partners in rural proofing**. Piotr Sadlocha criticised current government consultation processes, which often rely on "lazy" methods like posting information on a website rather than directly asking common people about their needs. He argued that **national networks of local action groups** are the only organisations capable of effectively collecting this grounded information and bringing it to the attention of national and EU governments.

Tom Jones highlighted the **significant administrative barriers** that prevent small organisations from accessing European research and development funding. He advocated for **fast-track, ring-fenced funding** for smaller groups to build their capacity, noting that many community organisations simply do not have the management personnel to handle complex inter-country financial reporting. Tom Jones concluded by urging everyone to speak **"truth to power,"** standing alongside people who believe something is not being delivered properly to ensure co-created solutions.

In the final takeaways, an audience member highlighted that while **"small is beautiful, the big is powerful,"** and rural areas must find bridges to work with urban counterparts rather than competing for resources. Participants expressed a shared frustration with research that stays in academic silos, calling instead for a move toward **giving responsibility and power directly to the people living on the ground**. As the session closed, it was agreed that rural development is most successful when it puts **money and power at the lowest level possible**, allowing communities to lead their own vibrant futures. Particular attention was given to the intermediary role of Living Labs, LEADER and Local Action Groups in connecting evidence and local knowledge with implementation, and to the space and flexibility available for locally led development within future governance frameworks.





CLOSING REMARKS

Radim Sršeň, Member of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR)

Radim Sršeň, CoR Rapporteur on Rural Development in the 2028-2034 programming period, and until recently Czech deputy minister, co-Chair of the Rural Pact Coordination Group and a local mayor for 16 years (Dolní Studénky, Czechia), delivered the conference's final concluding remarks. He praised the GRANULAR and RUSTIK projects for successfully **bridging the gap between the academic world and practitioners** in the field. Mr Sršeň expressed great optimism about the future of rural development, noting that the negotiations for the post-2027 EU budget are just beginning and represent a "long fight" that is well worth pursuing.

He emphasised that while rural advocates are often intuitive about their strengths, they have historically struggled to provide **robust data and evidence** to back up their claims during high-level negotiations. He welcomed the analytical approaches and tools presented over the two days of conference, noting that as the world changes, mayors and local actors need more than just heart – they need the refined skills to tackle new challenges. He specifically identified the **National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs)** as a critical opportunity to move beyond purely agricultural solutions and utilise synergies across different policy areas.

A staunch supporter of bottom-up development, Mr. Sršeň called for the proposed **10% rural spending target** to be dedicated specifically to place-based solutions like **LEADER, CLLD, and Smart Villages**. He argued that these funds must be protected and not "eaten up" by large-scale farming interests, as local mayors and governments often hold significantly more public trust than national authorities. For Radim Sršeň, these instruments are the easiest way to reach the most local levels and ensure that **rural development is not just about big infrastructure**, but about the everyday needs of the community.

Mr Sršeň also advocated strongly for the **Right to Stay, which is presently being developed by the European Commission**, arguing that every citizen is entitled to the same quality of life and access to services regardless of their location. He challenged the argument that rural investment is not cost-effective by citing a **Committee of the Regions study on "non-rurality,"** which found that failing to invest in rural schools, hospitals, and transport is ultimately far more expensive for society in the long run. He urged the audience to stop viewing rural and urban areas as competitors and instead **find bridges and connections** that showcase the unique value rural territories bring to Europe. Discussions throughout the conference also highlighted the growing importance of biodiversity loss, ecosystem resilience and sustainable land-use management as strategic challenges for the future of rural Europe.

In his final words, Radim Sršeň outlined a vision of Europe which is at a crossroads where rural areas could either become stagnant "museums" or **"vibrant places to live,"** with his strategy focusing firmly on the latter. He concluded by noting that "Europe starts in rural areas" and left the audience with a final call for solidarity, sharing a motto from Albert Einstein that encapsulated the spirit of the joint GRANULAR and RUSTIK mission:

“*Nothing truly valuable can be achieved except by the
unselfish cooperation of many individuals.*”
Radim Sršeň

He identified the project participants as those individuals, urging them to continue fighting for the future of rural Europe together.



CONCLUSION

The collaboration between **GRANULAR** and **RUSTIK** over the course of the projects and through this joint Final conference, has successfully moved the needle from merely gathering data to providing the "territorial intelligence" needed to shape the future of rural Europe.

While GRANULAR is currently finalising its deliverables and RUSTIK will reach its formal conclusion at the end of this year, the research and tools developed are designed for long-term impact. A comprehensive suite of results – ranging from **modular typologies and wellbeing profiles to innovative digital dashboards** – will be made available on the projects' respective websites to serve as a permanent resource for policymakers and practitioners. Furthermore, the two projects are actively collaborating on **joint policy briefs that will synthesise their combined findings** into the precise, actionable recommendations currently requested by the European Commission.

The conference also provided an opportunity to reflect on the principal lessons emerging from four years of research. Across both projects, a recurring finding was that **rural Europe cannot be understood through a single narrative.**

Instead, the evidence points towards a highly diverse landscape of opportunities and challenges shaped by functional relationships, local assets, governance capacity and citizen experience. The conference therefore reinforced the importance of combining robust evidence with local knowledge, strengthening the role of Living Labs as spaces of collective sense-making, and embedding rural perspectives more systematically into European, national and regional policymaking.

However, the **transition pathways do not end with these projects.** With the ongoing negotiations for the post-2027 EU budget and the deepening of the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, the mission to structurally integrate rural voices into European policymaking is only beginning.

