GRANULAR

PRACTICE ABSTRACT

Will this policy help or hurt rural areas?

A tested method for finding indirect effects

GRANULAR developed and tested a **practical method to check how policies affect rural areas.**

It combines three elements:

- the policy or initiative being assessed,
- local knowledge from people familiar with the territory,
- and "rurality" elements drawn from the EU Rural Vision and Rural Diversity Compass, covering access to services, natural resources, and community-led approaches.

For each element, simple questions are asked: is it relevant, why, is the effect direct or indirect, does it vary by area, who is affected, what action could reduce harm.

Where data allows, effects are also rated by direction, strength, and geographic level.

One full round is complete so far: eight Multi-Actor Labs in seven countries each applied the method to a policy chosen for their own territory, from island policy in Finland to wolf-compensation schemes in Italy.

It worked across very different policies and territories, revealing indirect or hidden effects that standard checklists usually miss.

A second round is now underway, with all labs assessing the same EU-level policy, the Digital Decade Programme, to compare results directly across territories.

⬢ **Recommendations**: start with the qualitative screening before attempting any quantification; treat missing data as a signal of where local monitoring needs strengthening, not as a reason to stop; and assign the roles of knowledge generator, translator and validator explicitly, whether they sit in one organisation or several. No advanced data skills are needed, which makes the method usable by local administrations, NGOs and community groups.

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Methodological context and rationale

Rural areas across the EU are very diverse, but most policy assessments rely on **generic, EU-wide indicators** that miss how a measure actually plays out locally. Existing rural proofing approaches often stop at a broad question, "does this affect rural areas?", with no structure and no local input. This means **indirect, hidden, or place-specific effects go unnoticed.**

GRANULAR fills this gap by **combining a structured framework with local territorial knowledge**, so impacts are identified case by case rather than assumed from the top down.

Description of the method

The method rests on three elements: the **initiative being assessed** (a policy, strategy or programme); **"rurality" elements** (prosperous, connected, resilient, stronger, environmental, productive, residential, recreational); and **territorial knowledge**.

In practice, it works in two steps:

- First, the **initiative is screened against each rurality element with simple questions**: is it relevant, why and how, is the effect direct or indirect, does it vary across rural types, who is most affected, and what action could reduce harm.
- Second, where data allows, **effects are rated more precisely** (direction, strength, geographic level, change over time, and any monitoring indicator).

Inputs needed are a **description of the initiative** and **local knowledge of the territory**.

The target users are **Multi-Actor Labs** (Living Labs and Replication Labs), who can act as **generators, translators, or validators of knowledge**, alongside **policymakers** who want to test an initiative before or during implementation.

The logic can be summarised as:



These eight elements are **GRANULAR's multi-dimensional characterisation of rurality in operational form**: instead of one generic question about rural impact, the screening requires a separate answer for each dimension, which is what surfaces effects a single question would miss.

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Testing and application in Multi-Actor Labs

Two rounds have been run.

In Round 1, 4 Living Labs and 4 Replication Labs each **tested a policy of their own choice**, relevant to their own territory, covering **national, regional, and multi-level initiatives** (from island policy in Finland to wolf-compensation schemes in Italy).

The method worked across very **different policy types and governance levels**, surfaced **indirect and systemic effects**, and **showed geographic inequality** as a recurring theme, with **less-connected areas often benefiting less**. Labs adapted the process to their own governance setup; the Finnish Lab, for example, ran an iterative loop between a scientific partner, local lab members, the ministry owning the policy, and a collective reflection step.

Feedback showed that standard indicators often fell short for indirect or demographic effects, while well-targeted, existing indicators worked better.

Round 2 is currently in progress, with input expected from 3 Living Labs and 1 Replication Lab. This time all labs are assessing the **same EU-level policy, the Digital Decade Policy Programme 2030,** allowing **direct comparison of impacts across very different rural territories**.

The evidence the method produces is a **structured impact record** for each policy: which rurality elements are affected, in which direction and at what strength, and which effects would otherwise remain invisible. A public authority can reuse it directly, since it needs only an initiative to assess, people who know the territory and a facilitator, and both the method and the tool will be published on the GRANULAR Digital Platform.

Lessons learned and practical recommendations

The framework proved flexible enough to apply to **very different policies, scales, and governance levels**. Impacts are often a mix of immediate and longer-term, direct and indirect effects.

Practical tips:

- start with the **qualitative screening** before attempting any quantification;
- treat missing data as a **signal of where better local monitoring is needed** rather than a reason to stop;
- **assign clear roles** (generator, translator, validator), which can sit in one organisation or be split across several.

The main benefit is that it is **structured yet adaptable**, and it surfaces impacts that generic checklists miss. The main limitation is that **suitable indicators for indirect or systemic effects are still scarce**, and **EU-level expectations of full coverage can be unrealistic for local actors.**

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Scalability and replicability

The method and tool are built to be reused. It asks the **same structured questions** regardless of country, policy, or governance level, as shown by its use across very different national contexts in Round 1.

It requires an **initiative to assess, people with territorial knowledge, and a facilitator to run the process**; no specialised technical capacity is needed. The method and tool will be available on the GRANULAR Digital Platform.

Further information:

- GRANULAR project www.ruralgranular.eu & Digital Platform https://platform.ruralgranular.eu/
- Publications on rural proofing: GRANULAR Deliverables D5.1 Guidelines for the rural proofing of transition policies in Europe https://zenodo.org/records/18984776 and D5.2 Report on the rural proofing of selected policies https://zenodo.org/records/18984879

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