GRANULAR

PRACTICE ABSTRACT

From priorities to evidence

A six-step data cycle for rural planning with limited resources

Rural policy needs evidence, but local actors rarely have the time, skills or budget to produce it, and official datasets often miss what matters locally.

GRANULAR built a practical answer: the **Local Data for Rural Planning cycle**, a six-step route from priorities to usable evidence. The steps are:

- set the agenda and identify territorial priorities;
- turn them into SMART indicators;
- mine existing secondary data before collecting anything new;
- collect primary data only where gaps remain;
- process and harmonise it;
- then analyse it for the decision at hand.

Three examples show it working.

The Romanian Lab mined official statistics systematically before running its own survey on short food chains, building a picture of land use, holdings, organic area and labour, and cutting the amount of new data it had to collect.

The Spanish Lab combined spatial analysis, administrative telecare records and a focus group into emergency risk indicators by municipality, revealing inequalities standard demographic statistics do not show.

The French Lab used aggregated mobility datasets to map seasonal and directional flows, validated them against existing statistics, and discussed the results with local authorities.

The clearest lesson is that starting from minimum data needs beats starting from maximum ambition. Labs that tried to collect everything ran out of resources and produced data too complex to use.

Recommendations: define your indicators before you look for data; inventory existing sources first, because much of what you need already exists; balance statistics with what residents tell you; match the level of detail to the decision, since sub-municipal data is powerful but costly; and document your process so others can reuse it.

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Methodological context and rationale

Rural policy is only as good as the evidence it rests on. But existing datasets often fail to reflect the multi-dimensional realities of rural Europe. Key dimensions —**mobility, accessibility, biodiversity, demographic trends, social wellbeing**— are frequently under-covered by public data sources, or available only at too coarse a spatial or temporal resolution to be useful for local planning.

At the same time, local actors in rural areas —municipalities, development agencies, community organisations— are increasingly expected to produce **evidence to support place-based policies** and engage with EU transition agendas on climate, digital adoption and social inclusion. Yet they often lack the structured methodologies to identify what data they need, where to find it, and how to use it. This **gap between data availability and data use** is a core barrier to **effective rural governance**.

The GRANULAR project addresses this gap by developing a **replicable, step-by-step methodology** that helps local actors move **from priority setting to evidence generation** in a structured, resource-efficient way — connecting to both conventional official datasets and innovative new sources such as geospatial, citizen science and crowdsourced data.

Description of the method

The "**Local Data for Rural Planning**" cycle (Figure 1) provides a structured framework that guides rural actors through six phases of data-driven decision-making. It is designed to be resource-efficient: it prioritises minimum data needs and maximises reuse of existing secondary data before committing to new primary data collection.

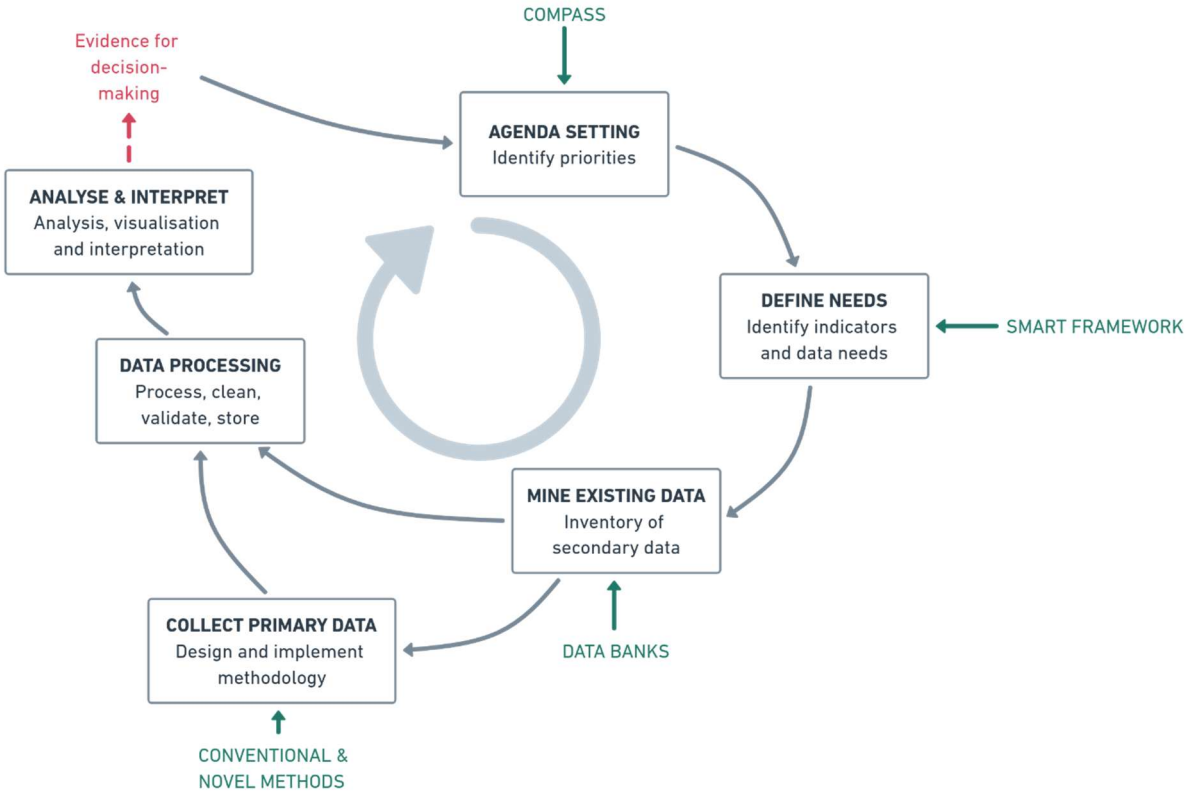


Figure 1: The Local Data for Rural Planning cycle. Source: IAMM.

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The six phases are:

1. **Agenda setting** – identify territorial priorities using the COMPASS tool, drawing on community input and policy objectives
2. **Define needs** – translate priorities into SMART indicators (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound), specifying the data required to track each one
3. **Mine existing data** – conduct a systematic inventory of available secondary data (national statistics, administrative records, remote sensing products, open datasets) before collecting new data
4. **Collect primary data** – where gaps remain, design and implement data collection using conventional methods (surveys, interviews) and/or novel approaches (citizen science, crowdsourcing, sensor data)
5. **Data processing** – clean, validate, harmonise and store data to ensure accuracy and interoperability
6. **Analyse and interpret** – apply appropriate analytical and visualisation tools to generate evidence directly usable for planning decisions



Key decisions at each phase include: defining **minimum data needs**, balancing **quantitative and qualitative information**, choosing the **level of spatial disaggregation**, setting **collection timelines**, and specifying **accuracy requirements**. These decisions are guided by available local resources — **time, skills, and budget**.

Target users include municipal planners, rural development practitioners, Local Action Groups, regional authorities, and researchers working with or in rural communities. The cycle is designed to work with **different levels of technical capacity** and can be **adapted to the scale and resources of the territory.**

Testing and application in Multi-Actor Labs

The "Local Data for Rural Planning" cycle has been applied and tested across **the GRANULAR Multi-Actor Lab network**, which spans a wide range of territorial contexts — from sparsely populated upland areas to peri-urban fringes, and from northern to southern Europe. This diversity allowed the methodology to be **stress-tested across different policy contexts, data environments and institutional capacities.**

Key findings from Lab applications:



In Labs with technical capacity that requires prioritisation, the **secondary data mining phase** proved particularly valuable — local actors often discovered relevant datasets they had not previously known or used, **reducing the need for costly primary data collection**.

In Romania, the aim of Iași Replication Lab is to deepen the **understanding of local food system characteristics and its future dynamics.**

Before launching their own survey on short food supply chains, they carried out **extensive secondary data mining**, systematically mobilising official statistics (TEMPO Online of the National Institute for Statistics, the Iași County Statistical Office, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, and the Structural Survey in Agriculture) to build a multi-indicator picture (land use, structure of holdings, organic area, labour dynamics).

This **sequenced and reduced the use of costly primary collection.**

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In Labs with stronger analytical capacity, the **SMART indicator framework** helped structure multi-dimensional territorial assessments covering ecological, social, and economic dimensions simultaneously.

In Spain, the Living Lab has studied the **territorial distribution of ageing in Europe** and the **functioning of telecare systems** in rural contexts.

Using a **mixed methodology** that combines spatial analysis, exploitation of administrative data from telecare programmes and qualitative contributions from a focus group, the Lab has developed **innovative operational, comparable, and territorialised metrics**, such as population-adjusted emergency risk indicators at the municipal level.

By **highlighting spatial inequalities that are not captured by traditional demographic statistics**, these metrics facilitate decision-making that is more in line with rural reality.

Novel data sources —including geospatial open data (OpenStreetMap), satellite-derived land cover products, and citizen-generated observations— were successfully **integrated alongside official statistics** in several Labs, demonstrating the value of **combining conventional and innovative data.**

In France, the Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée Living Lab sought to **understand the volume of people present throughout the year**, clarifying their **travel patterns**, and assessing the **temporal variation of mobility and connectivity**, to improve mobility services (particularly public transport).

Analysis of **aggregated mobility datasets by Meta** combined with **TripAdvisor mobility signals** focused on mobility before, during, and after key holiday periods and tourism seasons, and identified **directional flows and seasonal mobility patterns**.

The results were validated using **existing complementary datasets and statistics**, then shared and discussed with **local actors and authorities** to identify implications for tourism planning and mobility services.

Stakeholder feedback highlighted the **importance of the agenda-setting phase**: when local priorities are clearly defined from the outset, subsequent data work is more focused and the resulting evidence more directly useful for planning.

Adaptations were needed to account for **differences in national statistical systems**, **data availability**, and **local governance structures**. Romania sequenced secondary data mining ahead of its own survey, Spain built new municipal indicators from administrative records, and France combined novel mobility datasets and validated them against existing statistics. The cycle held in each case; what changed was the data environment it was applied to.

Lessons learned and practical recommendations

The clearest lesson from across the Labs is that **starting with minimum data needs is more effective than starting with maximum data ambition**. Practitioners who tried to collect everything at once often ran into resource constraints and produced data that was too complex to use in practice. A focused, phased approach delivers more actionable results.

- **Define indicators before searching for data** — not the other way around. The SMART framework prevents data collection from drifting away from actual policy needs
- **Prioritise secondary data first**. Much of what local actors need already exists in open datasets; the inventory step consistently reveals underused resources

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- **Balance quantitative and qualitative data**. Statistical indicators capture trends, but qualitative inputs from community members often identify what the numbers miss
- **Match the level of disaggregation to the decision at hand**. Sub-municipal data is powerful but expensive; regional data may be sufficient for strategic planning
- **Document and share your data process**. Transparent metadata enables data reuse by others and builds the local evidence base over time

A key limitation is that the cycle assumes a **minimum level of organisational capacity** — at least one person with analytical skills and dedicated time. In the most resource-constrained rural areas, **external support** (from a Living Lab facilitator, a university partner, or a regional agency) **may be needed to get the process started**. This dependency should be planned for, not assumed away.



At policy level, **embedding this cycle within local development planning processes** — such as LEADER area strategies or territorial cohesion assessments — ensures that **data work feeds directly into decision-making** rather than remaining a standalone research exercise.

Scalability and replicability

The "Local Data for Rural Planning" cycle is explicitly **designed to be scalable and replicable**. Its modular structure means it can be applied at **different territorial scales** (municipality, sub-region, cross-border area) and adapted to the **data environment and governance structure** of any EU rural context.

Conditions for replication:

- A **defined territorial scope** and at least **one committed local actor with planning responsibilities**
- Access to **national or regional open data sources** (statistical, geospatial, or administrative)
- **Analytical capacity** — either in-house or supported by a partner organisation

Resource requirements are variable and scalable. The **secondary data mining phases** require primarily **time** and **analytical skills**, not significant financial investment. **Primary data collection costs** depend on the methods chosen, but citizen science and crowdsourcing approaches offer low-cost alternatives for many indicator types.

The cycle is the **operational core of GRANULAR's contribution to place-based policy**: it is the route by which **novel data sources**, from mobility datasets to administrative records, **become evidence that a municipality can act on**, and it supports the ecological, digital and social transitions by making each of them measurable locally.

Further information

- GRANULAR project: www.ruralgranular.eu & Digital Platform: https://platform.ruralgranular.eu/
- For practical insights and methodological support for data collection and usage at every stage of the planning process, refer to *Deliverable D6.2 Guidelines and Training Materials for Data Collection* https://zenodo.org/records/18984171;
- For data sources and analysis, refer to Deliverable *D3.1 Screening Rural Data Sources* https://zenodo.org/records/13838524 & *D3.2 Exploring Rural Data Landscapes* https://zenodo.org/records/13744714.

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