

# Rural Proofing: Lessons from OECD countries and potential application to health



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By Betty-Ann Bryce

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Improving rural development, well-being and maximising the potential in rural areas requires greater horizontal and vertical co-ordination at the national, regional, and local level as well as the mainstreaming of rural issues across all policies. However, taking an integrated approach to rural development - where rural ministries and non-rural ministries coordinate in the development of policies and initiatives - is often very challenging. Rural proofing is a tool to help policy makers overcome this challenge and develop more nuanced rural-friendly policies. It involves making policy decisions based on evidence on rural dynamics available in a timely fashion to enable changes and adjustments. In practice, however, it is a mechanism that has proved complex to design, implement, and sustain. This article explores how more robust rural proofing models can be developed, with health as a focal point. Drawing on lessons from different OECD member countries, it develops a roadmap for more effective rural proofing mechanisms to help embed the practice in the policy space and culture of governments.

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**JEL codes:** R00, R58

**Keywords:** rural proofing, rural development, rural health, well-being

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# Acknowledgements

This working paper was prepared by Betty-Ann Bryce, Senior Policy Analyst/Rural Policy Co-ordinator in the Regional and Rural Unit in the Regional Development and Multi-level Governance Division, in the OECD's Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and Cities (CFE) and under the supervision of Dorothée Allain-Dupré, Head of the Regional Development and Multi-level Governance (CFE/RDG) and Jose Enrique Garcilazo, Deputy Head of RDG. The opinions expressed and arguments employed herein do not necessarily reflect the official views of the OECD Member countries.

It was supported by the World Health Organization (WHO) through a grant to WHO from the Government of Canada entitled "Strengthening local and national Primary Health Care and Health Systems for the recovery and resilience of countries in the context of COVID-19". This article is part of the WHO-sponsored "Rural and Remote Health" journal's Special Edition on Rural Proofing for Health. It is also part of an ongoing collaboration on rural proofing between the WHO Director General's Office and CFE/RDG. The OECD wishes to thank Theadora Swift Koller, Senior Technical Lead/Unit Head, Health Equity in the Department of Gender, Rights and Equity (GRE) at the Director General's Office in WHO Headquarters for the collaboration and comments.

The paper also benefited from comments by Nadim Ahmad, Deputy Director, CFE, Laurence Todd Counsellor, CFE as well as the discussions at the forum co-organised by WHO-OECD on "Rural proofing for health" that took place at the preconference of the 13th Rural Development Conference in Cavan on 28 September 2022 and other comments from: Tatjana Buzeti, State Secretary, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food, Slovenia; Aidan Campbell, Rural Community Network, Northern Ireland, United Kingdom; Bruce Chater, World Organization of Family Doctors/WONCA; David Freshwater, University of Kentucky, United States; Liam Glynn, University of Limerick, Ireland; Barbara Kuriger, Member of Parliament, New Zealand; Cathy Lavery, Southern Health and Social Care Trust, Northern Ireland United Kingdom; Sabrina Lucatelli, Riabitare l'Italia, Italy; Tom Morris, Federal Office of Rural Health Policy, Health Resource Services Administration, United States; William Parnell (formerly) Department of Rural and Community Development, Ireland; Katarzyna Ptak-Bufkens, DG-SANTE, European Commission; Alexia Rouby, DG-AGRI, European Commission; and, Ruth Stewart, Department of Health and Aged Care, Australia. Jeanette Duboys edited the paper and prepared it for publication.

In addition to published research, this article draws from five sources: 1) Interviews with academics that have written exclusively on rural proofing; 2) Interviews with policy makers at the national and federal level and stakeholders from countries with rural proofing experience; United Kingdom (Northern Ireland, Scotland, England), Canada, Finland, Sweden, Ireland; 3) Interviews with policy makers and stakeholders from countries that are new to/interested in rural proofing: Australia, New Zealand, Estonia, Spain, United States, Chile, and Italy; 4) Engagement with and participation in the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) Thematic Working Group on Rural Proofing; and 5) the OECD and World Health Organisation Rural Proofing for Health discussion which was held at the 13<sup>th</sup> OECD Rural Development Conference in Cavan, Ireland.

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# Acronyms and abbreviations

ALGA	Australian Local Government Association
CFFR	Council of Federal Financial Relations
CFR	Community First Responders
CMS	Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (
CRC	Commission for Rural Communities
DEFRA	Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs
DITRDCA	Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts
EC	European Commission
FCC	Federal Communications Commission
GHG	Greenhouse Gas
GP	General Practitioner
HRSA	Human Resources Services Administration
MNEs	Multi-national enterprises
NTIA	National Telecommunications and Information Administration
NPP	New Policy Proposal
RAIS	Regional Australia Impact Statements
RDPC	(OECD) Regional Development Policy Committee
RIF	Regional investment Framework
RPN	Rural Partners Network
SDH	Social determinants of health
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
WHO	World Health Organization
WONCA	World Organization of Family Doctors
WPRUR	(OECD) Working Party on Rural Policy

# Introduction

Rural regions are home to one-quarter of the population and contain the vast majority of the land, water and other natural resources in OECD countries (OECD, 2021<sup>[1]</sup>) (OECD, 2020<sup>[2]</sup>) (OECD, 2018<sup>[3]</sup>). Three-quarters of rural residents live in regions with close connections to cities but close to one in ten of the total population (75 million people) live in remote rural regions: including over one in five in Australia, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Norway and Sweden (OECD, 2022<sup>[4]</sup>). Rural areas play a key role in food production and environmental services and are an integral part of the economy. However, they face a unique set of challenges including marked and persistent spatial inequalities, which are typically greater within than across OECD countries (OECD, 2023<sup>[5]</sup>). The income gap among metropolitan and non-metropolitan regions has steadily increased since the 2008 financial crisis. Rural areas are also on the frontlines of population ageing and this is expected to increase over time (OECD, 2022<sup>[6]</sup>). OECD analysis reveals that the proportion of “shrinking” regions over 2001-21 was 28 percentage points higher in remote regions compared to large metropolitan regions (OECD, 2023<sup>[5]</sup>).

In recent years, rural areas have been exposed to a wide range of shocks that have had differentiated place-based impacts, including pandemics, economic crises, and armed conflicts. The cascading effects of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, the spatial challenges caused by the pandemic, plus the expected decline in subnational government finances (OECD, 2023<sup>[5]</sup>), have important implications for national, regional, and rural policy. COVID-19 exposed structural weaknesses in rural health systems. Specifically, it brought into focus the gaps in available health resources to cope with a large and sudden influx of seriously ill patients. Rural communities are often the most susceptible to climate disasters and extreme weather which have become more frequent and intense over the past few years. The most recent disasters include wildfires (Australia, Canada, Greece), hurricanes (United States), flooding (Slovenia) earthquakes (Italy, Morocco, Türkiye) that underscore the vulnerability of rural regions to such shocks.

However, there are also important opportunities for rural areas to thrive and build on the positive opportunities arising from these challenges. The pandemic accelerated digital trends and precipitated changes in geographical preferences for remote work and even residential preferences. Recent analysis by the OECD reveals that remote work is triggering a demand for places outside large cities to offer more housing and workspace (Ahrend et al., 2023<sup>[7]</sup>) (OECD, 2021<sup>[8]</sup>). The *World Social Report* notes that where high-quality Internet connectivity is coupled with flexible working arrangements, many jobs that were traditionally considered to be urban can be performed in rural areas too (UN DESA, 2021<sup>[9]</sup>). Rural policies also have an essential role to play in reaching net-zero GHG emission targets and given the large scale of financial resources required and new business opportunities the transition can create in rural regions, there is potential to attract green private investment and increase economic activity while safeguarding the natural environment and reducing emissions ( (OECD, 2020<sup>[10]</sup>)).

Managing these negative impacts, and leveraging the opportunities that may arise, calls for strategies and policies that respond to the specific needs of rural areas. However, this remains a challenge in many cases, either because policies are defined as “one-size-fits-all” and are therefore place-blind (OECD, 2023<sup>[5]</sup>) and fail to account for the specific characteristics of rural areas, or because certain



policies even exhibit an urban bias, for example in failing to examine the possibilities to recognise and expand rural innovation efforts, “pervasive urban bias in innovation studies” was a key barrier (OECD, 2023<sup>[11]</sup>).

Rural Proofing is not a policy, it is a tool to ensure policies are fit for purpose in rural areas. It involves making policy decisions, based on evidence on rural dynamics, available in a timely fashion, to enable changes and adjustments early in the policy design and strategy development phase. Rural Proofing forms part of wider place-based approach to policymaking, which can more effectively address individual well-being. The OECD has consistently called for the rethinking of policies to tackle the “persistent underutilisation of potential and reducing persistent social exclusion to move from place-blind to place-based policies” (2011, p. 205<sup>[12]</sup>). This recommendation is often coupled with evidence that policies can deliver rural places that are more prosperous, connected, and inclusive, when they are “well-designed”, “leverage local assets” and are “executed in co-ordination across levels of government and between the government, the private sector and civil society”.

Interest in, and uptake of, rural proofing continues to grow in OECD and non-OECD countries. In fact, the European Commission (EC) recently developed a rural proofing mechanism to “assess the impact of major EU legislative initiatives on rural areas” and encouraged member states to do the same (European Commission, 2021<sup>[13]</sup>). While some countries, embraced rural proofing early, Canada and the United Kingdom (specifically, England and Northern Ireland) in the 1990s and Finland in the 2000s, no country is considered to have been fully successful in embedding an effective and enduring rural proofing model in their administrative systems (Parnell, 2023<sup>[14]</sup>). Nonetheless, these countries have become the *de facto* leaders on this issue and the ones from which to learn. The evidence base is small, but it suggests that some aspects of rural proofing may be more effective than others and will differ depending on the country.

This paper draws on those lessons, and others to develop a roadmap for other countries to follow. The aim is not to question the validity of rural proofing or compare country experiences. Instead, it explores ways to improve the impact of and/or influence rural proofing to encourage the development of more robust rural proofing mechanisms that systematically assess policies in terms of their impact, use of relevant data and methodologies and provide decision makers with information in a timely fashion. The paper also considers the value of rural proofing rural health systems as a way ensure that rural health needs are better understood and considered in government health policies and strategies.

This paper is organised in three sections. It begins with “Rural proofing in context”, which describes the concept, benefits, and key challenges associated with rural proofing. This section also highlights the links between the place-based approach to policy development and the increased focus on well-being and rural proofing. This is followed by “Factors that could increase the effectiveness of rural proofing” which identifies the main ways to sustain the concept of rural proofing beyond government cycles and thus help with the consistency and increased effectiveness of rural proofing – this includes the importance of exploring new techniques and data, specifying policy objectives and targets. The final section, “Rural proofing for health”, focuses on applying rural proofing to the health sector.

# 1 Rural proofing in context

## What is rural proofing?

Rural Proofing is a process, not a policy. It is a guidance mechanism that involves a number of interconnected variables that aim to enhance the quality of government decision-making in relation to rural regions. This is evident in the definitions and approach to rural proofing. In England, the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs describe it as “practical guidance for policy makers and analysts in government to assess and take into account the effects of policies on rural areas” (DEFRA, 2017<sup>[15]</sup>). New Zealand describes it as “taking into account the particular challenges faced by the rural sector when designing and implementing Government policy” (New Zealand Ministry for Primary Industries, 2023<sup>[16]</sup>). The European Commission defines it as “reviewing policies through a rural lens, to make these policies fit for purpose for those who live and work in rural areas” (European Union, 2022<sup>[17]</sup>). In Canada,<sup>1</sup> it is known as “rural lens”, and described as a tool that ensures that rural concerns and priorities are fully considered in policy – and decision-making processes (Canada, 2001<sup>[18]</sup>). In the United States, the National Rural Health Association, defines it as an approach to the development and review of government policy and strategic planning that recognises that the needs of rural areas and communities are different to those of their urban counterparts (David Schmitz, 2015<sup>[19]</sup>).

The definitions may vary, but the core aims remain the same. It is designed to be a “process” that enables decisionmakers to “think rural” when designing policy interventions in order to prevent negative outcomes or, even better, trigger positive outcomes in rural areas. While similar in form to impact assessments, when designed and applied it is broader in scope, reach, and objectives, a key difference is that rural proofing mandates a commitment to “undertake systematic procedures” to ensure that “all of its policies, programmes and initiatives, both nationally and regionally, take account of rural circumstances and needs” *before* the policy is implemented (Nordberg, 2020<sup>[20]</sup>). In practice this means, the review should occur early in the policymaking phase to allow for the consideration of “any likely impact of policy actions on rural areas in advance” (OECD, 2011<sup>[21]</sup>). In Finland, rural proofing is used to “identify whether the proposals under “development” and the “means selected to implement them have significant impacts in and on the rural areas” (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of Finland, 2023<sup>[22]</sup>).

Today, there is growing acceptance among OECD Members that rural communities need more support. The OECD has collected a significant body of evidence on the extent and drivers of inequalities, social mobility, and equal opportunity. According to the most recent work in this area, the gaps in regional performance undermine, growth, productivity and well-being, and come with economic, social, and political costs (OECD, 2023<sup>[5]</sup>). It also highlights how reducing inequalities can be highly beneficial for rural regions. Rural proofing is a mechanism that governments turn to repeatedly to help shape how policies are applied in rural areas. Northern Ireland provides an example of the most formalised process. The *Rural Needs Act* makes rural proofing a part of the policymaking process and calls for the rigorous scrutiny of proposed policies to ensure: 1) fair and equitable treatment of rural communities; and 2) that a policy does not indirectly have a detrimental impact on rural dwellers and communities (DAERA, 2015<sup>[23]</sup>).

Rural proofing is gaining traction. In Canada, a renewed approach for reflecting rural realities in government initiatives is currently being designed and implemented by the Centre for Rural Economic

Development, housed within “Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada”. Other recent rural proofing initiatives include:

- In 2022, the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) introduced the Rural Partners Network (RPN), This was conceived at the White House level (The White House, 2022<sup>[24]</sup>); through a working group with multiple non-rural federal agencies facilitated by the USDA. This group helped reach an agreement to improve access to resources, staffing, and tools in rural areas.
- Also in 2022, the Chilean government created a general evaluation system for all public programs to identify ways to efficiently reach the rural population and achieve the objective of improving the quality of life and increasing the opportunities of the inhabitants of rural territories.
- In Germany, the policy for ensuring equivalent living conditions (*gleichwertige Lebensverhältnisse*), codified in the country’s Basic Law, evaluates the impact of policies from a territorial point of view and is meant to focus on structurally weak territories (ENRD, 2022<sup>[25]</sup>). More recently, the government created an Equivalent Living Conditions Commission and tasked it with drawing up recommendations for action on how to ensure “equal living conditions” both in cities and in rural areas; establishing a common understanding of what these conditions were; and evaluating territorial disparities regarding this aspect. The Commission developed a report along with an Atlas of Germany (*Deutschlandatlas*) containing 54 descriptive indicators to support this common understanding.
- In Spain in 2021, a new national-level law was adopted on Evaluation of Public Policies which led to the creation of specialised units on public policy evaluation in independent fiscal authority, courts of auditors and social committees. The law required the establishment of a stakeholder group, the G100 Rural Proofing, to advise on how the rural perspective can be reflected in new laws. Led by the social economy NGO El Hueco, and supported by the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and the region of Navarra, the goal is to support the review of sectoral policies from a rural perspective, taking into account possible impacts on the development, growth, employment, social well-being and environment in rural areas. The group’s aim is to collect and review the policies and rules that influence and/or limit rural development and propose alternatives for future laws (Baztan-Bortziriak, 2021<sup>[26]</sup>).
- At the EU level, the European Union’s Long-term Vision for Rural Areas mandates the development of a rural proofing mechanism, “to assess the anticipated impact of major EU legislative initiatives on rural areas” (European Commission, 2021<sup>[13]</sup>). In other words, the Commission is rural proofing its own initiatives. They also encourage member states to also consider implementing the rural proofing principle at national, regional, and local levels (European Commission, 2021<sup>[13]</sup>).

Rural proofing health policies is also increasing outside of the OECD, with the most recent introduction in South Africa (RHAP, 2015<sup>[27]</sup>). The World Organization of Family Doctors WONCA (Working Group on Rural Practice) has acknowledged the importance of rural proofing for health (WONCA, 2003<sup>[28]</sup>).

## Why is rural proofing needed?

Rural proofing can support the place-based approach to policy development and the consideration of the well-being of rural constituents in policy formulation. More broadly, it can help improve policy coherence for rural regions, curb the urban bias in policymaking, and help avoid unintended negative consequences from policies in rural regions. There have been recent examples where failure to account for the specific characteristics of rural areas have contributed to a significant negative response to policies. For example, in the Netherlands, the government’s recommended cuts in nitrogen compound emissions, intended to protect the 150+ nature reserves in the country, in fact fostered a series of social

movements and increased tensions between urban and rural areas. Likewise, the violent 2018 “yellow vest” protests in France were triggered by a proposed increase in diesel and petrol tax to aid the country’s transition to green energy. Rural communities opposed this move, as the constituents, more dependent on cars to commute, they considered themselves disproportionately affected. Rural proofing can also support non-rural departments when creating policies that impact rural areas, highlighted in Figure 1 and discussed in this section.

**Figure 1. Why rural proof?**



Source: Author’s elaboration

### **Help curb urban bias and encourage a more balanced approach to rural-urban development.**

There is a prevailing perception that rural areas are “perpetually declining” and “losing to the urban bully” particularly when seeking to access fiscal resources (Ashwood and MacTavish, 2016<sup>[29]</sup>). In the paper *From Territorial Cohesion To Regional Spatial Justice*, Jones *et al*, analysed the impact the EU approach to territorial cohesion has on “lagging” regions and the ability to “catch up” with more prosperous regions (Jones, Goodwin-Hawkins and Woods, 2020<sup>[30]</sup>). The authors noted that “limited visions of success or failure” tend to “reinforce the notion that ‘lagging’ regions have to play a game” based on rules defined by urban areas. They also note that “territorial cohesion, when discussed in relation to regional inequalities” risks reinforcing a perception that certain “underperforming” regions are somehow problematic or lacking (Jones, Goodwin-Hawkins and Woods, 2020<sup>[30]</sup>). This alone brings a few challenges such as:

- Putting lagging regions in an untenable position. They are essentially in a fixed race – “one that has already been run and the finish line drawn by stronger, faster sprinters” – often urban regions.
- A narrower view of territorial cohesion, development, well-being and the “good life” in regions because the focus is on particular economic and social measures of success or failure without seeing how this could be different in the rural context.

Further, as Mahon *et al* observe, the “distribution of regional development funds to pre-defined bounded administrative units on the basis of GDP have been shown to skew benefits and mask social and spatial variations at lower levels of aggregation” (Mahon *et al.*, 2023<sup>[31]</sup>). To some, territorial cohesion has “imposed spatial and scalar straightjackets” on regions, making the furthering of “more equal and just societies more, not less, challenging” (Jones, Goodwin-Hawkins and Woods<sup>[30]</sup>). In the context of these challenges, Rural Proofing can play an important role to “correct bias” in policies and empower community-led development (Mahon *et al.*, 2023<sup>[31]</sup>).

### **Support the place-based approach to policy development**

Place-based policymaking is an important and long-standing pillar of OECD Recommendations. In *Distributed Rural Proofing – An Essential Tool for the Future of Rural Development?* Kenneth Nordberg argues that it is important to link the place-based approach to policymaking to rural proofing mechanisms so that government systems can respond to change seamlessly at different scales of governance, horizontally and vertically (Nordberg, 2020<sup>[20]</sup>). In 2011, the *OECD Regional Outlook* noted that policy responses were primarily one-size-fits-all and “place-blind” leaving “little or no consideration for regional specifics” (OECD, 2011<sup>[12]</sup>). The report acknowledged that the place-blind approach was appealing because the impacts were “easy to understand and help to address the need for accountability of public spending” (OECD, 2011<sup>[12]</sup>). For example, large cross-regional differences in tax policies could make it more difficult for firms to do business throughout a country. The reality was quite different, outcomes often yielded unintended, unexpected, and undesired consequences. It also led to “greater regional polarisation” and economic marginalisation of many peripheral regions. This is because, there are instances where the place-blind nature of policies limits the potential to address severe differences in economic outcomes across regions.

The OECD’s Regional Development Policy Committee (RDPC) has spent the last twenty plus years since its creation in 1999, engaging in quantitative and qualitative analysis of the place-based policy approach to rural and regional development and building standards and good practices. *OECD Regional Outlook* 2014 called for the “adopt(ion) of a place-based approach to rural policy because the need for a more tailored approach was arguably greater there (OECD, 2014<sup>[32]</sup>). The 2016 edition focused, among other things, on place-based drivers of productivity growth (OECD, 2016<sup>[33]</sup>), while in 2019, it identified place-based policies as central to addressing persistent regional inequalities (OECD, 2019<sup>[34]</sup>). The 2021 version provided more evidence that a place-based approach is vital for resilience (OECD, 2021<sup>[35]</sup>). Specifically, it stressed that place-based policies were essential to building an inclusive, resilient, and sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. The culmination of this work was the OECD Council adoption of the *Recommendation on Regional Development Policy* at Ministerial level in June 2023 (OECD, 2023<sup>[36]</sup>).

The 2012, OECD report *Promoting Growth in All Regions* report provided extensive empirical evidence for supporting so called “lagging rural regions” (OECD, 2012<sup>[37]</sup>). It sought to de-bunk the myth that there is no growth potential in underdeveloped rural regions. Instead, it posited that, less developed regions should be viewed as potential assets (OECD, 2012<sup>[37]</sup>). The report concluded by calling for the inclusion of geography and place-based factors into the structural policy agenda to increase the growth potential of countries (OECD, 2012<sup>[37]</sup>). Additionally, the OECD study *Rural-Urban Partnerships: An Integrated Approach to Economic Development* suggested that policy makers could no longer address rural and urban areas in isolation if they want to maximise the potential of both places (OECD, 2013<sup>[38]</sup>). Rural proofing mechanisms can help to embed the place-based approach into policymaking as has been recommended by the OECD for over 20 years.

### **Well-being – putting people at the centre.**

It is widely acknowledged that people’s well-being should be the target of development policy. Place-based does not only benefit national economies it “contributes to a more inclusive and sustainable growth model; and has a strong social dimension by helping to build a “fairer society” (OECD, 2012<sup>[37]</sup>). The deep structural inequalities between places stretch beyond economic outcomes and impact broader well-being. Evidence is mounting on the far-reaching costs of failing to tackle regional underperformance. These include reduced employment/earnings, social mobility, and life satisfaction, and a higher prevalence of welfare dependency and health issues (OECD, 2023<sup>[5]</sup>). The *OECD Regional Outlook* 2019 stressed that “the long-term vitality of communities depends not only on economic growth and competitiveness, but also on resident well-being, inclusion, and environmental sustainability (OECD, 2019<sup>[34]</sup>), and *How’s Life?*

2020: *Measuring Well-being* recommends that governments look beyond the economy to understand how people and societies are doing (OECD, 2020<sup>[39]</sup>).

Citizens are demanding better living standards and the reduction of inequalities, putting more pressure on governments to steer recovery towards resilience and inclusivity. Trust is a central concept, integral to understanding how citizens relate to the state (Bienstman, 2023<sup>[40]</sup>). Inequalities and trust are linked. In fact, some consider rising income inequality to be a powerful social divider (Wilkinson, 2009<sup>[41]</sup>). Public discontent about imbalanced opportunities and the perception of being overlooked is visible in the use of the “ballot box and, in some cases, outright revolt” to garner greater attention to their plight (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018<sup>[42]</sup>). The inaugural *OECD Survey on the Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions* found that there is an even split between people who say they trust their national government and those who do not (OECD, 2022<sup>[43]</sup>). The report recommended that OECD Members set a goal to strengthen trust, reinforce democracy, and recommit to reducing inequalities. Effective policy design is considered to be the foundation for achieving goals such as sustainability, public value, or justice (Mukherjee, 2018<sup>[44]</sup>).

Governments are paying increasing attention to the different dimensions of well-being – including health. Well-being recognises that economic progress encompassing a broader view of social progress, beyond production and market value is critical. The *OECD Well-being Framework* (OECD, 2020<sup>[39]</sup>) considers whether life is getting better for people and includes a distinction between well-being today and the resources needed to sustain it in the future. Rural regions have different geographies, ranging from communities near urban areas to remote sparsely-populated places, strategies between the two may differ. The OECD’s *Rural Well-being Framework* (OECD, 2020<sup>[2]</sup>) offers a people-centred approach that factors in the rural context. It calls for greater horizontal co-ordination between rural and non-rural ministries, as well as the mainstreaming of rural issues across all policies (Box 1). The Framework is built on three pillars:

- **Three types of rural:** Those near a large city, those with a small or medium city close by, and remote regions
- **Three objectives:** Encompassing not only economic objectives but also social and environmental
- **Three different types of stakeholders:** The government, the private sector and civil society

## OECD Rural Well-being Framework

The *Rural Well-being Framework* and its three pillars of well-being (economic, social, and environmental dimensions) identify a number of priority areas for rural regions:

- Focus on improving the well-being of citizens living in rural regions as the key deliverable.
- Raise productivity by developing strategies for rural communities to add value to tradeable activities, internationalise SMEs, retain more value in rural communities and strengthening rural skills.
- Design forward-looking policies to provide sustainable services on education and health.
- Develop sustainable services to ensure inclusive rural areas for all.
- Make rural communities attractive for youth, the elderly, and newcomers.
- Put rural regions at the centre of the transition to a zero-carbon economy.

In 2019, the RDP and its Working Party on Rural Policy (WPRUR) adopted the *OECD Principles on Rural Policy* (OECD, 2019<sup>[45]</sup>). The Principles also help prepare rural areas for the myriad of economic, environmental, technological and demographic changes. They are informed by the body of work undertaken by the OECD over the past two decades on a variety of economic, environmental, and

social dimensions. The Principles are designed to help national and local governments deliver better rural policies for better lives and shape more resilient, sustainable, and inclusive futures. Most recently, they served as the model for Our Rural Future (Government of Ireland, 2022<sup>[46]</sup>), the Irish Government's blueprint for the development of rural Ireland.

### Box 1. Mainstreaming rural policy and rural proofing

Mainstreaming and rural proofing are sometimes used interchangeably but they are in fact different. In mainstreaming the dynamics specific to rural areas are expected to be considered by all ministries at all times. This is a policy approach or strategy, while rural proofing is the mechanism used to support or achieve mainstreaming. This was evident in 2011 in the *OECD Rural Review of England* which revealed that the rural policy approach there was in fact “rural mainstreaming” – the consideration of rural circumstances as part of day-to-day policymaking (OECD, 2011<sup>[21]</sup>). Mainstreaming was intended to ensure that people in all parts of England receive comparable policy treatment by government. The process used by the government to achieve mainstreaming was “rural proofing”, co-ordinated by the department of Agriculture (OECD, 2011<sup>[21]</sup>). The goal was to support mainstreaming by improving the knowledge of rural areas and making it available during the policy design and development phase to different departments and civil servants.

Source: (OECD, 2011<sup>[21]</sup>)

### **Responding to Megatrends**

Policy makers will increasingly need to take action to address both short and long-term impacts of megatrends, and in particular their spatial impacts. Megatrends such as digitalisation, the green transition, demographic change, and globalisation (Box 2) could further amplify existing regional inequalities. Some regions will need to undergo major transitions to adapt to challenges, while others are better equipped to seize the opportunities that are created from the transition. Megatrends also provide opportunities to boost sustainability and resilience. Whilst all regions have been adversely affected by these shocks, their capacities to adapt and capitalise on the opportunities, vary significantly (OECD, 2022<sup>[4]</sup>). Policy makers need to find ways to simultaneously respond to these interconnected challenges and maximise opportunities. Interventions that target administrative boundaries or economic sectors in silos will miss out on opportunities to unlock synergies and meet broad policy objectives. Greater multi-level governance and stakeholder co-ordination are variables taken into account in rural proofing. The rural proofing process should encourage different levels of government to engage between the different levels or among the same levels or networked co-operation in order to design and implement better policies.

## Box 2. Global megatrends and rural areas

A number of global shifts are likely to influence how rural areas can succeed in a more complex, dynamic and challenging environment.

- **Population ageing and migration:** The general ageing trend across OECD economies, is expected to continue. The capacity for rural communities to provide an attractive offer and integrate newly arrived migrants will shape their ability to address the challenge of ageing and shrinking populations.
- **Urbanisation:** The rural to urban migration trend has stabilised in OECD economies. However, population ageing, particularly in rural remote areas, will tend to shift the political balance within countries toward metropolitan areas.
- **Global shifts in production:** The production of goods and services is increasingly dispersed across countries as multi-national enterprises (MNEs) pursue offshore, reshore, and outsource activities. Rural regions will need to continue to specialise and focus on core areas of advantage to compete in the global economy.
- **Rise of emerging economies:** The centre of economic gravity is likely to continue to shift away from the North Atlantic toward Asia, Africa and Latin America. By 2030, emerging economies are expected to contribute to two-thirds of global growth and be major centres of global trade. A larger global middle class will translate into increased demand for raw materials, food and technologies from rural places in OECD economies.
- **Climate change and environmental pressures:** The United Nations Paris Agreement provides a framework for global action to limit temperature increases to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. Future population and economic growth is likely to further increase pressures on the environment.
- **Technological breakthroughs:** A number of emerging technologies associated with digitalisation, including automation and artificial intelligence, decentralised energy generation, cloud computing and the Internet of Things, and Nano technologies will open up new production possibilities and transform access to goods and services. This is likely to result in labour saving technologies and product innovations in agriculture, forestry, mining, and associated value-adding.

Source: (OECD, 2019<sup>[34]</sup>) (OECD, 2022<sup>[6]</sup>) (OECD, 2018<sup>[3]</sup>)

### ***Supporting government departments that don't "think rural"***

Analysis of OECD Member countries reveal growing recognition that broad national policies for health care, education, infrastructure and environment, have a greater impact on rural areas than policy that is explicitly targeted to rural places and people (Freshwater and Trapasso, 2014<sup>[47]</sup>). Government departments that do not deal with rural issues on a day-to-day basis may have limited understanding of rural areas. This could leave rural areas vulnerable to “unresolved and conflicting assumptions and policy prescriptions” (Saraceno, 2013<sup>[48]</sup>). Rural policy is defined as “all policy initiatives designed to promote opportunities and deliver integrated solutions to economic, social and environmental problems” (OECD, 2019<sup>[49]</sup>). For this reason, rural policies are often located within other policies, targeting other objectives, that sometimes conflict with rural policy intentions, so there is a definite need for coherence (Saraceno, 2013<sup>[48]</sup>). Governments are expected to deliver on an ever-expanding set of policy objectives, design programs, policies, and regulations, that will work within limited time frames in all regions. Coherent alignment is



critical when one department's policies are subject to another's. There is also a lot to be gained from getting different government departments to see the inter-dependence of their policies and work on actions together. Policies are complementary when they support the achievement of a given target from different angles Table 1 highlights a few related to land use, infrastructure, resource use and public services.

**Table 1. Policy complementarities for different types of rural regions**

Type of rural region	Land use	Infrastructure/ accessibility	Resource use	Public services
Close to a city	Manage land conversion to limit urban sprawl.	Control expansion of sewer and water systems to slow land conversion. Plan road and public transit to manage development.	Maintain environmental quality and restrict activity that is not sustainable. Work to valorise rural amenities used by urban residents.	Provide local high-quality services that are integrated into adjacent urban capacity.
Remote	Restrict land use practices that create environmental externalities. Preserve high-value land that provides natural or cultural benefits.	Improve connectivity to urban regions through broadband, roads and rail	Maintain environmental quality and restrict activity that is not sustainable. Work to valorise rural amenities used by urban residents.	Develop innovative ways to deliver high-quality public services in health, education, business support and workforce training. Local countercyclical revenue stabilisation plan/support

Source: (OECD, 2020<sup>[2]</sup>)

Some policy makers tend to believe that rural proofing is not necessary in the early stages of policy development because the ability to adapt policies locally is built in. In their view, the policy or strategy should be proofed when it is being implemented. However, the OECD finds that often the opposite is true: that the scope for adapting an already-shaped policy is more limited once it reaches the local level (OECD, 2011<sup>[21]</sup>). New Zealand shaped their rural proofing policy to “ensure that when policy makers sit down to design the rules, they take into account the unique factors that affect rural communities” (O’Connor, 2018<sup>[50]</sup>). The *OECD Rural Review of England* found that early engagement with policy makers during the budget committee, consultative and issue debating stages would have provided an opportunity to mitigate a number of measures with disproportionate impacts on rural areas in the budget such as the removal of allowances for small business and the increase in fuel duty and changes to vehicle excise duty (OECD, 2011<sup>[21]</sup>)

More recently in the United States, the 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law included USD 65 billion to fund high-speed broadband deployment to households and businesses lacking such services. In a 2021 report, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), agency that regulates interstate and international communications, pointed out that rural areas have poorer access to broadband infrastructure than urban areas, and that rural areas have fallen behind urban and suburban levels of fixed broadband by 54% (FCC, 2021<sup>[51]</sup>). The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law allocated USD 1.15 billion to the USDA Rural Development Agency. It allocated the balance of the funds, USD 48.2 billion, to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), an agency responsible for advising the President on telecommunications and information policy issues. While USDA, FCC and NTIA have an Interagency Agreement in place to co-ordinate broadband funding deployment, there was still a risk that rural areas would not receive the levels of funding needed. For this reason, political leaders encouraged NTIA to prioritise unconnected rural areas, instead of “overbuilding existing broadband infrastructure in areas with reliable broadband service” (Marco Rubio, 2022<sup>[52]</sup>).

Policymaking should aim for policy coherence, defined as an outcome where various policies are aligned so that efforts in one policy area do not undermine efforts in another – and even reinforce those efforts where possible (OECD, 2021<sup>[53]</sup>). Rural needs may differ from the needs of urban communities and the

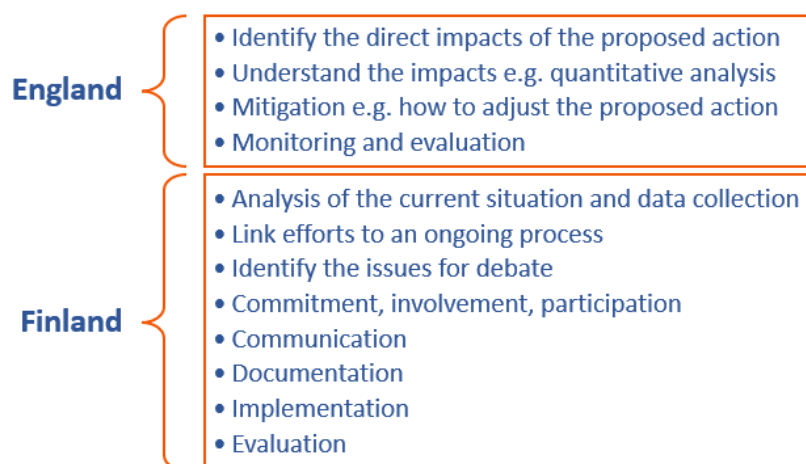
corresponding solutions could vary accordingly. In his review of the rural proofing process in England, Cameron found that “departments seemed, genuinely unaware of the value of describing and commenting on the rural dimensions to their policy interventions (Cameron, 2015<sup>[54]</sup>). The European Commission developed a rural proofing tool because of the “multidimensional nature of rural areas” and their focus on “social and territorial cohesion” (Rouby and Ptak-Bufkens, 2022<sup>[55]</sup>). They needed a mechanism to screen new EU legislations for potential impacts on rural jobs growth, development, and the social well-being of rural people. At the same time, not all policies will require adjustments to be made if their intended purpose has little or negligible differential impact in rural areas.

When evidence supporting a policy is incomplete or unknown, it becomes particularly challenging to anticipate, analyse and thoroughly discuss its impact. In Canada, the Rural and Northern Lens was created by the Rural Ontario Municipal Association as guidance to be used by the Government of Ontario. This was done after, noting that many of the challenges facing rural and northern communities had one commonality – a lack of forethought about the consequences of applying a one-size-fits-all approach to a specific policy area. Rural proofing is geared to provide assistance and is used by “provincial ministries to assess the impacts of new policy initiatives or changes on existing programs *before* they are implemented” (Rural Ontario Municipal Association, 2015<sup>[56]</sup>). In Northern Ireland, the Rural Needs Act was implemented to safeguard the needs of rural communities and states that public authorities must ensure that policies do not disadvantage people in rural areas compared to people in urban areas (Sherry and Shortall, 2019<sup>[57]</sup>).

### The different stages and elements involved in rural proofing.

Rural proofing usually involves variations of the different stages shown in Figure 2 and supported in different ways by the variables listed in Table 4. In the England example, the first stage focuses on identifying the issues by looking at the direct impact of the proposed policy action. The second stage uses deeper analysis to understand the impacts through quantitative studies or other means. The third stage moves from diagnosis to adjustment, introducing policy tools to decrease or remove any negative impacts. The Finland process includes a few of the same things but specifically calls for “linking the rural proofing effort to an ongoing process” and communication. Whether there are four or multiple steps in the process, different methodologies are involved. In Finland, checklists, geospatial data, and questionnaires are used to review for impacts while participative workshops convene stakeholders.

The role of rural stakeholders is considered by many to be key to the overall rural proofing process (ENRD, 2022<sup>[25]</sup>). This involves a rich patchwork of not only public authorities at national, regional or local level but also businesses, research institutions and the civil society. This is a part of the continuing shift in OECD countries away from the national government in a command-and-control role to one that facilitates knowledge pooling and shared decision making (OECD, 2008<sup>[58]</sup>). However, how and when to engage rural stakeholders in the rural proofing process is still a work in progress for many countries, as is how to do it in a way that does not make the process unduly cumbersome. Perhaps rural stakeholders could be members of the co-design team developing rural proofing as in Chile. In Northern Ireland, Sherry and Shortall, recommended a “consultation-focused” approach to rural stakeholder engagement which combines evidential review, pre-consultation and public consultation (Shortall and Sherry, 2017<sup>[59]</sup>). In that example, rural stakeholders are at the table from day one with full awareness of any agreed objectives and process planning.

**Figure 2. Rural proofing stages: Examples from England and Finland**

Source: (Husberg, 2022<sup>[60]</sup>) and (DEFRA, 2017<sup>[15]</sup>)

A co-ordinating agency, at the helm, supporting rural proofing as it moves through different steps in the process is also crucial. More often than not, this role is undertaken by the agency responsible for rural policy, in the United States RPN example, the co-ordinating body is the Department of Agriculture. Likewise, the supporting staff or experts with rural knowledge needed to help non-rural departments rural proof their initiatives are usually gleaned from the Department of Agriculture or the rural ministry. Table 2 provides an overview of the governance structure in a few OECD countries. The lead ministry on rural policy is often agriculture, but there are others: Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation (Sweden); Ministry of Industry, Business and Financial Affairs (Denmark); Ministry of Regional development and/or rural affairs. Country experiences also reveal that rural proofing can be a resource intensive process. For example, the lead agency's responsibilities include helping to identify opportunities to rural proof; providing guidance and developing supporting tools e.g. data, training, workshops. The increase in activities for the agency is rarely accompanied by an increase in staffing or other resources. Furthermore, there are inherent difficulties in the ability of any single department to influence the behaviour of a department outside its remit.

**Table 2. Governance structure in a few OECD countries**

Governance	Federal System	Constitutional Division of Powers	Agriculture as a Main Agency	Formal Rural Policy	Strong Local Government	Stable Policy Approach	Rural Policy Driven by European Union Common Agricultural Policy	Connected to other policy
England			x					x
Finland			x	x	x	x		x
Germany	x	x	x		x	x		
Italy	x		x	x			x	
Mexico	x	x	x	x		x		
Netherlands			x			x		
Quebec, CA	x	x		x	x	x		x
Scotland, UK						x		x
Spain			x	x			x	x

Source: (Freshwater and Trapasso, 2014<sup>[47]</sup>)

## Rural proofing challenges

In *Achieving Policy Impact*, the authors accurately describe the policymaking world as “one in which bandwidth is limited, attention is scarce, and solutions are often needed urgently” (Marta Sienkiewicz, 2020<sup>[61]</sup>). Experts believe that the greatest benefits from rural proofing are delivered when the impact on rural is considered from the outset (Cameron, 2015<sup>[54]</sup>). As noted earlier, rural proofing involves a number of variables that are interlinked which contributes to the perception of it as a cumbersome complex process, (Table 4) and results in a number of weaknesses (Table 3). A comprehensive review of the Rural Lens created by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (Hall and Gibson, 2016<sup>[62]</sup>) and Rural Proofing in England (Cameron, 2015<sup>[54]</sup>) revealed that the challenges that continue to thwart rural proofing are often linked to one or more of the elements in the table below.

**Table 3. Rural proofing strengths and weaknesses**

Opportunities and strengths	Challenges and weaknesses
Increases the number of ex-ante assessments	Time constraints
Fosters collaboration across government (horizontal and vertical)	Overly cumbersome process
Encourages stakeholder engagement	Ineffective oversight
Builds capacity and knowledge on rural issues	Vague or overly ambitious objectives - trying to do too much
Improves rural data collection and co-ordination	Perpetuates a negative view of rural
Encourages clear objectives and outcomes on rural issues	Overly dependent on political support which limits long-term sustainability
Increases focus on rural opportunity	Resources and commitment are not in sync with needs of the co-ordinating body
Builds synergies and streamlines administrative actions	Risk of bureaucratic paralysis
Improves policy coherence	Limited agreement or collective understanding on what constitutes 'rural' and limited availability/easy access to hard data that corresponds to rural or rural areas

Source: Author's own elaboration

The assessments (Cameron, 2015<sup>[54]</sup>) (Hall and Gibson, 2016<sup>[62]</sup>) (OECD, 2011<sup>[21]</sup>) (ENRD, 2022<sup>[25]</sup>). shed light on some common challenges that persist today. They include:

- Over reliance on political-level buy-in to advance rural proofing
- Limited or no knowledge and understanding of rural issues and areas by policy makers outside rural department
- Limited responsibility of the department with responsibility for co-ordinating rural proofing
- Confusion across government about the roles and responsibilities of the co-ordinating agency
- Lackluster support for the co-ordinating body to enable cross government collaboration
- More often than not, policy examinations are undertaken as “ex poste impact assessments of policy rather than “ex ante assessments” during the policy design phase
- Executing rural proofing at the “right” time to influence policymaking:
- Adapting the rural proofing process to the different policymaking process at different levels of governance e.g. national, regional, or local levels:
- Lack of accountability when a department fails to rural proof: and
- Fear that rural proofing would lead to increased costs and delays in implementation.

**Table 4. Rural proofing elements**

Rural proofing elements	Factors for consideration
Mandatory or voluntary	Formal/mandatory co-ordination and collaboration procedures may imply some transaction costs, at least in the short term, while co-operative relationship among government actors and levels of government can facilitate the alignment of objectives and incentives and facilitate collaboration with fewer formalities. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Should rural proofing be obligatory, mandated by law, introduced via a legislative process? Or should it be voluntary or <i>ad hoc</i>?</li> </ul>
Political support	Strong leadership and explicit commitment at the highest political level can often reinforce rural proofing in line ministries. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Driven by or supported by a Minister or Ministerial group?</li> </ul>
Co-ordinating Body	Appropriate co-ordination of efforts both vertically and horizontally across government departments can make public investment more effective. The co-ordinating authority in government should usually have a role in stimulating other line ministry officials and departments to rural proof. One department working across the public administration, is not a simple matter.
Timing and governance level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When to rural proof?</li> <li>How does it differ based on the governance level: national, regional, and local?</li> </ul>
Supporting tools e.g. workshops, data, questionnaire	The evidence does not speak for itself. Policy makers need the best available information that clearly help to understand the evidence and its implications. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are supporting tools fit for purpose?</li> <li>Tailored to governance scales?</li> <li>Are they simple or complex?</li> </ul>
Objectives and outcomes	Begin with a clear goal in mind. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are the objectives for rural proofing?</li> <li>What would you like to achieve?</li> <li>How do you manage conflicting interests of different stakeholders (within rural areas and rural vs urban)?</li> </ul>
Rural stakeholder engagement	Some of the areas that really need to be rural proofed may be more obvious to the non-government sector but not to government. It is for this reason that business and other non-governmental sectors should be involved in rural proofing. Well-planned engagement with stakeholders, including citizens, can help combine pragmatic government approach with other types of knowledge to increase relevance and impact. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is there a channel to engage with rural stakeholders?</li> <li>Is it set up, early enough in the process to inform guidance?</li> <li>At what point should stakeholders be engaged?</li> </ul>
Monitoring, assessment, evaluation	Setting up monitoring and evaluation systems may be necessary to test progress and remedy weaknesses. Evaluations help officials to allocate the resources necessary for defining evaluation methodologies and producing relevant data. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do you measure success in the short and long term?</li> </ul>
Communication	Communicating results to stakeholders could help illustrate value added and support building ownership and strengthening accountability to all stakeholders. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do you share the results of the rural proofing?</li> </ul>
Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is it impervious to administration/political shifts?</li> </ul>

Source: Author's own elaboration

Some believe that an outside “go-to” body that provides rural expertise and evidence could or should reinforce the capacity and resource gaps of the co-ordinating body and staff (ENRD, 2022<sub>[25]</sub>). The British government experimented with such an entity; it was called the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC). It was an organisation with full cabinet (political) support and a formally-recognised mandate to support rural proofing. It focused on gathering rural evidence and the CRC lead had a direct access to the Prime Minister (See Box 3). OECD analysis revealed that despite the best intentions, the CRC support of rural proofing was hit-and-miss. While they did produce valuable empirical evidence on the “state of rural” they were never able to engage non-rural departments. Some attributed this to their “outsider” non-government status” (OECD, 2011<sub>[21]</sub>). This does not mean that an external entity cannot support rural proofing, only that an external body in of itself may not be enough, in the same way that designating a co-ordinating

government department may not be enough. Identifying a leading body within or external to the government should be coupled with the requisite authority to act. In practice this means, the lead agency can engage different departments on policies to help provide support and help fill knowledge gaps on rural issues.

### Box 3. Commission for Rural Communities example of an expert body tasked with rural proofing

The Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) was formally established on 1 October 2006 following the enactment of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006.<sup>248</sup> Funded by the UK government, the CRC's annual budget was over GBP 9 million; which decreased to GBP 6 million over 2010-11 and GBP 500,000 over 2011-12 and 2012-13. The aim was to ensure that "policies, programmes and decisions consider the circumstances of rural communities. CRC had three functions:

- Advocacy, acting as a voice for rural people, businesses and communities;
- Advisory, giving evidence-based, objective advice to government and others; and
- Independent watchdog, monitoring and reporting on the delivery of policies nationally, regionally and locally.

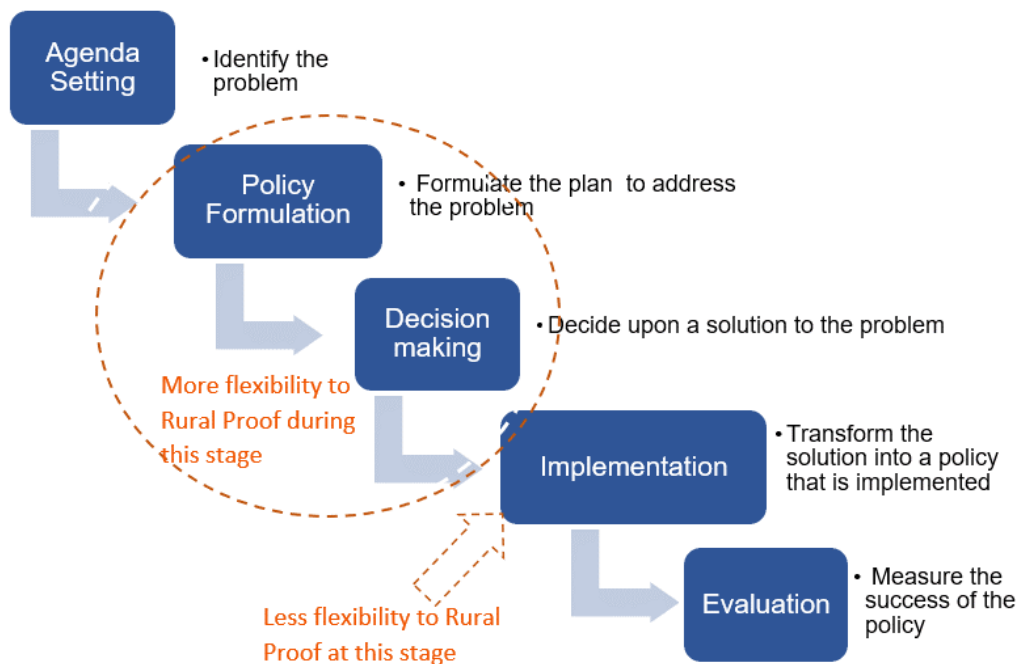
The advocacy role ensured rural issues were well represented before Parliament and Government, with the Chair of the CRC reporting directly to the Prime Minister. The role of adviser ensured a degree of commitment to rural proofing by advising how policy formation and delivery could work as well for rural areas as they did for urban. In addition, the CRC was able to warn Government departments and other public bodies when their policies were failing rural communities. The role as watchdog enabled a longer-term view, through monitoring of the way in which policies were developed, adopted and implemented.

The CRC closed in 2013 and the functions were brought into the government. Following the closure, the Government established the Rural Communities Policy Unit (RCPU) within Defra to oversee rural policy and "operate as a centre of rural expertise, supporting and co-ordinating activity within and beyond Defra". RCPU was also intended to lead on rural proofing, ensure that all Government departments were effectively rural proofing policies before decisions were made.

Source: (House of Lords, 2017<sup>[63]</sup>).

The most common critique of rural proofing is the fact that the assessments are undertaken later as *ex poste* impact assessments of policy rather than *ex ante* assessments during the policy design phase" (OECD, 2011<sup>[21]</sup>) (ENRD, 2022<sup>[25]</sup>). Policymaking is not a static process, but the policymaking cycle does tend to include five main areas: 1) agenda-setting, 2) policy formulation, 3) decision-making, 4) implementation, and 5) evaluation see Figure 3. These five areas provide a framework to better understand how policy is developed. During the agenda-setting phase new issues that may require government action are identified. While the policy formulation focuses on developing policy options to address the issue and the decision-making phase, a particular course of action is determined. In the implementation stage the chosen solution is put into effect and during the evaluation state, the policy is monitored to determine if it is achieving the intended goal.

Figure 3. Rural proofing and the policymaking cycle



Source: Adapted from (Benson and Jordan, 2015<sup>[64]</sup>)

Policy makers use evidence at various stages of the policymaking process – from problem definition to identifying a solution (Marta Sienkiewicz, 2020<sup>[61]</sup>). This makes timing, i.e. finding the crucial moment to influence policymaking a very important factor. While some feel that “thinking rural” needs to be relevant in all policymaking stages – from drafting the initial policy strategy all the way to impact assessment after implementation (Roland Gaugitsch, 2022<sup>[65]</sup>). Arguably, the opportune moment for rural proofing is during the period after the problem is *identified* but not yet *finalised* for implementation. This is when the rural proofing supporting instruments e.g. data, guidance documents etc, can affect the impact in rural areas by identifying new issues for the policy agenda and potentially change how decisionmakers perceive problems and solutions.

The ability to influence policymaking and rural proof could also vary depending on the governance structure where the policy is created, i.e. at the national, regional, or local level. Top-down processes mean that policy decisions are passed on to lower levels, whereas bottom-up processes refer to the involvement of the local level in policy-making and subsequent impact on higher levels (Cerna, 2013<sup>[66]</sup>). Rural proofing in a top-down governance scenario may require a different rural proofing approach. In the US infrastructure example, it would mean the infrastructure bill should have been rural proofed when it was being developed before it was approved by the House and Senate. However, at this level, the policymaking cycle is quite fast and the window to influence the process much shorter. By contrast, in a bottom-up governance structure there is potentially more scope to do more as shown in Figure 4 because subnational governments differ greatly in their degree of autonomy and the types of responsibilities. A complete understanding of the governance framework is essential to customise tailor-made approaches for rural proofing.

**Figure 4. Rural proofing: Top-down versus bottom-up governance structure**

Top down policymaking	Bottom-up policymaking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shorter rural proofing window</li> <li>• Increases the need to move quickly</li> <li>• Encourages a more nimble or streamlined rural proofing approach</li> <li>• Necessitates more simplified rural proofing supporting instruments</li> <li>• Fewer opportunities to influence policy change if a rural proofing window is missed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expands the rural proofing window</li> <li>• Decreases time pressures, more time to rural proof</li> <li>• Enables different approaches to rural proofing e.g. streamlined or more complex</li> <li>• Allows for the use of varied supporting instruments that could be tailored to the governance level</li> <li>• Provides more opportunities to influence policy change if a particular window is missed</li> </ul>

Source: Author's own elaboration



## 2 Factors that could increase the effectiveness of rural proofing

Some in the academic community remain hesitant to embrace rural proofing. In *To Rural Proof or Not to Rural Proof: A Comparative Analysis* and *Rural Proofing Policies for Health: Barriers to Policy Transfer for Australia*, the authors present compelling reasons as to why rural proofing would not work using Australia as a focal point of analysis. In the first article, Shortall and Alston posit that rural proofing “does not makes sense” in Australia while Sutarsa *et al.*, argue that “rural proofing is not the best option” or way to ensure that health policies have a rural lens in Australia (Shortall and Alston, 2016<sup>[67]</sup>) (Sutarsa, Campbell and Moore, 2021<sup>[68]</sup>). Today, Australia’s federal relations architecture includes intergovernmental forums where commonwealth, state and territory ministers can meet to advance a range of priority cross-jurisdictional issues including health (Australian Government, n.d.<sup>[69]</sup>). Furthermore, there are a few examples of different types of rural proofing mechanisms built into the Australian governance ecosystem (Box 4). Nonetheless, it is worth examining the positions raised in these articles as it highlights some of the weaknesses and misperceptions about rural proofing that could continue to temper its success rate and sustainability if they are not addressed.

### Box 4. Applying a regional, rural and remote rural lens to policy actions in Australia

In Australia, the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts (DITRDCA) provides advice, assistance and feedback to departments and agencies on regional impact considerations for any new policy proposal, and advice on completing Regional Australia Impact Statements (RAIS) as part of the policy development and Cabinet Submission process. Where required, a RAIS is designed to help policymakers understand how a New Policy Proposal (NPP) affects regional, remote and rural Australia (including Australian Government administered Territories) differently to metropolitan Australia. In addition, a RAIS can also support consideration for how an NPP or submission aligns with the Government's Regional Investment Framework (RIF), which sets out the Government's approach to how regional investment is delivered across the Commonwealth in a way that is joined-up, flexible and cohesive.”

The RIF sets out a new approach to delivering regional investment, co-ordinating across governments to make investment work better for regions and placing regions and their people at the centre of decision-making. It outlines guiding principles, priority areas for investment and an implementation approach that will support the delivery of smart and responsible investments that support regions to adapt and thrive, regardless of their economic circumstances. The Framework supports a joined-up and cohesive approach to seizing opportunities and responding to challenges across Australia's diverse regions. It supports the Government's commitments to valuing local voices and priorities; informed and evidence-based decision making; and delivery of investment in our regions with integrity and transparency. Under the Framework, government investment will be targeted and support better

outcomes for regional people, the places they live in, the services they rely on, and the regional industries and economies that are core to Australia's prosperity.

Source: (DITRDCA, 2024<sup>[70]</sup>) (Regional Australia, 2023<sup>[71]</sup>) (DITRDCA, n.d.<sup>[72]</sup>)

Both articles relied heavily on early versions of the UK approach to rural proofing as the measure of comparison. Shortall and Alston, determined it was not a good fit because of the nature of the territory and how rural is situated or not situated within the Australian governance structure. Sutarsa *et al.*, proposed that rural proofing the health sector in Australia would fail for four reasons. First, rural proofing rests on the similarities between rural and urban rather than the differences, while rural and remote communities in Australia are heterogenous and very diverse. Second, rural proofing for health policies “assimilates rural and remote communities into a single undifferentiated aggregate with urban communities as the comparison”. Third, it is a process-oriented policy with tick-the-box activities and unclear goals and objectives. Fourth, the lack of a federal ministry with responsibility for rural and remote affairs in Australia (Sutarsa, Campbell and Moore, 2021<sup>[68]</sup>).

The authors are correct to some degree. If the rural proofing premise is based merely on an urban versus rural approach, that is too narrow a frame for a country with a territorial scope as varied as Australia. Also, rural proofing is a policy tool that is process-oriented. It is not meant to be a tick box exercise but, it can morph into one when it lacks guardrails e.g. co-ordination, authority to act, monitoring, buy-in from government departments etc. One example is taking a formal or informal approach. The Canadian and England rural proofing initiatives were not formal processes mandated by law which is considered by some to be a flaw (Atterton, 2022<sup>[73]</sup>). While rural proofing in Northern Ireland is a formal process required by law, the legislation is considered to include many weaknesses (Sherry and Shortall, 2017<sup>[74]</sup>).

Rural proofing is shaped significantly by the way it is designed, implemented and transposed into national, regional and local policy frameworks. It is meant to support the policymaking process, but a number of elements need to be put in place to increase its effectiveness over the long-term. There is a shared commitment to strengthen rural proofing and this article supports this effort by offering some factors for consideration. Rather than tackle every challenge or weakness noted in Table 3. The focus, in this section, is on different ways to optimise the process as it is being developed.

## 1. Develop clear objectives and tailored supporting tools

Objectives must be clear from the start to set expectations, accurately measure success and ensure that supporting tools like the assessment questionnaires are fit for purpose. A clear objective provides a baseline from which to gauge success. Another reoccurring critique of rural proofing mechanisms centers on the objectives which can sometimes be vague and unclear. In her initial analysis of the rural proofing process in Northern Ireland, Shortall described the objective as being “less clear”. She questioned the goal and wondered if rural proofing was trying to achieve “equality of opportunity or equality of outcome” (Shortall, 2008<sup>[75]</sup>). On the other hand, there are instances where there are too many objectives, undermining the ability to effectively achieve them all. The European Commission Working Group on Rural Proofing identified a few common objectives associated with rural proofing (ENRD, 2022<sup>[25]</sup>). They include:

- ensuring that fiscal resources reach rural places
- tailoring services to rural areas
- making sure that policies reflect the characteristics of rural
- mitigating against negative impacts in rural places
- assisting government departments that impact rural communities especially in territories where the urban agenda is the underlying focus

According to Parnell, the quality and consistency of rural proofing is influenced by the clarity of objectives as to what rural proofing is intended to achieve (Parnell, 2022<sup>[76]</sup>). Additional gains in terms of effectiveness can be reaped by designing rural proofing models that align to specific objectives. For this reason, objectives should be formulated in precise terms, so as to provide a good basis for assessment and to enhance accountability. For example, an objective could be *rural proofing policies or strategies that will impact rural areas for potential negative effects*. This objective by itself is straight forward but challenging. If you expand the same objective to “*rural proofing policies or strategies that will impact rural areas for potential negative effects and ensure equal treatment or rural as in urban*” this could make it a much more difficult objective to realise.

The rural continuum is diverse— a mix of urban adjacent, small urban municipalities and remote rural areas that could be affected in different ways by the same policy action. There will be conflicting interests for different stakeholders (within rural areas and rural versus urban); clear objectives will help prioritise the key issues. If rural proofing operates in a space where the desired outcomes are not clear, it is less likely to be successful. Supporting tools are typically developed to guide the process and help decision makers understand the unique aspects of rural communities, identifying the impacts of policies on them to allow for fair and equitable outcomes (see Box 5).

### Box 5. Rural lens: Environment scan and impact assessment

Example of questions to support the rural proofing process taken from the formerly used rural lens model created by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada:

- How is this initiative relevant to rural and remote Canada?
- Is it specific to a particular rural or remote region?
- What are the potential financial and economic impacts on rural and remote regions?
- What are the potential social impacts on rural and remote regions?
- What are the potential environmental impacts on rural and remote regions?
- What are the potential cultural impacts on rural and remote regions?
- How can the effects on rural and remote regions be measured?

Source: (Hall and Gibson, 2016<sup>[62]</sup>)

## 2. Adopt a “pilot study” approach – learn from sub-optimal short-term results

The consistency of “mixed results” in rural proofing to date, whether the country underscores that the different elements involved in getting the rural proofing process “right”, complicates the ability to get it right on the first *try*. Arguably, a process of constant and adaptive learning could prove beneficial for the long-term efficiency of rural proofing. Using a “trying and testing” approach, permits a better definition of objectives, as well as an easier identification of barriers or bottlenecks, be they technical or political (OECD, 2018<sup>[77]</sup>). A pilot program is a small-scale effort that helps the government learn how a large-scale rollout of a particular initiative might work in practice. Indeed a “good pilot program provides a platform to test, prove value and reveal deficiencies before spending a significant amount of time, energy, or money on a large-scale effort (TechTarget<sup>[78]</sup>). Conceiving initial attempts to rural proof as a pilot anticipates and prepares for the fact that there will be parts of the rural proofing model that may not produce the desired result in the short-term.

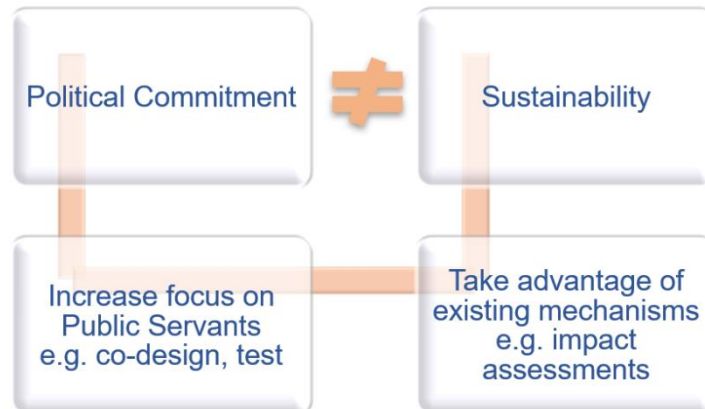
A pilot approach would also mean introducing it with built in feedback loops allowing for incremental adjustments as information is received. As part of their rural proofing effort, the Estonian government, through interviews with different policy makers in different ministries, tried to understand the key issues with impact assessments. The interviews revealed that the challenges lay less with timing and more with data. In some instances, there was “not enough” data, and in others it was just “too complex”, plus the solutions were found before the *ex-ante* assessment was completed. Based on this a number of new tools were developed, including new guidelines for the policy makers as part of the impact assessment phase. They also plan to pilot the guidelines in one ministry before expanding it to other departments because “if they do not use the guidelines – there is no point in expanding to other ministries” (Kasemets and Kurvits, 2022<sup>[79]</sup>). Taking a pilot approach in lieu of a full scale roll out will also provide scope to identify the rural proofing model that is the best fit for the governance level and culture.

### 3. Build a model that is less dependent on political commitment over time

Political commitment to rural proofing is considered a critical factor in ensuring its success. This position was reaffirmed in the recent European Network for Rural Development, *Rural Proofing Actions*. In this report Atterton noted that a “high level commitment” to rural proofing will be required and that it should be re-stated regularly’ (Jane Atterton and Veronika Korcekova, 2022<sup>[80]</sup>). This view is understandable, when political winds are favourable it makes it much easier to garner support for rural proofing, engage different departments, and access additional resources. The creation of the rural partners network is an example of endorsement at the highest level of government which enabled USDA, to facilitate cross-departmental collaboration on policies that impact rural America. In the OECD 2019 Multilevel Governance paper the authors noted that cross-sector co-ordination is almost always difficult and can be made easier when directly supported from above (Michalun and Nicita, 2019<sup>[81]</sup>). Furthermore, rural proofing often needs to be “pushed into use” and to date is rarely implemented without some strategic high-level apparatus or support. The Canada Rural lens was designed to be applied by any government department early in the development of a program or policy (Hall and Gibson, 2016<sup>[62]</sup>). As part of this effort, it required a permanent communication channel with high political levels to provide progress updates, as well as to get assistance to overcome any problems or difficulties that arose.

Correspondingly, when political support shifts, it can stall or decrease momentum, and potentially derail the process. A disproportionate dependence on political buy-in and support alone can hamper the sustainability of the mechanism over time. The natural changes that occur with political turnover, especially from an administration that is in support to one that is not, tends to affect continuity and consistent adherence to the rural proofing process. When that commitment is lost, rural proofing tends to lose traction. The Rural lens in Canada, created by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, lost ground at the national level when the governing party failed to renew their mandate (Atterton, 2022<sup>[73]</sup>) (Hall and Gibson, 2016<sup>[62]</sup>). A cluster of actions could help, first investment in the civil servant – they are different from elected officials and tend to remain in office when there are political changes (Boring, Desrieux and Espinosa, 2019<sup>[82]</sup>). Second, building on the first, governments could wean themselves off dependence on political commitment and support by using any initial political support to embed rural proofing in the culture and practice of the civil servant see Figure 5.

**Figure 5. Sustaining rural proofing beyond government cycles**



Source: Author's own elaboration

In Estonia, the goal is to make rural proofing routine practice. To do this they are taking advantage of an existing channel, the Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) process, and the current strong political commitment to rural proofing, to make changes ahead of elections. Estonia was recognised by the OECD as having a good regulatory impact assessment system (OECD, 2021<sup>[83]</sup>). There, preliminary RIAs are prepared for all primary laws and selected subordinate regulations, and for laws with significant impacts, in-depth RIAs are conducted. This, coupled with the Spring 2021 approval by the Estonian Government of the methodology of rural proofing, and the April 2022, Minister of Rural Affairs Parliamentary speech emphasising co-operation between ministries and local authorities in the implementation of the methodology of rural proofing, is providing significant scope for action. They are doing this through better regulation rules and guidelines framework, consulting with stakeholders, and oversight, activities. This three-pronged approach is meant to, as they describe it, “support the institutionalisation of rural proofing toolboxes in the working routines across the government, in all ministries” (Kasemets and Kurvits, 2022<sup>[79]</sup>).

#### 4. Change the rural narrative – from negative to positive

Changing the narrative on rural areas that underpins the justification or the need for rural proofing is also important. “To date, rural proofing has been rather negatively focused on identifying the differing needs of rural areas” (Atterton, 2022<sup>[73]</sup>). Presenting it as a tool to “protect” or “save” rural areas implies weakness. This perpetuates a negative perception of rural that is not helpful in a policy space dominated by urban thinkers. It assumes there are negative aspects to rural living which must be ameliorated (Shortall, 2008<sup>[75]</sup>). Not only is the focus on “rural disadvantage” – a problem, but also “the pervasiveness of viewing rural issues through a lens tinted by methodological fallacies (Sherry and Shortall, 2019<sup>[57]</sup>). Rather adopt a more positive view that emphasises the characteristics and value-added of rural places. The OECD report *Innovation and Modernising the Rural Economy* (OECD, 2014<sup>[84]</sup>) offers the same insight to policy makers. It recommended reframing the narrative on rural areas to focus on their advantages as part of a basket of actions to shift to a more modern approach to developing rural areas (see Box 6). In addition, the complexities and diversities across remote and very remote communities are neglected when urban is used as the only lens for comparison (Sutarsa, Campbell and Moore, 2021<sup>[68]</sup>). Failure to introduce a more dynamic theory of rural leads to flawed policy, because it is designed to treat disparity rather than accommodate diversity (Sherry and Shortall, 2019<sup>[57]</sup>).

### Box 6. Modernising the approach to rural development to better adapt to today's realities.

It has long been established that rural communities no longer depend solely on the agricultural sector. To better tap into a complex economic system, sometimes encompassing large territorial networks, including urban areas, a more nuanced approach is needed. This involves policy frameworks focused on investment and growth, and interventions that both take into account the features of territories (a “place-based” approach) and increase the coherence and efficiency of public expenditures in rural areas.

The discussion about how to construct modern rural development policies is really about introducing policies more in sync with the changing rural context. Rural development is a wide and complex topic requiring action that goes beyond general prescriptions or blanket policies. To this end, policy makers should consider the following when developing policies to meet today's rural challenges:

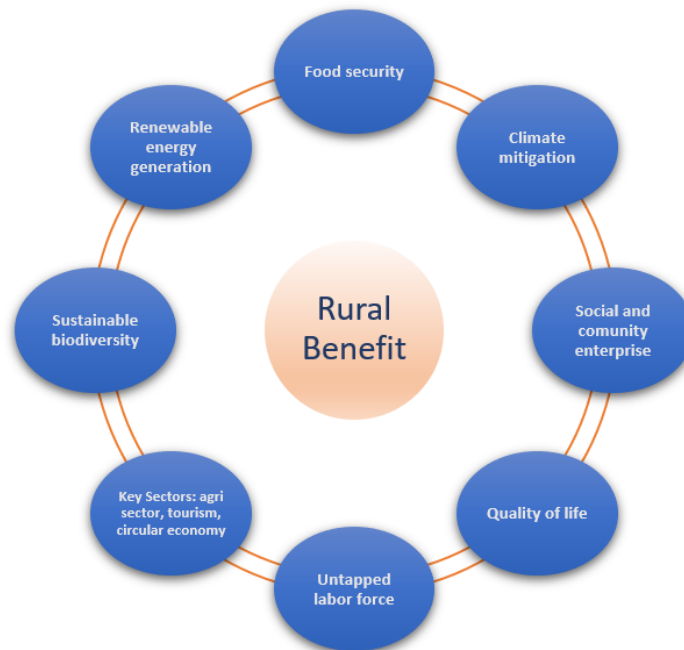
- Reframe the narrative on rural areas from a discussion around their assumed shortcomings to one focusing on their advantages and explore how to best maximise the existing opportunities there.
- Adopt a place-based approach, since the need for a more tailored approach is arguably greater in rural territories. The less densely populated a region is, the more the key determinants of its growth performance tend to be specific to that region. In part, this is because rural economies are more likely to be defined by their natural geography than are cities. Uniform, economy-wide policies – which are designed for the most part in urban environments and for predominantly urban populations – often fail to take account of the specific needs of rural places.
- Focus on increasing productivity in rural areas to help improve workforce skills, strengthen capital investment in firms and foster entrepreneurship.
- Embrace and support strategies that identify and mobilise local assets – rather than relying on external subsidies and other support – can help improve rural performance.
- Understand how innovation in rural areas differs from innovation in urban areas to improve policy support mechanisms. An understanding of how to recognise innovation in rural areas is critical. Innovation is as vital for rural economies as it is for urban economies. It is crucial both for raising productivity and for meeting the challenges of improved public service delivery. Many rural economies are already very innovative. This is often overlooked, because innovation in rural places looks different.

Source: (OECD, 2014<sup>[84]</sup>)

Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine have exacerbated challenges in rural regions. However, there continues to be greater recognition of rural areas as places of resource and opportunity rather than disadvantage and income transfer (Parnell, 2022<sup>[85]</sup>) see Figure 6. As noted by the European Commission in the Long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Area there is a growing understanding, that the role and importance of rural areas is under-appreciated and insufficiently rewarded (European Commission, 2021<sup>[13]</sup>). Changing the narrative means focusing more on the many positive characteristics and attributes of and within rural places as part of the rural proofing process (Parnell, 2022<sup>[85]</sup>) This would include not only obvious opportunities that can boost local economic development (e.g. renewable energy, tourism, forestry and local foods) but also less obvious solutions, such as cultivating small markets that facilitate greater collaboration across firms, and using non-traditional service providers to deliver services (OECD, 2014<sup>[84]</sup>). This change is already evident in Sweden. There the rural proofing focus is on applying “geographical glasses” to determine how rural areas can contribute to

development (ENRD, 2022<sup>[25]</sup>). Prior to the pandemic, rural areas were being framed as potential solutions to societal challenges (Cross, 2017<sup>[86]</sup>).

**Figure 6. Rural areas sources of opportunities**



Source: (Parnell, 2022<sup>[85]</sup>)

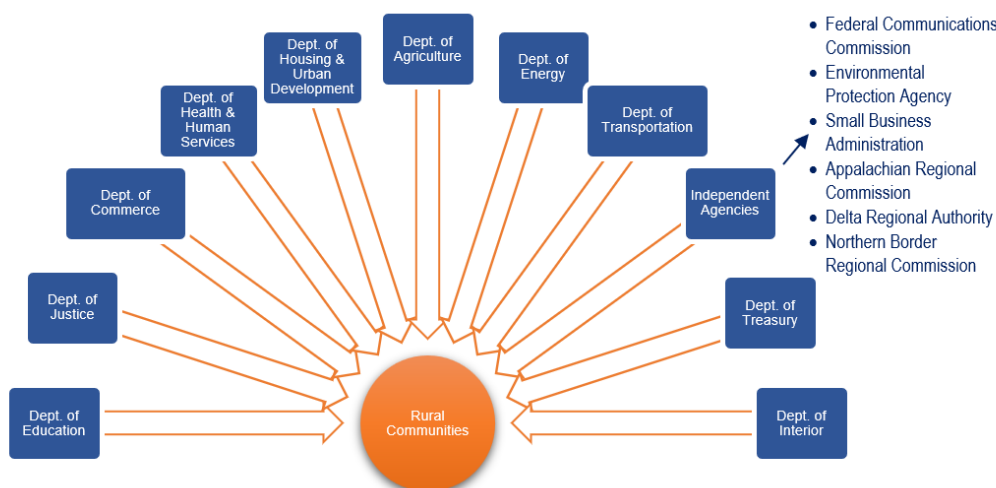
The growing gaps between rural and urban areas and the asymmetric effects of megatrends makes it even more important that governments seek ways to leverage opportunities that anticipate and address risks, maximise development opportunities, mobilise and engage citizens, and build long-term resilience in rural regions. There is considerable potential in rural areas to develop new and more sustainable value chains, in particular related to the circular economy and the bioeconomy (Cross, 2017<sup>[86]</sup>) Rural areas are active players in the EU's green and digital transitions, including through sustainable production of food, preservation of biodiversity and the fight against climate change (European Commission, 2021<sup>[13]</sup>) An inflow of young working-age people can mitigate population ageing and offer opportunities to increase economic vibrancy and diversity (OECD, 2020<sup>[2]</sup>). Indigenous peoples' strong attachment and belonging to territories and traditional knowledge often remains an untapped asset for generating regional economic opportunities, (OECD, 2019<sup>[87]</sup>)

There is also scope for data to support the narrative shift and demonstrate that government departments can really benefit from working with rural communities. This would mean understanding the priorities and objectives of the government department as it relates to a new policy proposal and then providing evidence of the value-added of working with rural. This would also underscore the change in narrative from rural disadvantage to demonstrating how working with rural regions can support your goals. Here the proposition is to drive all different departments to think about their own policies and how rural places can contribute to achieving the policy objectives rather than seeing rural proofing solely as a tool to avoid harm.

## 5. Consider a targeted issue or sector approach over rural proofing all policies

Most rural proofing rollouts to date have been undertaken with a focus on *all policies* no matter the department. Governments contemplating rural proofing should also consider if they should take an *all-policies* approach or a targeted approach. Targeting rural proofing based on specific issues (e.g. climate change), public emergencies (e.g. disaster) or sector (e.g. health) could be more manageable in the short term and provide scope from which to grow into a full cross-government all policies effort. Implementing a whole-of-government approach to rural proofing is not an easy task. Moreover, the all policies effort would likely be more demanding for the leading responsible agency for co-ordinating rural proofing, as there are numerous departments which means a number of different policy actions, strategies and plans under development at any given time. In the United States the multitude of departments that interact with rural outside the lead department (Agriculture) makes a mechanism to ensure consistency and coherence in policy actions with rural communities necessary Figure 7. In reality, rural proofing all policies in this dynamic would be challenging for the Department of Agriculture – or any other agency – to manage. This explains, in part, why more targeted rural proofing initiatives are emerging.

**Figure 7. United States different federal departments with assistance for rural communities**



Source: Inspired by (Morris, 2022<sup>[88]</sup>)

While the targeted approach (either by issue or sector) does involve a high level of attention it may not require the same level of resources and could allow them to be used in different ways. Take the health sector for example which is impacted by different aspects of government Figure 8. In the United States, when the opioid crisis was declared a public health emergency by the President in 2017, it mandated an all-federal government hands-on-deck approach to develop policy actions and identify and allocate funding. Using the crisis an entry point, the USDA was able to embed staff in interagency efforts. They worked closely with non-rural government partners and ensured the development of several policy actions that were tailored to rural communities.

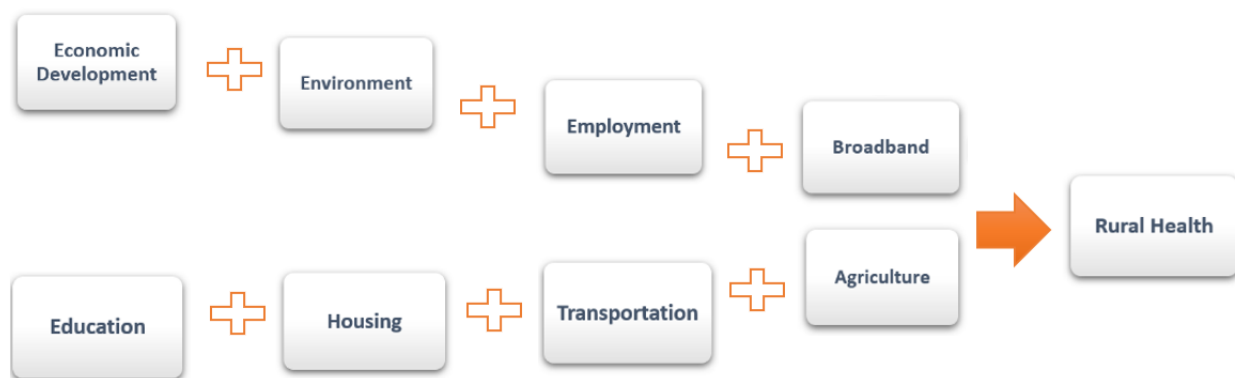
The all-of-Government approach to the crisis also enabled the creation of a key resource to support rural communities, the Rural Community Toolbox. A comprehensive tool that compiles resources from 16 federal departments in one place to enable access to information across a complex governance landscape in a simplified and easy to access format (White House, 2020<sup>[89]</sup>) (USDA, 2018<sup>[90]</sup>). The toolbox is a result of the first Federal Rural Interagency Working Group on Substance Use Disorder, established in July 2018, co-ordinated by the USDA. The toolbox was originally created and funded by the Department



of Agriculture but its reach and scope was extended in 2023 with support from two distinctly non-rural departments; the Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Assistance within the Department of Justice and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration an agency within the U.S. Department of Health (DOJ-DOH, 2023<sup>[91]</sup>).

If more EU Member States take the Commission up on the invitation to implement rural proofing, there will likely be states that are new to the concept. Casting too wide a net as an initial step could be overwhelming. The issue or sector specific entry point is another way to introduce rural proofing and build the capacity and knowledge of non-rural departments on rural issues. In Australia, the National Cabinet was established on 13 March 2020 and comprises the Prime Minister and state and territory First Ministers. The first priority of National Cabinet was to respond to the urgent health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. While this continues to be a priority, First Ministers now utilise the National Cabinet to collaboratively address a wide range of issues of national significance. The Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) is invited to attend National Cabinet and the Council of Federal Financial Relations (CFFR) once a year to ensure that all levels of Government are represented at these national forums and brings an awareness of local government's role in progressing national policy priorities (Australian Government, n.d.<sup>[69]</sup>).

**Figure 8. Improving rural health systems requires the government to take an integrated approach**



Source: Author's elaboration

## 6. Design the rural proofing model with the public servant “end user” in mind

Rural proofing is not a straightforward endeavour. In 2011, the OECD described it as a challenging, complex, “hard-to-get-right” process that requires substantial place-based sensitivity and understanding (OECD, 2011<sup>[21]</sup>). Analysis of rural proofing revealed that individuals (public servants) who are key to rural proofing as the “rural proofers”, found both the multiple steps and the diversity of forms of support confusing and defaulted to a “tick box” exercise or bypassed it altogether. (Cameron, 2015<sup>[54]</sup>) reviewed impact assessments between 2011-14 and noted that: 51% showed no consideration of rural proofing of rural issues in circumstances where the policy would impact rural areas; 38% described rural issues but did not analyse the policy impact; 11% provided robust evidence on rural proofing and indicated how the evidence had been used to inform policy design (Cameron, 2015<sup>[54]</sup>). The public servant is responsible for carrying out government policies. They are usually already overburdened and under resourced to execute their core mandate. In some instances, as part of the process, the public servant may be expected to rural proof policies in a relatively short time period. However, rural proofing mechanisms must avoid placing an onerous administrative burden on the rural proofer, those who are being asked to conduct the exercise (Parnell, 2022<sup>[85]</sup>).

Rural proofing comes with additional layers of process and activities causing it to be perceived as cumbersome. Members of the European Commission Working Group on Rural Proofing noted that in practice, it calls for being integrated into both existing and newly-established programmes (ENRD, 2022<sup>[25]</sup>). The Rural Needs Act in Northern Ireland does not limit rural proofing to just policies. It is much broader in scope, calling for rural proofing when “developing, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans, designing and delivering public services” (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2016<sup>[92]</sup>). At a minimum, it involves public servants in the design and implementation of the rural proofing model. Often there are all additional tasks with documents and data that must be reviewed or workshops and training that they must attend. They are more likely to be sensitive to potential problems regarding tasks and responsibilities and administrative burdens. In the case of England, the country with most experience with rural proofing, the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) offered facilitated workshops on rural proofing to improve policy knowledge. Cameron referred to this as a bespoke service for departments on designing and implementing new policies (Cameron, 2015<sup>[54]</sup>). However, not all policy makers took advantage of this service.

Some call for a more “nimble or agile” process that can be adapted to the governance level that is more in-depth than a check list or tick box exercise (ENRD, 2022<sup>[25]</sup>). Consulting with key stakeholders including public servants in the very early stages of the rural proofing development process is key to buy-in. Ideally, public servants should be part of a rural proofing co-design team, particularly civil servants from non-rural government departments. The Chilean government is taking this approach. Having recently launched a National Rural Development Policy in May 2020, it is now looking to create a rural proofing system. As a first step, they put together a Rural Development Advisory Council comprised of public, private, and civil society actors. The Council, will:

- Identify the “key” public programs for rural development
- Determine the “operation, resources, origin and scope” of the programmes and how they impact the quality of life of rural populations
- Recommend changes and improvement to these programmes through the lens of “real effect”
- Propose a *rural proofing mechanism*, an evaluation process for public programs to achieve the objective of the rural development policy and address the problems and needs of rural territories (ODEPA, Oficina de Estudios y Políticas Agrarias, 2022<sup>[93]</sup>)

## 7. Encourage the collection of different types of data to support rural proofing

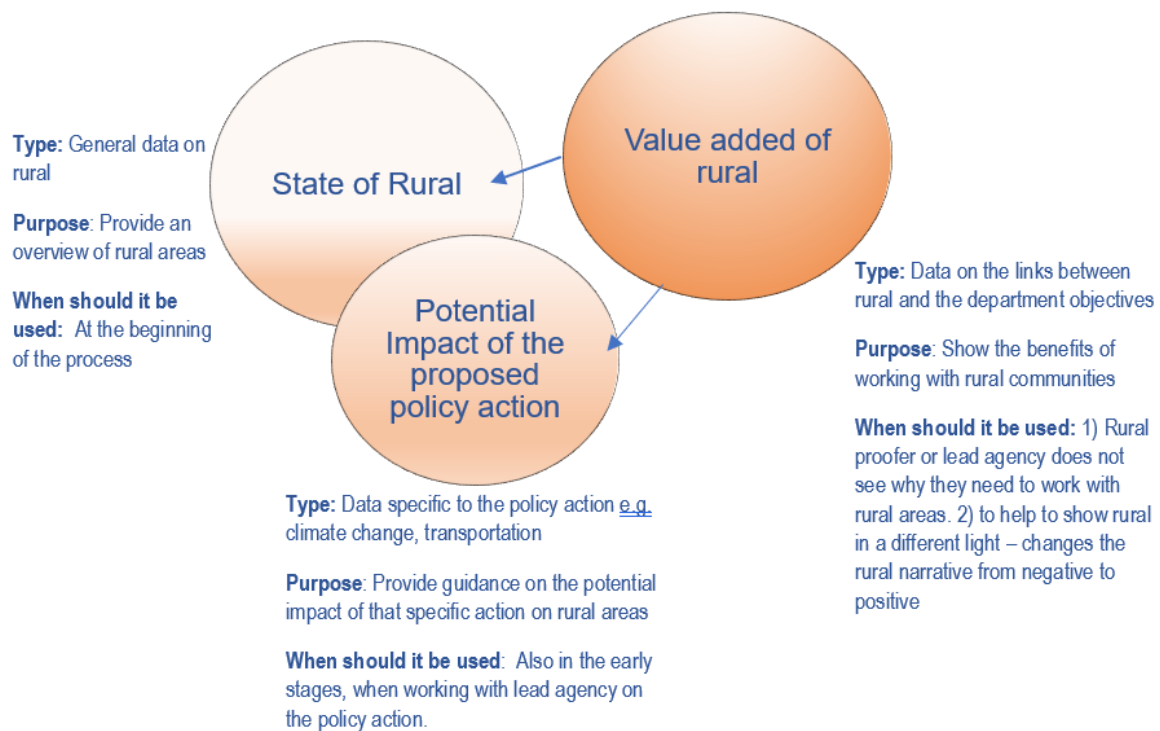
In the policymaking cycle, many factors influence finding a solution. For this reason, Sienkiewicz suggests evidence-informed, rather than evidence-based policymaking, as the best way to frame the support evidence (Sienkiewicz, 2020<sup>[94]</sup>). Systematic use of rigorous evidence in the policy process is widely expected to produce more accurate policy advice (Head, 2015<sup>[95]</sup>). Places where people live, work and consume include both urban and rural territories and many are linked in economic, demographic and environmental terms. Therefore high-quality, systematic data that provides information on rural issues is critical. One could argue that the rural proofing process calls for a variety of data, at minimum three types, see Figure 9.

First, there is a need for “state of rural” data to provide an overall sense of rurality within the country e.g. how it is defined, economic, environmental and social dimensions. A common reason for differentiated results of a policy in a rural area is a lack of understanding of rural regions and why they may differ, especially from urban areas. To undertake rural proofing effectively across government, policy makers need to have good knowledge and understanding of rural issues (Atterton, 2022<sup>[73]</sup>). Improving rural data collection is pivotal. When data quality is suboptimal, with shortfalls in quality, it could result in inadequate data sources shaping policy actions. In the United States, the Census Bureau’s annual American Community Survey is relied upon to set federal programme eligibility and analyse rural needs and

strengths. One criticism of this survey is that the data on the “small sample sizes in sparsely populated areas”, produces high margins of error and makes measures for individual communities unreliable (Corianne Payton Scally and Eric Burnstein, 2020<sup>[96]</sup>). The capacity to provide policy advice enriched by ‘evidence-based’ analysis is dependent on the availability of reliable data (Head, 2015<sup>[95]</sup>) This is where the role of a rural department is key. It can take a proactive role in providing appropriate data, rural-urban definitions/classifications (Atterton, 2022<sup>[73]</sup>). In the United States, through the RPN, rural experts, (USDA staff) make rural-specific information available to support local leaders and different government departments (USDA, Rural Development, 2021<sup>[97]</sup>). It is notable that analysis and monitoring of rural conditions; how well data is present across government was recognised as a crucial factor in shaping policy and an essential function of the government department that replaced the CRC (Commons, 2013<sup>[98]</sup>).

The second, type is the “potential impacts on rural areas” data which is understandably more narrow. It is data that is specific to the proposed policy action or strategy. It should aim to clearly demonstrate the links between the proposed policy action and rural areas to show how rural communities could be impacted by the specific policy in question.

**Figure 9. Strengthen the evidence: expand the data used to support rural proofing**



Source: Author’s own elaboration

Finally, and perhaps, this is less commonly used for rural proofing, there should be data or other evidence showing how working with rural can help the non-rural departments or agencies achieve their final objective. This latter data could be referred to as “value-added” data. This would be most helpful in instances where public officials from non-rural departments remain unconvinced of the benefits of working with rural areas. These officials are likely to have low interest, other priorities, and seek more immediate and more visible results from other actions. Having evidence on the potential benefits that would flow from working with rural communities to achieve the departments objectives add more to the toolbox. This type of evidence may be very hard to quantify, but even where precise quantitative information cannot be obtained, qualitative information can also be of considerable importance. It could take the form of a case

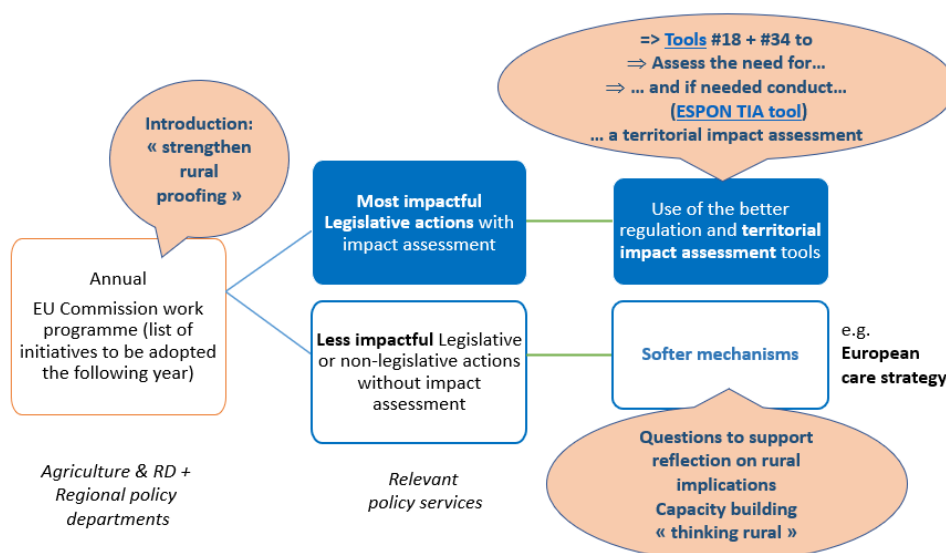
study or learning more about a rural-based projects to show in a very practical way the contribution rural areas can make to policy objectives. Ideally, this data/evidence should be used at the beginning of every rural-proofing process, not only when the lead agency does not see the need to work with rural communities.

## 8. Be flexible – there is no one-size-fits all rural proofing model

Time should be allotted to tailoring the rural proofing model to fit it to the specific needs and circumstances. In Finland for example, there are also differences in how rural proofing is implemented at the national and regional level. At the regional and local level, the process includes a large number of actors from the public and private sectors (Husberg, 2022<sup>[60]</sup>). At the national level impact assessment is often carried out by one or a few public officials (Husberg, 2022<sup>[60]</sup>). In the case of the European Commission (see Figure 10), the updated the Better Regulation Guidelines are used each time new EU legislation is developed. They now include requirements to consider any significant impact on territorial and rural issues and to gather evidence from various types of territories (European Union, 2022<sup>[17]</sup>). They then identified the tools that would be used to rural proof: territorial impact assessments and better monitoring of the situation in rural areas. The guidelines set a clear objective, to ensure coherence, consistency, and complementarity between policies to benefit rural areas.

The process involves screening the Annual Commission work programme as well as the list of upcoming initiatives to be adopted the following year for new ones likely to have differential impacts on rural areas. The initiatives are categorised by type for screening. For most impactful or new legislation, better regulation guidelines require an impact assessment. In this case, services are invited to conduct a pre-territorial assessment necessity check to determine if the legislation is likely to have a symmetrical territorial impact. If the preliminary check is positive, then, a full territorial impact assessment is needed. Less impactful or non-legislative actions (e.g. communications) are reviewed using softer mechanisms and qualitative approaches.

Figure 10. European Commission rural proofing model



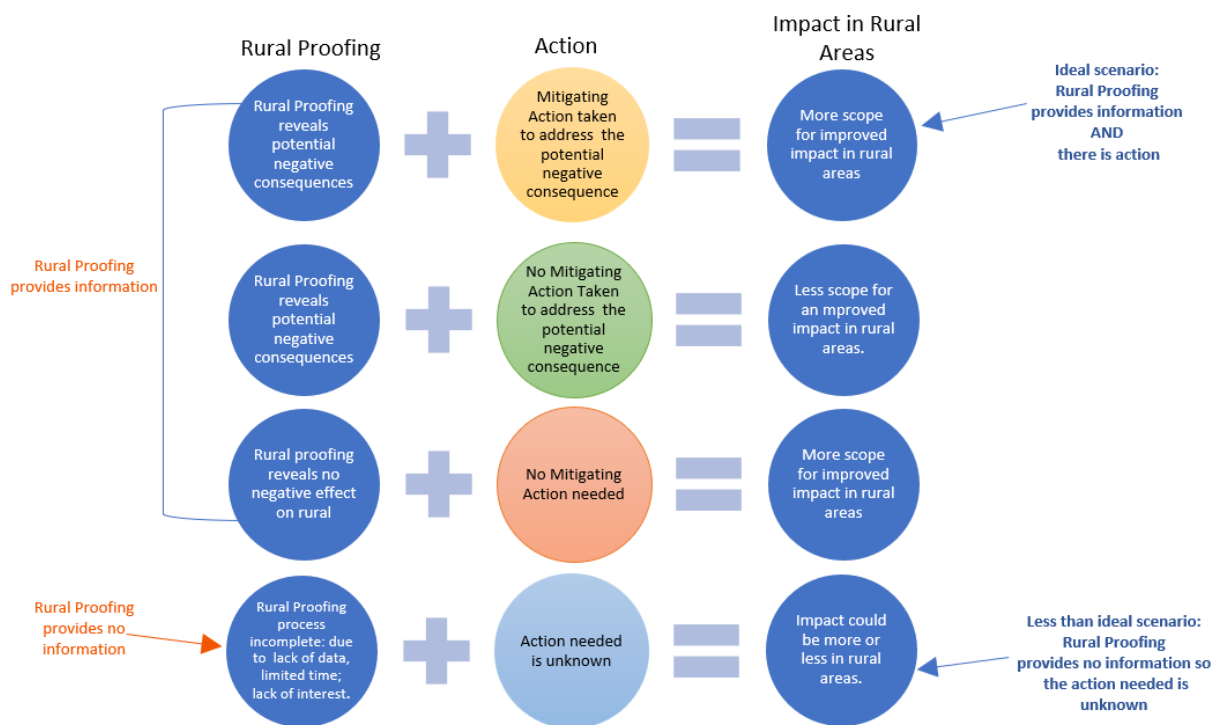
Source: (Rouby and Ptak-Bufkens, 2022<sup>[55]</sup>)

There is also scope to explore new ways to rural proof. Nordberg proposes the *distributed* rural proofing model which relies on two components bottom-up and local knowledge. It is bottom-up to allow for the quick retrieval of granular information and distributed—informed by a local network. In his view, this is a direct response to rural proofing models that have failed to “perceive detailed and varying local circumstances, to pay attention to dynamics, to changing circumstances and the potential for change” (Nordberg, 2020<sub>[20]</sub>). This approach is particularly relevant in cases where sufficient statistical data about the area is not readily available and prior research is limited. Because the desired information could include not only the possible impact on the region and local budgets, but also the impact on different groups of society and on economic actors. In this model unintended side effects should be detected, and the obstacles identified at the local level could form the basis for altering circumstances or for directing development funding.

### 9. Measuring success and setting expectations as it relates to rural proofing

It is important to manage expectations regarding rural proofing. Another common frustration associated with rural proofing is the limited attention given to measuring success or monitoring and evaluating its impact. However, the expectation of a positive outcome in rural areas as a result of rural proofing should be put in context.

Figure 11. Rural proofing measuring success



Source: Author’s elaboration.

Arguably, an ideal scenario for improved outcomes in rural areas involves a two-step process; 1) rural proofing revealing potential negative consequences and 2) action taken to mitigate the impact (see Figure 11). The example of rural proofing working is in the first step, when the process reveals the information. It is important to recall that rural proofing provides evidence of a potentially imbalanced effect

on rural areas by the policy or strategy being considered, at the point when a change can be introduced. It does not, however, compel policy makers to act on the information provided. Therefore, there could be scenarios where rural proofing reveals some issues, but due to other factors the policy moves forward as is – without any changes. In that case, rural proofing is still successful, but with no action, there is less potential for a positive outcome in rural areas. The more frequent scenarios are where the process is incomplete, challenged by many of the dynamics discussed earlier or simply not executed in time to introduce changes. In those cases, rural proofing is less successful. Metrics to evaluate rural proofing should capture these nuances. Similarly, the narrative around rural proofing’s “success” or “failure” should also consider these elements.

## Summary

In summary, this section provides a few ways to improve the effectiveness of rural proofing such as:

- Setting clearer objectives for rural proofing and tailoring the supporting tools to those objectives
- Taking a pilot “testing” approach in the initial stage, to anticipate, react to, and learn from suboptimal results in the short-term.
- Using political commitment for rural proofing where it exists, to embed the practice over time.
- Focusing more on changing the negative narrative on rural regions to a positive and to be more innovative in how data is used to support departments or agencies less familiar with rural areas.
- Developing models with the public servant “end user” in mind and ensure it is in sync with the time, resource constraints and policy design and delivery modalities at the national, regional, and local level.

Furthermore, in response to the reoccurring criticisms on the cumbersome nature of the process, more consideration should be given to taking a targeted issue or sector specific approach in lieu of a “whole of government” approach. This is key particularly when a country is new to the concept of rural proofing as is the case for several OECD Members. When designing ways to monitor and evaluate the success of rural proofing, consider if the measurement criteria should be focused on the “completed process” or a “completed process that yields a positive outcome” in rural areas. The latter is a much heavier burden than the former. Additionally, to ensure accurate data collection, the measurement criteria for success should be in synch with the rural proofing mechanism in place. Finally, since there is no one-size-fits-all rural proofing model, it is important to adopt a flexible approach and take the time to experiment to find what works.

# 3

## Rural proofing: Focus on health

There are several challenges facing the delivery of health care in rural areas, including older populations, larger distances to cover, and poor connectivity (of both transport and telecommunications). Poor broadband and mobile signals hamper service delivery and make remote consultations challenging. Ambulance response times in rural areas tend to be longer than in urban areas which mandates the development of more innovative approaches to deliver care. Health care service problems in rural areas increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of their effort to support and provide guidance related to rural health, the World Health Organization (WHO) is encouraging their Member countries to apply a rural lens to health. The joint WHO-OECD discussion during the OECD Rural Development Conference, engaged national authorities and partners on this issue. It sought to address the entry points, challenges, and possible partnerships for the systematic application of rural proofing to health policies, strategies, plans and programmes to ensure rural needs, contexts and opportunities are considered. This section provides an overview of these discussions and learnings from the experiences of health authorities and partners who have advanced rural proofing of health policies, strategies, plans and programmes.

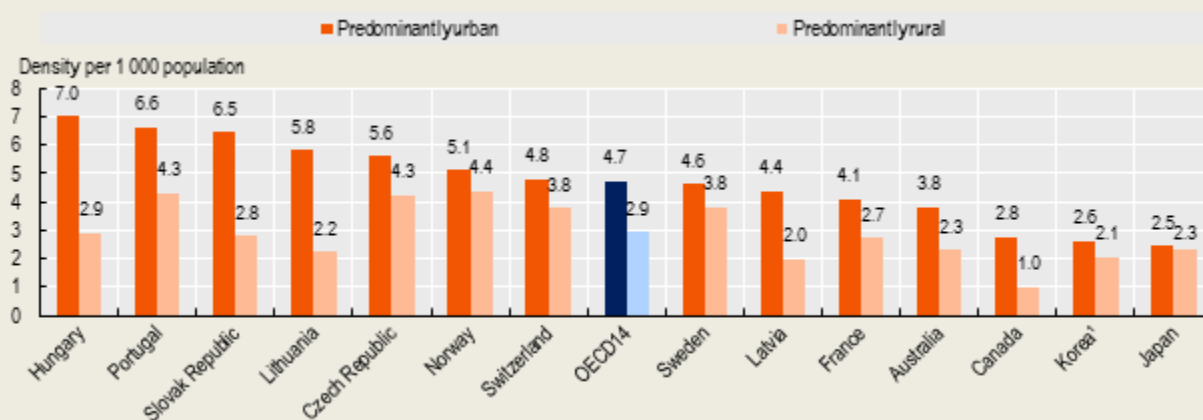
Delivering quality rural services in a framework of shrinking public budgets, geographic remoteness and demographic shifts presents a unique challenge for policy makers. Rural residents have shorter life spans, less healthy lifestyles, and overall, live in worse health states due to a higher incidence of chronic disease. Capacity gaps in health care delivery and unmet health needs were pre-existing challenges that increased the short-term costs of the pandemic. They also face a wide range of threats to health status and health performance challenges including increased poverty and joblessness (OECD, 2021<sup>[1]</sup>). Many rural populations face longer travel times to access rural care facilities, which in turn face the constant threat of declining user numbers and difficulties in recruiting and retaining health care professionals (see Box 7). Rural hospitals were less able to handle the influx of patients due to fewer specialists, less technology and capacity (e.g. intensive care unit [ICU] beds per capita) during the pandemic (OECD, 2021<sup>[35]</sup>).

To maintain high quality provision of health care and meet the needs of the population, countries need to invest considerably in new health facilities, diagnostic and therapeutic equipment, and information and communications technology (OECD, 2022<sup>[99]</sup>). Tackling the challenges of rural health care delivery require understanding of both health issues and the structure of health systems. The *OECD Principles for Rural Policy* call for “aligning strategies to deliver public services with rural policies” and recommend assessing the impact of key sectoral policies (including health) on rural areas and diagnosing where adaptations for rural areas are required (e.g. rural proofing). Rural health is a “key component” of high-performing health systems “and inequalities in provision are more likely to happen in rural places” (OECD, 2021<sup>[1]</sup>).

### Box 7. Attracting health professionals to rural and sparsely-populated regions

Differences in the density of doctors between urban and rural regions were highest in Canada, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania and the Slovak Republic, and in 2019. In countries such as Belgium, Finland, Italy, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, pharmacists also play an enhanced role in health promotion and disease prevention, including in rural areas. In most OECD countries, concerns and policy responses relate more specifically to recruiting and retaining health professionals in rural and sparsely-populated regions. In the *OECD Health at a Glance* the key reasons for fewer health professionals include: concerns about their professional life (including income, working hours, opportunities for career development and isolation from peers) and social amenities (such as educational options for their children and professional opportunities for their spouse).

Figure 12. The European Commission Rural Proofing model



Note: Korea, data for predominantly rural regions refer to intermediate regions (i.e. the share of the population living in rural areas is between 15% and 50%).

Source: (OECD, 2021<sup>[100]</sup>) ([StatLink https://stat.link/qt6e5w](https://stat.link/qt6e5w))

A range of policy levers can be used to influence the choice of practice location of physicians, including: 1) providing financial incentives for doctors to work in underserved areas; 2) increasing enrolments in medical education programmes of students coming from underserved areas or decentralising the location of medical schools; 3) regulating the choice of practice location of doctors (for new medical graduates or foreign trained doctors arriving in the country); and 4) reorganising service delivery to improve the working conditions of doctors in underserved areas.

- In France, over the past 15 years the government has launched a series of measures to address concerns about “medical deserts”, including offering financial support for doctors to set up their practices in underserved areas. It has also supported the creation of multidisciplinary medical homes to allow GPs and other health professionals to work in the same location,
- Encouraging medical students to practise in underserved areas has been quite successful, notably through the use of “access contracts”, whereby medical students and residents receive a monthly stipend during their education and training in exchange for a commitment to practise for an equivalent period after graduation in designated underserved areas.



- In Germany, a number of measures have aimed to improve the number of doctors working in rural areas, including granting places to medical students who commit to practise as GPs in rural areas upon graduation.
- In the Czech Republic, GPs working in underserved areas receive funding for their practices to cover personnel and technical equipment costs up to a certain ceiling. Health insurance funds also pay more for GP services provided in some underserved areas

Source: (OECD, 2021<sub>[100]</sub>)

Rural health systems need to be strengthened to not only deliver high performance, but also to be resilient against shocks (OECD, 2021<sub>[100]</sub>). The provision of health care has a strong place-based dimension necessitating a balance between costs, quality and access all driven by density and distance. A low volume of patients and long distances between them means that, in order to stay accessible, health care facilities in rural areas tend to be small and scattered (OECD, 2021<sub>[1]</sub>). The health of rural populations is influenced by health systems and the social determinants of health (SDH) (Box 8). These are the non-medical factors that influence health outcomes and quality-of life-risks and outcomes. According to the World Health Organization SDH are mostly responsible for health inequities – the unfair and avoidable differences in health status seen within and between countries. (WHO, 2022<sub>[101]</sub>). Without action, shrinking and ageing populations in many rural communities are likely to see not only fewer hospital beds per head of population, higher rates of morbidity, different skill-levels of, and higher demands on, local teachers and medical staff (OECD, 2021<sub>[1]</sub>).

Across the OECD new spending and policy actions are being developed in response to a wide range of shocks – from the COVID-19 Pandemic, Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, to rising geopolitical tensions, coupled with accelerations in long-term megatrends and increasing weather-related disasters. Research strongly suggests that, as it relates to rural regions, when these types of action take place in a vacuum without an understanding of rural places, the results are less than optimal. The pandemic made it urgent to help the 2 billion people living in rural and remote areas across the world who lack adequate access to the health services. The OECD’s Rural well-being policy framework highlights the importance of co-ordinating rural proofing across sectoral domains to optimise investments and synergies (OECD, 2020<sub>[2]</sub>). The *Rural Proofing for Health* workshop which was held at the 13<sup>th</sup> OECD Rural Development Conference highlighted a number of these issues. Representatives from Australia, Ireland, Italy, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, United Kingdom, United States and the European Commission discussed the challenges associated with delivering health care services in rural areas and adapting health care systems to rural needs. They also provided some insights on the steps needed to overcome them and how rural proofing could help.

### Box 8. Five pillars of the social determinants of health

Social determinants of health include five pillars:

1. **Health care access and quality:** people's access to and understanding of health services and their own health.
2. **Education access and quality:** the link between education, health and well-being e.g. graduation from high school, enrolment in higher education, educational attainment, and early childhood education and development.
3. **Social and community context:** characteristics of the community and social environment and its impact on health and well-being e.g. cohesion within a community, civic participation, discrimination, etc.
4. **Economic stability:** the financial resources and socioeconomic status and the link to health e.g. poverty, employment, food, security, and housing stability.
5. **Neighbourhood and built environment:** where a person lives – housing neighbourhood and the quality of the environment and the link to health and well-being e.g. quality of housing, access to transportation etc.

Figure 13. Social determinants of health



Source: (CDC, 2022<sub>[102]</sub>)

## 1. Rural proofing and access to health care in EU rural areas

Rural proofing produced a successful outcome on a health focused EU communication. The recently published European Care Strategy for caregivers and care receivers proposes to ensure quality, affordable, and accessible care services across the European Union and improve the situation for both. As it belongs to the non-impactful, non-legislative category, it was rural proofed via the softer tools mentioned earlier. In the process, two departments (agriculture and employment) worked together to refine the text to include more nuanced aspects on rural regions. The process also revealed the need for more data so departments (in this case employment) can better understand the implications on rural regions.

Access to health care is Principle 16 of the European Pillar of Social Rights (Commission, n.d.<sub>[103]</sub>). The European Commission is keen to find new ways to measure the effectiveness of health coverage and openly acknowledged that the information they have now is incomplete (Rouby and Ptak-Bufkens,

2022<sup>[55]</sup>). The challenges in rural areas are greater because there are more unmet medical needs in there. Financial issues and waiting times are compelling factors but they only account for part of the story. More data is needed on what really matters to patients, specifically if the challenges are linked to access to certain types of services, or issues with opening hours and whether the supply of services meet the demand in communities. Member states have been using EU funds to address access to health care to services challenges (see Figure 14). The recent report *Improving Access to Health care through More Powerful Measurement Tools* by the Expert Working Group on Health System Performance Assessment is an important step forward. It identifies measurement tools that can be put into practice to refine measures and capture problems related to accessibility of health care (European Commission, 2021<sup>[104]</sup>). The work on improving access to health care continues with EU4Health actions addressing the challenge of affordability of health care<sup>2</sup> and metrics for a fairer distribution of in-kind health benefits<sup>3</sup>. These actions target more socially vulnerable groups, which include rural populations, experiencing greater social disadvantage in general. Finally, EU actions of health workforce, especially the cluster of medical deserts projects under the Third Health programme<sup>4</sup>, help Member States design measures and policies to attract and retain health workers in areas with lower density of health professionals.

**Figure 14. Recovery and resilience programmes: access to health care in underserved areas**

<b>AT:</b> Strengthen primary care (especially in rural areas); establishment of a network of community nurses	<b>CZ:</b> Centre for Cardiovascular and Transplant Medicine in the South Moravian region	<b>EE:</b> Increasing capacities of the emergency system in peripheral areas; the reform to incentivise provision of services in remote areas	<b>ES:</b> High-tech equipment to address territorial disparities in access to health care; promotion of physical activity in rural areas	<b>FI:</b> Innovative and remote care model; implementation of a care guarantee through digital solutions
<b>FR:</b> Investments in the territorial dimension of health care according to regional needs	<b>CR:</b> Access to pharmacies, cardiologist, mobile primary outpatient care in remote and rural areas; specialist training.	<b>IT:</b> Territorial health network; community health houses; improving access to care at home, community hospitals and telemedicine	<b>LT:</b> Improving access to home care and community-based care; optimising the hospital network.	<b>LU:</b> Improving access to health care through telemedicine.
<b>LV:</b> Investments improving availability of out-patient and inpatient services	<b>PT:</b> Investments in primary care; mobile health units to ensure access to health care in lower population density areas	<b>RO:</b> Investments in primary care and community centres in rural and marginalised areas; telemedicine solutions for specialised care in rural areas; mobile medical caravans	<b>SL:</b> Training of professionals for mobile palliative care teams.	<b>SK:</b> Support to new outpatient care units in deprived areas; optimising the hospital network

Source: (Rouby and Ptak-Bufkens, 2022<sup>[55]</sup>)

## 2. Why accurate definitions and data on rural matter for rural proofing for health

How rurality is defined matters for policy, service delivery, and for the communities that live in rural places. In New Zealand, the territory is vast, and the patients can be very distant from health facilities and practices. Up until recently, there were over fifteen different ways to classify rural and urban areas in New Zealand's health data. This variability made it extremely difficult to have a clear idea of the health care needs and concealed genuine differences in health outcomes and access to services in rural New Zealand (Nixon et al., 2021<sup>[105]</sup>). Further, the classification did not take available health services into account; the population defined as "rural" differed from that which actually received rural health care; and finally analysis found that around 40% of the people who actually accessed rural health services were classified as "urban", and 20% of those defined as "rural" actually receive urban health care (Nixon et al., 2021<sup>[105]</sup>). As a result, the Universities of Otago and Waikato in New Zealand developed the new Geographic Classification for Health (GCH). As expected, the GCH revealed new information, unadjusted mortality rates in rural areas were 21% higher than in urban areas. It also revealed higher mortality based on injury

e.g. farm accidents. Now that the depth of challenges is better understood, work can begin on the solutions (Kruiger, 2022<sub>[106]</sub>).

A nascent rural proofing effort is also taking shape in New Zealand. In 2021, the Minister for Primary Industries created a rural community team to review legislation from different government departments to determine the impact on rural areas. The objective is to determine “which parts of the legislation are workable for rural areas, and which would be much more successful if rural needs were considered” (Kruiger, 2022<sub>[106]</sub>). Rural people will often put off health needs significantly longer than they should, so there are also ongoing initiatives to bring the services to the community by taking advantage of local community gatherings. For example, health screenings are available at agricultural events e.g. farm days. Blood pressure and diabetes checks, general health and mental health screening and skin checks are just a few of the services offered. At one event, they diagnosed ten melanomas (Kruiger, 2022<sub>[106]</sub>).

### 3. Ensuring community voice and tackling inequities within rural areas (including for Indigenous health)

In Australia, there is a distinct focus on empowering the community and bringing them in as equal partners to find health care solutions. The push for community engagement is reflected in the *Australian Commission for safety and quality in health care* which explicitly calls for partnering with community consumers. The aim is to create health service organisations with mutually beneficial outcomes with consumers as partners in planning, design, delivery, measuring, and evaluation of systems and services that are provided to them and to have patients as partners in their own care (Stewart, 2022<sub>[107]</sub>). The Health Consumers Queensland developed a framework for consumer and community engagement called the “Kitchen Table Discussions”. This is used to engage the grassroots stakeholders in health care policy, decision-making and design (Stewart, 2022<sub>[107]</sub>). The discussions are facilitated by a trained local stakeholder and, to allow for open dialogue health service staff/consultants participate. Feedback from these engagements have been positive, the participants enjoy the process and request more dialogues. They also provide the participants with valuable information and help with health literacy. Through this series Health Consumers Queensland has engaged more than 1 000 consumers and community members.

Bringing Indigenous communities to the table to help improve health and well-being and provide information on matters of health care is quite different. Australia’s Indigenous peoples are two distinct cultural groups made up of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Community engagement must be tailored to how they view health, their interests and culture. It must also include discussions about the legacy of cultural disempowerment and institutional racism associated with the Australian health system (Stewart, 2022<sub>[107]</sub>). For this reason, the structure and approach to community dialogue take the form of “Yarning Circles” which is an important process within Aboriginal culture and Torres Strait Islander culture. These could be described as cultural focus groups. Non-Indigenous participants need to follow a set of protocols to build trust and rapport, ensure cultural safety and respect, and self-determination for the Indigenous peoples. They also have to offer, equal partnership, co-design and co-decision-making around the services and solutions. In the Circle, everyone has an equal seat, and all views are valued giving utmost respect to the voice or opinion of every member in the circle. In the Yarning Circle: Thursday Island Midwifery Group Practice, was co-designed with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. Continuity of care and culturally safe care was the focus. It led to significant reductions in antenatal smoking; preterm birth; and incidence of low and very low birth weights. It also demonstrated the value added of working in full partnership with the Indigenous community to find solutions to health care matters.

#### 4. Rural proofing to ensure strong rural primary health care

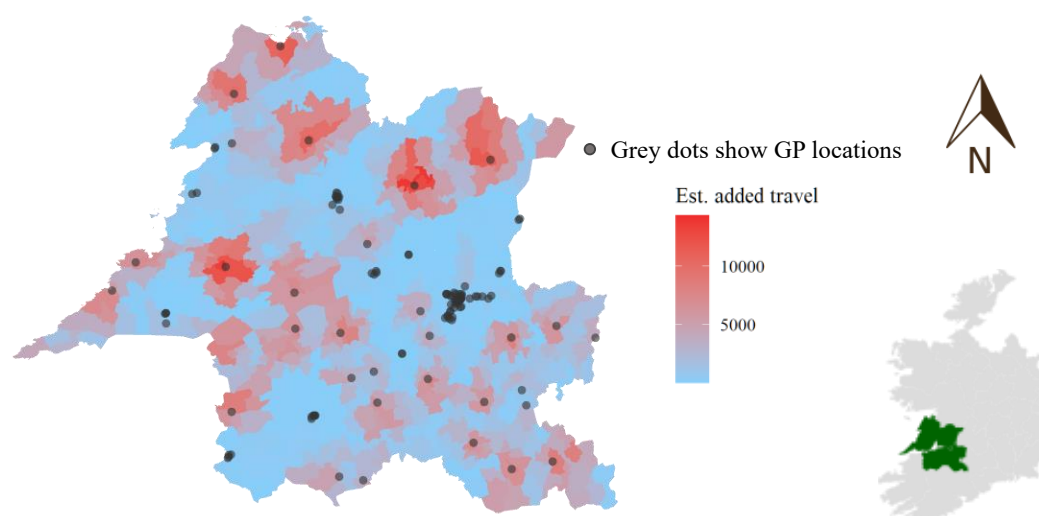
How do we ensure strong rural primary health care, the Limerick Declaration on Rural Health provides a path forward. The World Organization of Family Doctors (WONCA) created the declaration to provide governments with information on how to support rural practitioners and health care systems (Rural WONCA Conference, 2022<sup>[108]</sup>). The declaration places emphasis on three areas:

- **Rural health care needs and delivery:** regular assessment of community needs increases understanding of the supply- and demand-side factors driving inequitable access.
- **Rural workforce:** sustainable Rural health workforce should as much as possible come from the local communities they serve and be incentivised.
- **Advocacy and policy, research for rural health care:** Policy for rural health should include rural communities and rural organisations as key stakeholders and equal partners whose needs and views are sought and who participate in decision making as key informants about rural health.

The declaration emphasises the need for national health care rural assessments. Like the Commission, Australia, and New Zealand, engaging communities in the process of solving health care needs is pivotal. It also calls for widening the focus from urban health care infrastructure to include rural and remote communities. Figure 15 provides an example from Ireland of the effect when rural health care facilities are closed. This would ensure improved working conditions for health care workers. Also, increased funding to support innovative technological solutions to enhance not replace face to face services provided rural practitioners. More medical education institutions should develop rural academic and education infrastructure for graduates with the skills, attitudes, and desire to work in remote locations. This should be coupled with targeted policies to support: rural students in health care worker programmes: curriculum pathways within undergraduate postgraduate training; and, a package of fiscally sustainable incentives for health care workers in rural places.

There is scope to learn from and build on existing examples. In England and Scotland, there are rural-focused GP trainings and the Keele University Medical School is a rural undergraduate campus (Bartlett et al., 2011<sup>[109]</sup>). In Australia, the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners offers fellowships in advanced rural general practice to develop skills to meet local needs, and rural generalist training and rural procedural grants programmes to help doctors in rural and remote areas maintain and update their skills (RACGP, 2022<sup>[110]</sup>). Also, in the United States the Human Resources Administration Agency sets a strategic goal to expand the health workforce supply to meet community needs in underserved areas (HRSA Bureau of Health Workforce, 2021<sup>[111]</sup>).

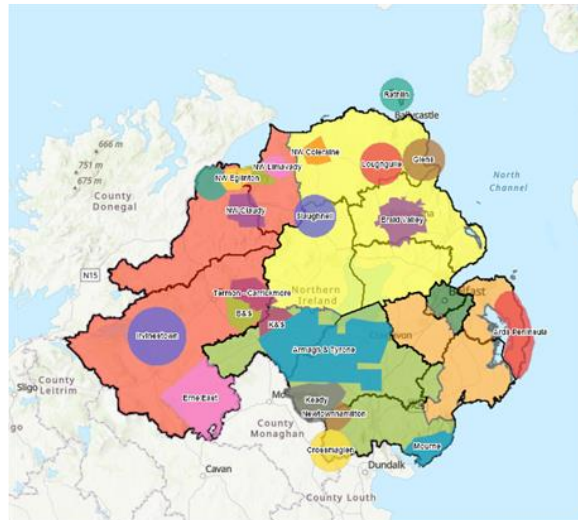
**Figure 15. Effect in terms of access when you close down rural health care facilities (Ireland)**



Source: (Glynn, 2022<sup>[112]</sup>)

## 5. The role of legislation and guidelines in sustaining a focus on rural in health policies, strategies, plans and programming

Northern Ireland boasts the longest waiting list for care in the United Kingdom. In fact, at the end of June 2022, 81% of patients were waiting longer than nine weeks for a first outpatient appointment (Campbell, 2022<sup>[113]</sup>). The Rural Needs Act mandates the rural proofing of public services including health. Shortall and Sherry, noted that this will “require a much more robust evidence base... for all stages of the process” (Shortall and Sherry, 2017<sup>[59]</sup>). A community of stakeholders worked together to develop a health toolkit to support the rural proofing process to put in one place all the information to develop better health policies and strategies. It contains facts and figures, on hospital, mental health, public health and prevention, social care services and workforce needs and challenges. A few examples of how departments interpreted the rural needs act were also included. One example is the Community First Responders (CFR) which has 18 schemes and over 300 volunteers across rural and remote Northern Ireland who live in their communities (see Figure 16). Emergency life support has to be applied quickly, so having local responders makes a difference. The CFR is alerted to specific types of emergency incidents: chest pain, cardiac arrest, choking, and potential stroke. They are able to reach life-threatening emergencies in the early stages before the ambulance arrives. In 2021, those schemes had 4 700 alerts (Campbell, 2022<sup>[113]</sup>).

**Figure 16. Community first responders – Northern Ireland**

Note: Map shows location of the community first responder schemes in NI; Some of the more remote rural areas covered where ambulance response times are longer. E.g. the Mournes, Ards peninsula and Co Fermanagh  
 Source: (Campbell, 2022<sup>[113]</sup>)

## 6. How rural proofing can enhance the economic contribution of the health sector to rural development

Italy's National Inner Areas Strategy Inner Areas are 72 rural areas characterised by their distance from the main service centres (education, health and mobility). They make up 53% of Italian municipalities (4 261), are home to 23% of the Italian population (13 540 000 inhabitants) and cover 60% of the national territory (ENRD, 2017<sup>[114]</sup>). Analysis of the data revealed that the state health services was suboptimal in the inner areas. Regions were not making the best use of hospitals and in some cases, there were being overused with limited specialisation treatments available. There was also no correlation between distance from cities and the organisation of health services (Lucatelli, 2022<sup>[115]</sup>). While this revealed some important challenges it also meant that services and policies could be improved.

The strategy boasts a number of innovations: stronger multi-level governance with national, regional and local levels working in close co-operation. It takes a multi-fund approach; pooling EU and national funds. It adopts a participatory approach to local development, engaging communities in identifying solutions. The community meetings with physicians and patients, public sectors actors provide insights into what communities needed. Some ideas that emerged include improving territorial care, increasing access to nurses; preserving birth centres; increasing access to and training for telemedicine and telehealth services; and reducing inappropriate hospitalisations. The Inner Areas Strategy yielded results and increased community engagement. However, realising the solutions were often blocked by bureaucratic hurdles such as lack of legislation to support the initiative. This threatens to undermine the success of the effort and could send the wrong message to the community. Italy does not have a formal rural proofing model in place, but elements of rural proofing could be seen in way that data was used to diagnose the challenges and working with the rural community to identify solutions.

## 7. Ensuring that funding allocations in the health sector account for rural

In the United States, the Human Resources Services Administration (HRSA) which is under the United States Department of Health and Human Services is the lead actor and advocate for rural health services. HRSA was created by Congress, which makes the office harder to ignore and gives them a firm seat at the table to advocate for rural areas and issues. This role is also a type of rural proofing as the office ensures there is a discussion of rural health issues nationally (Morris, 2022<sup>[88]</sup>). HRSA programmes provide equitable health care and support health infrastructure for people who are geographically isolated and economically or medically vulnerable. They are also responsible for rural research on health to quantify what needs to be done and maintain a strong evidence base on rural health service needs. Another health-related rural proofing example is the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) Rural Health Strategy. CMS administers the key public insurance programmes in the US and a higher proportion of rural residents depend on this for health insurance coverage. Built on input from rural providers and beneficiaries, the strategy applies a rural lens to CMS programs and policies. It focuses on ways in which the agency could better serve individuals in rural areas and avoid unintended consequences of policy and program implementation. That office published data and information showing the differential impacts on rural communities which helps to inform the work.

These efforts aside, there is often a struggle with finding a role for rural within the federal and state structure. For example, the funding to support health care needs in rural communities follow three distinct tracts: block grants, direct funding, and transfer payments. Each of them has built in limitations when it comes to reaching rural and remote communities. The notion that States are best placed to decide how to allocate the funds locally is rooted into the US system. As such, the bulk of federal public health and community health is distributed as block grants to the states. Unfortunately, the funds do not always reach the rural and remote communities within the states. The results improve when the federal department provides direct funding to rural communities, because the department can prioritise rural communities when developing an initiative for funding. However, rural communities may not have the skills and competencies to compete successfully for funding or manage grants. Transfer payments from the federal government for direct public insurance programs will reach rural communities but these funds fail to cover the range rural needs on health care. Payments are limited to Medicare for the elderly, Medicaid for mothers and children, child health insurance and private insurance subsidies and direct services for Indigenous populations, the military and veterans.

### Summary

The key takeaway from the discussion on health is that governments should seriously consider rural proofing the health sector. Rural proofing adds value in circumstances where the rural needs are not well understood or being taken to account. The European Commission *European Care Strategy for caregivers and care receivers* was successfully rural proofed to add information on the lack or shortage of available care services due to long distances or limited public transport options; insufficient access to and variety of long-term care options that raising equity concerns; investments needed in connectivity to benefit from digital opportunities; and untapped employment creation potential due in part to outmigration of women. (Rouby and Ptak-Bufkens, 2022<sup>[55]</sup>) It is also able to galvanise local stakeholders and experts to engage and support the process. In Northern Ireland, a mix of stakeholders took the initiative and developed a health toolkit to support the rural proofing process as mandated by the Rural Needs Act. Data is an essential part of the rural proofing process. It highlights how data makes a difference. While rural proofing its cares strategy, the Commission's employment department noted there was a need to have more data on care in rural areas. The Commission was also frustrated with the information their health data provides. New Zealand had to revise their classification to get more accurate information on the challenges in rural areas.



The nature of the health challenges means, that taking a targeted approach to rural proofing will bring interdependent government departments together to agree on actions. In 2020 the OECD cautioned that rural proofing is not fully effective if there is no co-ordination and integration among sectoral policies that are rural proofed (OECD, 2020<sup>[2]</sup>). A cursory glance at the five pillars of the social determinants of health reveals significant overlap with a variety of the agencies because health is influenced by where people live and work and the ability to access critical services. Recruiting and retaining physicians and health care professionals, housing for workers, connectivity, are common challenges which mandates engagement with departments of employment, housing, and transportation. In Italy, the valuable work of the Inner Areas Strategy is threatened by “bureaucracy” specifically the lack of legislature that can facilitate realising the innovative solutions for rural health care access developed by the community having some form of a national rural lens could support this process.

# Conclusion

Promoting rural development can pose numerous policy and governance challenges. Rural Proofing is a tool to help policy makers develop more nuanced rural friendly policies, making them fit for purpose in rural areas. It involves making policy decisions based on evidence on rural dynamics available in a timely fashion to enable changes and adjustments early in the policy design phase. Making choices and setting priorities are unavoidable responsibilities of government. Rural proofing supports the place-based and well-being approach to policymaking and draws from OECD experience on rural and regional policy and the guidelines set by the *OECD's Principles on Rural Policy*. In addition, identifying and promoting connections between economic, environmental, and social goals means going beyond administrative boundaries to consider reflect the realities of the places where they are implemented. Policies that related to rural areas are cross-cutting and involve a variety of governmental and non-governmental actors. Addressing the interdependencies of rural areas require horizontal co-ordination across levels of government. Better co-ordination will contribute to addressing some of the structural challenges rural regions and tap the opportunities presented.

It is not surprising that rural proofing is viewed as an avenue to achieving better outcomes in rural areas and better-informed decision-making. It has proved to be a useful mechanism for determining the most advantageous way of implementing policy actions to improve the effectiveness of strategies, and/or reduce their costs and negative side effects. It can ensure that resources are used in a more efficient way and respond more effectively to different needs. An important added value when governments are under pressure to use public money more cost-effectively. It also helps to shed light on the impact that implementing a particular strategy will have on other policy variables and helps with prioritising the timing of implementation and budgeting. While, it has some shortfalls, many of which are discussed in this paper. It remains a key mechanism to help with the development of “rural friendly policies”. Countries considering new rural proofing initiatives or refreshing ongoing schemes, need to consider how to learn from previous experiences, introduce sustainable rural proofing models and embed the practice into the policy space and culture of governments.

This report provides a framework to move in this direction. As a general principle, rural proofing should be considered more than a checklist or “tick box” exercise and should take place as early as possible in the policy development process – ideally before a decision to act is taken. After the lead department has developed and sketched out possible policy options, these options, their feasibility and their probable impacts are then the subject to the rural proofing exercise. As a tool to improve the information on rural areas during policy development, it will only be useful if it is properly positioned to influence decisions at key moments. Establishing or improving the capacity to carry out rural proofing is also vital in order to provide policy makers with the necessary information to take informed decisions on policy options and to improve the quality of policies. In addition, since the number of policy changes, resource limitations, and time constraints will not always allow for everything to be rural proofed. Timing, scale and scope must be carefully considered, as demonstrated by the European Commission.

In sum, the characteristics that could improve the effectiveness of rural proofing include:

- Taking advantage of and maximising political support (particularly for countries new to rural proofing), and eventually wean oneself off it
- Clearly allocated and supported responsibilities
- Ensuring that “rural proofers” have the necessary support—access to training and tools—tailored to the governance type (bottom-up or centralised) and governance level
- Improving and becoming more innovative, with the quantitative and qualitative data collection
- Making a determination based on the government or culture of the country, as to whether proofing should be established through a legal mandate or more informally
- Carefully consider whether to adopt a whole of government or targeted approach based on the context, culture, and available resources
- Taking steps to encourage the development and institutionalisation of a “rural proofing culture” in the public administration to embed the practice
- Setting clear and measurable objectives
- Considering a flexible, learn by doing model, and pilot approach where schemes can be re-calibrated based on feedback
- Consider arrangements that facilitate access to external expert bodies/stakeholders to support the rural proofing process this could be *ad hoc* or more formalised processes
- Ensure that the resources allocated for rural proofing are in sync with or “match” the actions needed to fully realise and support the process

Finally, governments should consider rural proofing health sector policies and strategies to ensure that rural communities have access to health services and are equipped to develop new ways to address health care needs. Improving well-being in rural areas mandates greater horizontal co-ordination between rural ministries and non-rural ministries and the mainstreaming of rural issues across all policies. Since, there is no one-size-fits-all rural proofing model, it is important to be flexible in the approach that is adopted and take the time to experiment to find the model that works. Robust rural proofing mechanisms can systematically assess new and ongoing policies for their impacts, using relevant evidence and provide the results to decision makers in a timely fashion.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In Canada, the federal level rural proofing work is led by the Centre for Rural Economic Development, housed within the Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada (ISED) department. The rural lens effort created by the department of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada that is referenced in different parts of this report is no longer in use at the federal level.

<sup>2</sup> HS-g-14.1.1 Supporting Member States in improving access to health care and effectiveness of health coverage, taking into account vulnerabilities of specific groups and targeted intervention; [com\\_2022-5436\\_annex1\\_en.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> HS-p-23-46 The role of health care in reducing poverty; [wp2023\\_annex\\_en.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> [ROUTE-HWF – A Roadmap OUT of mEdical deserts into supportive Health WorkForce initiatives and policies \(ROUTE-HWF\)](#); [OASES Project – Promoting evidence-based reforms on medical deserts](#); [AHEAD](#)

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