



SHERPA  
Rural Science-Society-Policy  
Interfaces

# A VISION FOR RURAL AREAS

MAP Position Paper



## LONG-TERM VISION FOR RURAL AREAS: CONTRIBUTION FROM 20 SCIENCE- SOCIETY-POLICY PLATFORMS

MAP POSITION PAPER – TOWARDS A “RADICAL  
COUNTRYSIDE”<sup>1</sup>

MAP SUOMI FINLAND

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<sup>1</sup> This term was used by one interviewee in a focus group interview conducted June 4.



## 1. Introduction

This position paper is the result of many interlinked steps and was only made possible because of the contribution of both engaged members of the Finnish Multi-Actor Platform and through the input of almost 100 anonymous respondents to a survey. This paper has its roots in a trends analysis for rural areas identified in a desk study (see Discussion Paper and summary in para. 2 below) as well as discussion about opportunities and pressing issues to be solved in the upcoming years. The discussions at the kick-off were also mirrored in a focus group interview with MAP members and in what they perceived as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges as well in their future visions for rural Finland. Survey respondents were invited to reflect upon those. A final consensus meeting served to confirm many points and added further exquisite reflections from actors that represent civil society, research, and the public sector.

### 1. Need for more and further developed place-based policies

More and further developed place-based policies is one of the central issues the MAP members stressed, including specific policy tools to foster place-based development in rural areas. Such policies help addressing increasing differentiation between rural areas and the many “switch off” areas.

A MAP member (research) stressed that regional policy shall not be further fragmented, but that place-based thinking must create cohesion between common themes that cross different sectors and “silos” and thus combine rural policy, urban policy, wider regional policy and different levels of strategies.

A member from the public sector added that many different levels are involved, *“moving at different paces. The fourth sector moves much faster than the rigid structures, and we have big underlying structures that slow things down. It would almost be easier to start from scratch.”*

### 2. People, networks and collaboration

The interviewees painted a rich picture of what makes rural regions strong:

- Existing networks and collaborations between different actors
- capacity for community-based development
- high level of trust and a policy system that enables good partnerships,
- recognised and strong civil society

One member (public sector) stressed that younger generations are more networked and more accustomed to collaborating. *“They do not care about titles but really want to see something happen, and are more driven by achieving results. This attitude can help advance the vision.”*

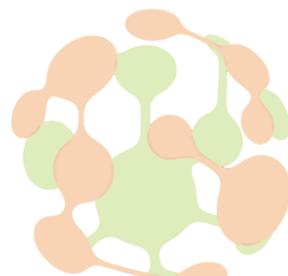
A member from civil society agreed and added that *“young people do not want to go to old-fashioned associations because they want to act differently.”*

### 3. Quality of life, attractiveness & radically sustainable

Strategies to attract new people are needed, including those that are based on other thinking than simply economic growth, including, for instance, quality of life. While sustainable economic growth is important, living a good life and wellbeing were seen as equally important.

To fully utilise and propel the strengths and opportunities, the development and implementation of a Finnish model of smart adaptation / shrinking was seen as an overarching opportunity. This implies combining economic and social perspectives, taking into account a place-based policy. In this model, social sustainability should be equivalent to economic sustainability. Ecological sustainability needs to be considered as well and in connection to the good availability of natural resources as the base for developing the bioeconomy.

Interviewees also challenged the norm and thinking that “more densely population patterns are better” and painted a picture of a “radical countryside”, more equal, innovative, vital and tolerant.



At the consensus meeting, we traced the “radical” element further. According to one member (public sector) this concerns *“the creation of a sphere of freedom, legally and administratively, in norms and resource management that really enables local sustainable solutions. That gives freedom of action and flexibility.”* MAP members also gave many obstacles in connection to this including energy, waste management and transport and including transmission charges in energy production, permits and how the permits are granted. *“These obstacles might need to be looked at a little differently. It must be possible to make a radical change”*, one member added.

Radically sustainable is also related to where resources are taken from and that *“systems should function in such a way that they generate something positive locally, tolerating where resources are taken from”*, another member (public sector) adds.

A representative from research points at the younger and future generations, *“who think differently about work, the environment, community, etc., they no longer see these from the perspective of traditional industrial society”*. This, according to him, can have an impact on lifestyle changes with a positive impact on the countryside. These generations seem to be “radically” challenging old-time thinking, while the rest of the society *“seems still stuck somewhere where the younger ones are not”*.

**Keywords:** *Place-based policy, quality of life and attractiveness, innovative, “radically” sustainable*

## 2. Key scientific evidence<sup>2</sup>

Through desk research, several trends for Finnish rural areas were identified.<sup>3</sup>

### **Population development:**

- Among all Nordic countries, population shrinkage is most pronounced in Finland, particularly in rural areas (Figure 1).<sup>4</sup>
- Rural regions have older population age structures than urban regions in all Nordic countries - this urban-rural divide is most expressed in Finland (Stjernberg 2020).
- Finland is the Nordic country with the oldest age structure. Especially the eastern and northern parts of the country have proportions of people aged 65 and over.

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<sup>2</sup> This section is a summary of main trends identified. For more detailed discussions and maps, see the MAP Discussion Paper available from the authors and at <https://rural-interfaces.eu/>.

<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 shows the total population change between 2010 and 2018, considering both natural change and net migration. Shrinking regions in Finland are primarily ones where there is both a negative natural development and a negative net migration.

<sup>4</sup> Shrinking regions are primarily ones where there is both a negative natural development and a negative net migration.

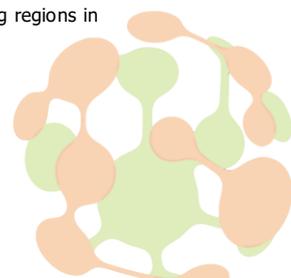
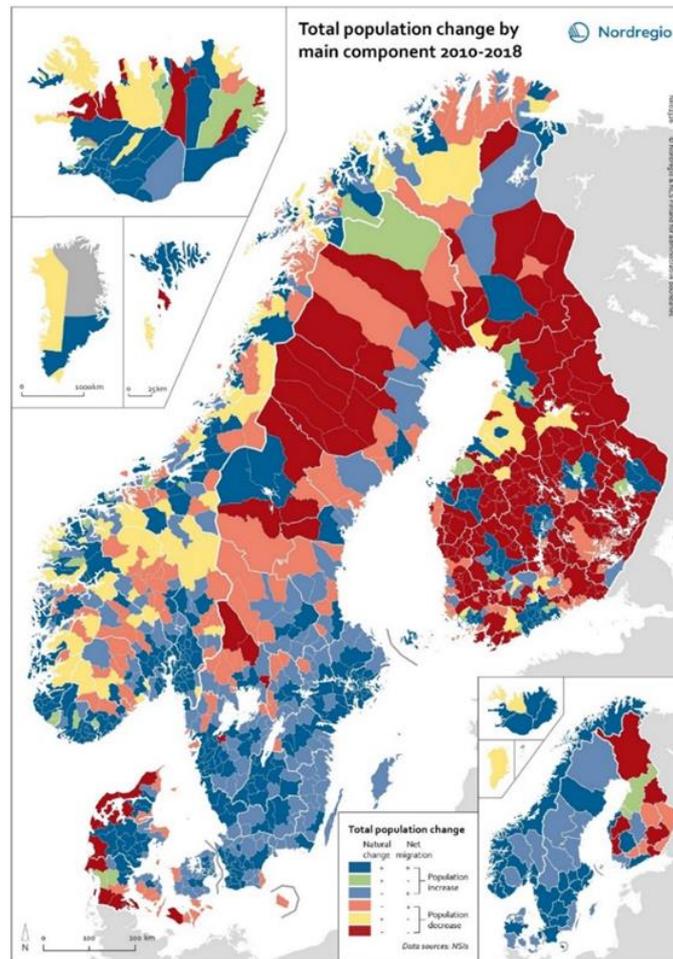


Figure 1. Total population change by main component 2010-2018



Source: State of the Nordic Region 2020

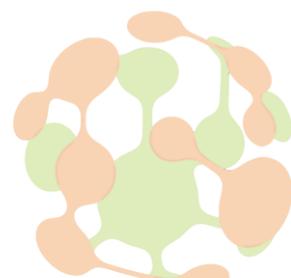
**Economic development and the bioeconomy**

- There were 408,397 jobs in the Finnish bioeconomy in 2016 = almost 18% of the total number of jobs in the country (Refsgaard et al. 2020).
- Across the Nordic Region, most of the bio-based jobs were in other sectors than agriculture, forestry and fisheries (see Refsgaard et al. 2020).
- In Finland, almost 24,000 farms stopped operating between 2005-2019<sup>5</sup> - there were 70,620 farms in 2005 and only 46,716 in 2019 (EUROSTAT 2020 & Luonnonvarakeskus 2020).
- Finland and Norway witnessed the largest decrease of biobased jobs in the Nordic Region in 2009-2017 (Refsgaard et al. 2020).
- It is worth considering the development of farms and agriculture in this connection. In Finland, and in 2005–2019, almost 24,000 farms stopped operating: 70,620 (2005) down to 46,716 (forecast for 2019) (EUROSTAT 2020 & Luonnonvarakeskus 2020)

**Service availability, housing and digital infrastructure:**

- Distances to health care facilities, pharmacies, grocery stores, libraries and post offices are considerably longer in rural than in urban areas (Statistics Finland 2018, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> See EUROSTAT (2020) and Luonnonvarakeskus (2020).



- Finnish sparsely populated regions have seen the most significant decrease in the number of schools in the country (Statistics Finland 2020a).
- The percentage of households with access to a broadband connection of at least 100 Mbps in the Nordic countries varies remarkably (Randall et al 2020), the poorest coverage can be found in Finland and parts of Norway.
- Housing: except from the regions of Uusimaa, Varsinais-Suomi and Pirkanmaa, housing prices have decreased in Finland in 2015-2019 (Statistics Finland 2020b).

**Future development**

- The proportion of municipalities with expected population loss is particularly large in Finland (49%) (Sánchez Gassen N. & Heleniak T. 2019).
- The working-age population is expected to decrease, and the decrease will be strongest in rural and remote regions (Sánchez Gassen N. & Heleniak T. 2019).
- Population ageing – a major demographic trend throughout the Nordic region – is expected to continue (Sánchez Gassen N. & Heleniak T. 2019).
- Municipalities in the northern and eastern parts of Finland are expected to have the highest old-age dependency ratios in the Nordic Region in 2040 (Sánchez Gassen N. & Heleniak T. 2019).

### 3. Summary of the outcomes of the Delphi

#### 3.1. Challenges and opportunities in the next 20 years

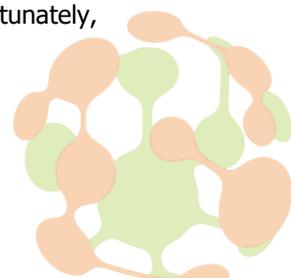
For the discussion of opportunities and challenges for Finnish rural areas in the next 20 years, a SWOT was used in the Focus Group. Interviewees were invited to discuss STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES and CHALLENGES & THREATS. The main points are summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Opportunities & challenges for Finnish rural areas in the next 20 years

<p><b>STRENGTHS</b></p> <p>Collaboration between actors and sectors (organised civil society)</p> <p>Knowledge and culture of problem solving</p> <p>Natural resources in rural areas</p> <p>Strong third sector</p> <p>Trust</p> <p>Grid data</p> <p>Policy system enabling good partnerships</p>			<p><b>WEAKNESSES</b></p> <p>Too many “switch-off areas” / segregation within rural areas</p> <p>Urbanisation (if seen as grand solution to problems) &amp; power concentration on cities -&gt; more consideration to multi-locality, counter urbanisation -&gt; negative effect on rural areas</p> <p>Increasing regional differentiation between rural areas</p> <p>Traditional infra (roads etc.)</p> <p>Low local constructed competitiveness (lack of public &amp; private investments)</p>		
<p><b>OPPORTUNITIES</b></p> <p>Developing and implementing a Finnish model of smart adaptation / shrinking</p> <p>Norms are changing, the rural norm may be in a better position</p> <p>Digital leap (further propelled by crisis)</p> <p>Bio Economy (blue and green) (renewable energy)</p> <p>Awareness of the urban-rural linkages and formation of the fuzzy boundaries between urban and rural areas</p> <p>Learn from COVID experiences</p> <p>Planning / MSP plan &amp; utilization of wind energy</p>			<p><b>CHALLENGES &amp; THREATS</b></p> <p>More place-based policies (taking into account local context) to enhance sustainability (e.g. differentiated tax)</p> <p>How to attract “new” people?</p> <p>Strategies often based on growth (economic), also need for other indicators (e.g. QoL).</p> <p>Maintain new technologies &amp; lessons learned from the crisis</p> <p>Digital infra</p> <p>Better use of data also when allocating funds</p> <p>“Regional development as a portfolio”</p> <p>Local statistics important (improvement needed)</p>		

#### Weaknesses, Challenges & Threats

The current strong focus on urbanisation “as a grand solution to problems” and the concentration of power in cities, has, according to the Focus Group interviewees, negative effects for rural areas and is seen as a **weakness**. Furthermore, the interviewees point at differentiation tendencies in Finnish rural areas (so-called “switch-off” areas), with some rural territories having more severe problems, than others. Overall, traditional infrastructure, such as roads, is still very important in terms of the distances to be travelled. Unfortunately, this traditional infrastructure is often in a poor condition.

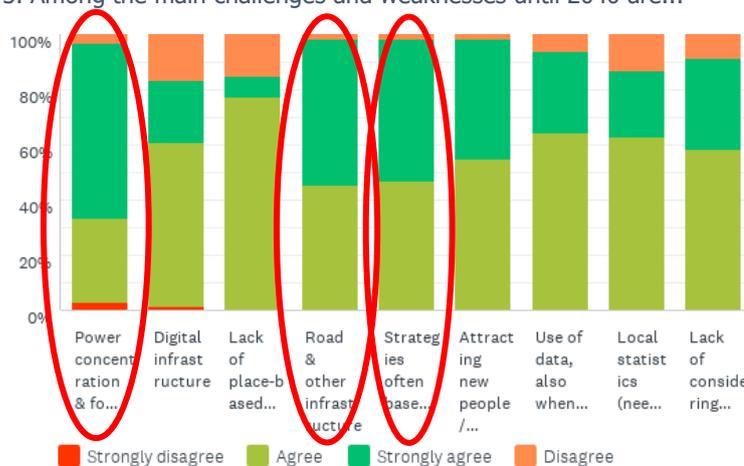


The discussion of place-based policies to enhance sustainability was a central part of the Focus Group. Implementation and further development were seen as one of the key **challenges**. One MAP member stressed the need for specific policy tools to foster place-based development in rural areas, such as the Norwegian model in taxation / differentiated pay roll tax (see also Kull et al 2020). "Finland is not there yet", one interviewee from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry reminded us and added that "local strategies still rely on continuing economic growth and population increase". Interviewees also agreed that the way of thinking needs to be changed – strategies are often based on (economic) growth. One further step for change might be to use other indicators, such as well-being or Quality of Life for local planning. Data sources should be improved and need to be used more efficiently (also as a basis for allocating funds). The expansion of the digital infrastructure is seen not only as an opportunity but as a challenge at the same time. Therefore, it is especially important to maintain new technologies and lessons learned from the current COVID-19 crisis.

Even if rural areas adapt to population decline, they are still in need to attract "new" people, in order to still be functioning. This becomes not only urgent due to outmigration, but also due to population ageing (see Trends).

These Focus Group reflections were used as a basis for formulating the survey questions. One question addressed the major challenges and weaknesses that Finnish rural areas are expected to face during the next 20 years. Among the answer alternatives, respondents mentioned the following three as the most important issues: a power concentration and focus on cities, the notion that strategies are often based on growth, and challenges regarding road and other infrastructure (Figure 3).

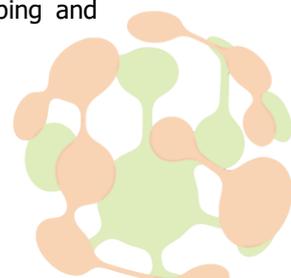
Figure 3. Among the main challenges and weaknesses until 2040 are...



In addition to the multiple-choice options, the respondents could also provide open-ended answers. Here, respondents raised challenges relating to e.g., a need of strengthening skills and education, demographic challenges and the relationship between nature and local life in villages. As one respondent stressed, decision-makers and authorities should think more in terms of multi-locality living and thus enable distance working.

### Strengths & Opportunities

MAP members also discussed **strengths** of Finnish rural areas. Existing networks and collaborations between different actors were perceived as very important. High trust levels and a policy system enabling good partnerships, while recognising the strengths of the civil society were highlighted. Furthermore, Finns tend to have a "problem solver mentality", as one interviewee stated. Natural resources are the base for developing the bioeconomy. Local knowledge and data are important prerequisites for developing and

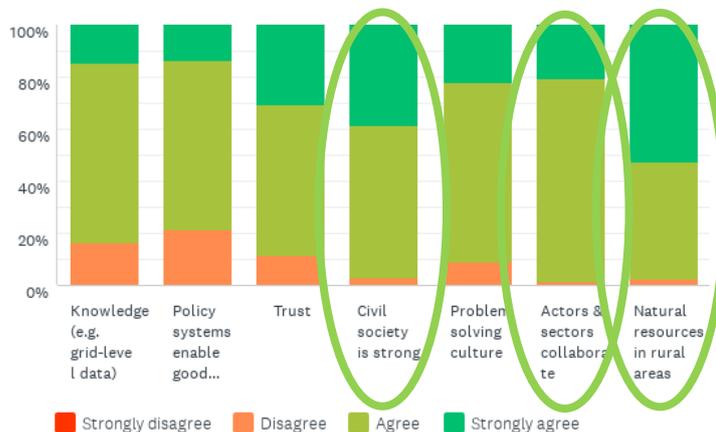


implementing place-based policies. Therefore, the availability of grid data (detailed spatial statistics) is a major asset for the governance of rural areas.

Focus Group interviewees painted a rich picture of **opportunities**. Changing norms away from density and growth and the digital leap are important ones – probably accelerated due to the COVID-situation. Other opportunities are related to the strong Finnish Bioeconomy sector. Using the Blue and Green Bioeconomy strategy in a broader way, e.g., for energy production, can be a great chance to develop the rural economy further. An overarching opportunity, combining economic and social perspectives in the development and implementation of a Finnish model of smart adaptation / shrinking. As an interviewee from the Ministry of Agriculture explains, this “requires a new way of making policy, taking into account a place-based policy. It also places aspects of social sustainability equivalent to economical sustainability aspects. It is important to have a sustainable economic growth in areas, but a good life and wellbeing is equally important. As is of course also the aspect of ecological sustainability.”

The survey invited people to look into the future and reflect on the strengths of rural areas. According to the respondents, natural resources, a strong civil society and actors and sectors collaborate are the three most important strengths of Finnish rural areas among seven alternatives that were listed (Figure 4).<sup>6</sup>

Figure 4. Rural areas and the next 20 - Finnish rural areas are strong because of...



Respondents reflected upon additional strengths in the open-ended answers including resilience, local entrepreneurship and service production, a sense of community and good cooperation between rural and urban areas and their inhabitants. The diversity of rural areas was also brought up, as one respondent answered that different rural areas have different strengths.

The survey was also focused on the opportunities of rural areas in the next two decades. Among the five alternatives that were given based on the Focus Group, respondents support mostly the digital leap (further propelled by the COVID-19 crisis), the notion that people will buy more locally produced products and the potential of the bioeconomy and renewal energy. Those developments were all considered “highly important” by approximately 60 percent of the respondents ( ).

<sup>6</sup> Interesting to note here is also not only to reflect on the mean result but on the “strongly agree” answers. Here Natural resources (39 answers), Civil society is strong (25 answers) and Trust (19 answers) received most support.

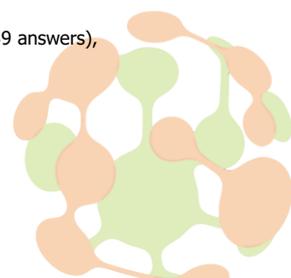
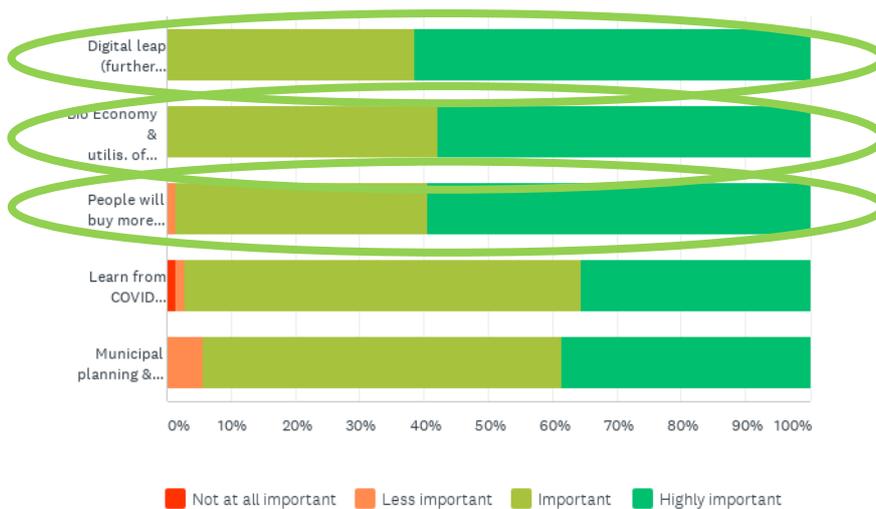


Figure 5. Opportunities in the next 20 years. How important are the opportunities below?



Several respondents also added smart adaptation and multi-locality living as major opportunities. Among the other opportunities that were highlighted were e.g. sustainable tourism, an increased interest in rural living and business opportunities emerging from natural products.

### 3.2. Desirable future for 2040

Focus Group interviewees' visions for rural areas did not differ fundamentally from each other. One MAP member (research) envisaged rural areas to be more densely connected to the knowledge economy, being more innovative, digitalised and based on a fossil-free economy. Increasing interaction between urban and rural areas will take place and will be incorporated in policies. Improved interconnectedness will decrease the division between urban and rural areas.

The interviewee from the village movement hopes to see more young people living in rural areas. "Smart", according to him, becomes the new keyword for rural development, as the economy and daily life are more digitalised. There will be "smart villages" and a boost of "smart specialisation". Policies are based on bottom-up approaches and rural development is based on place-based strategies. Furthermore, he pictures Finnish rural areas to look more outwards, strengthening European integration.

The interviewee from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry envisaged a "radical countryside". Rural areas will become more sustainable, the circular and bio-based economy will boost the countryside. Moreover, the people living in those areas will form a vital and active rural society. Justice, tolerance and innovation will be the key characteristics of this society, which will see a mix of older and younger people.

Another MAP member representing civil society sees a new rural "glocal" lifestyle emerging – people combine local and global lifestyles while living in a rural area. This might be especially interesting for younger generations. Furthermore, the importance of agriculture changes and farmers become a combination of farmers and businessmen.

Survey respondents were asked to agree or disagree with ten different statements about what Finnish rural areas might look like in 2040 (Figure 5).

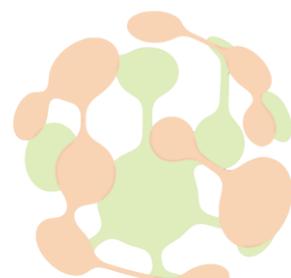
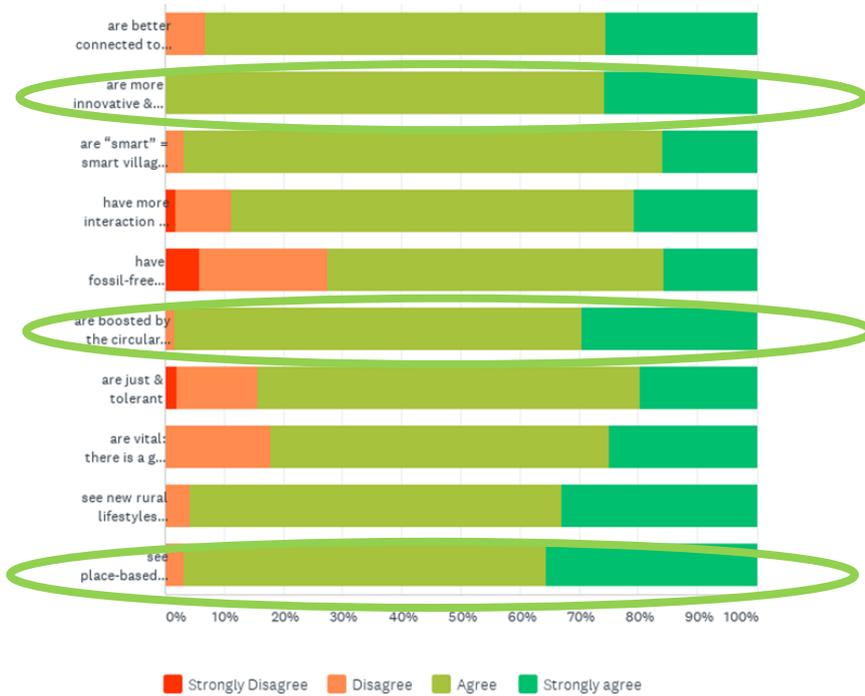


Figure 5. Rural Vision 2040. In 2040, Finnish rural areas...

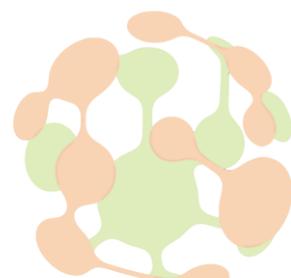


The vision that rural areas are more innovative and digitalised, see boosted by the circular- and biobased economy and enhanced place-based development and bottom-up approaches gained most support among survey respondents. Also, the opportunities that a circular, bio-based and knowledge economy may bring emerged in the answers.

### 3.3. Enablers to achieve the vision

Survey respondents envision rural areas as places that are smart, sustainable and open to innovation and provided several enablers that render a sustainable and positive development possible. A focus, according to many, should be on quality-of-life aspects. One respondent, believing that rural areas will be the backbone of the country, stressed that rural development is strongly interlinked to the development of welfare through resources, living and work arrangements. New mobility practices will emerge, according to one respondent enabling the combination of global and local life and with people having their base – living and working – in the countryside. Smartness was also frequently referred to both in the sense of digital solutions but also better and closer links between people, rural and urban areas and being “more integrated with society at large”. One respondent also mentioned that it is possible that the climate crisis may have increased immigration and made rural areas more attractive and tolerant. Again, the diversity of rural areas was mentioned – some rural areas may face severe decline, while others will see increased vitality.

The MAP members deepened these different aspects and highlighted that it needs a bundle of different mechanisms, approaches and also a “change of mentality” to enable the vision. Many of these points are closely interlinked and range from legislation and policy, via underlying statistics and data including their visualisations to new forms of interaction and dialogue towards an image change and new rural narratives.



### Infrastructure, services, training and skills

This point concerns both digital infrastructure as well as physical infrastructure and its sustainable planning. A MAP member from research stressed the ultimate need of maintaining primary schools. *"If primary schools are abolished, it will be difficult to maintain vitality. Are the areas that are being shut down selected by closing schools?"*, he critically commented. A third point was training opportunities and skills policies for the diverse needs and suitable for the specific needs of different regions.

### Place-based policy instruments and funding mechanisms

A more widespread use of place-based policy instruments requires that legislation will be better tailored to allow this and made more flexible. Instruments need also be adequately funded - investing in decentralised solutions is a key element.

New indicators and data are needed to develop new mechanisms for targeted allocation of funds. This serves to enhance local development in general and tackle problem areas that may not have been noticed before due to lack of an adequate knowledge base.

*"Start-up money and innovation money, easy to apply for and to experiment with"* was asked for by a member representing civil society. She referred to an example from Spain presented at the 2019 European Rural Parliament – the "Rural ticket"<sup>7</sup> to support innovation work.

### Statistics, indicators and visualisation

One MAP member (research) stressed that they looked at statistics of population change on a monthly basis and that there are indications that migration to rural areas look much more positive if January and August are excluded - January and August are months when young people move out to study. While not fully reflected in the annual statistics, statistics excluding these 2 months suggest that people move to different rural areas.

Multi-locality is another important theme and researchers will get more mobile network data for research use, providing more information on what happened during the first Corona wave in Spring 2020 in terms of population movements to / within rural areas.

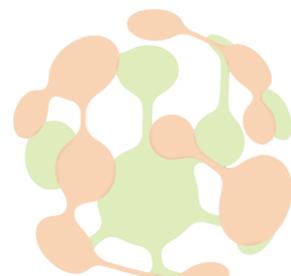
Overall, Finland has a good statistical system (member from public sector) but needs to improve measurements of multi-locality living to support (local) decision-making and planning. In the context of archipelago policy, for instance, there should be more support from data and information, such as on how many people living part-time in the areas use public services provided there. *"It is challenging to put this into practice, even though the indicators are well developed."*

Another member (research) reflected the growth-oriented debate and that quality of life and "good life" issues are a little forgotten. They start a new project to map "indicators of a good life" (funded by Rural Policy Council of Finland). *"Different new parameters are needed to better understand why some people live where they live"*. In this connection a public sector representative stressed that they also need "qualitative" and not only quantitative policy monitoring data and indicators. She adds that *"there is a need for better tools for management and monitoring that have a good and broad enough knowledge base. With current data collection methods, it is not enough. There are also qualitative measurements to show quality of life, security, etc."*

Last but not least, one member (public sector) said that one needs to continue visualising information in quite different and novel ways. *"If information can be displayed visually to decision makers, it brings a lot of added value. This has developed a lot already."*

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<sup>7</sup> See <https://erp2019.eu/activities/workshops/a-spanish-experience-of-rural-development-the-rural-ticket/>.



### Interaction, dialogue and change agents

In defining and committing to common goals a discussion of the implementation of those is needed and several participatory approaches could serve to stimulate discussions and also increase dialogue among different rural actors with opposing interests. One member (public sector) referred to different methods and specifically the "Yes, and...-method"<sup>8</sup> and stressed that *"those who do well, we need to have more common goals. You have to concretize what you do and commit to it."*

Another member (civil society) stressed the role of change agents (*förändringsagenter*). An example is the "Hela Sverige ska leva" project, *Service i samverkan*.<sup>9</sup> It emphasized that change agents can be paramount, when, for example, municipalities have a lot of work to do and to coordinate action across municipalities and regions and coordinate with businesses. "Change agents with time and money helped to promote local development."

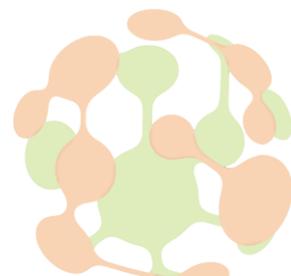
### Storytelling and positive images

One member stressed that the narrative of the countryside should be told "positively, proudly and with the chin upright". For him it is important how the countryside is communicated and what stories are told. "Rural actors should not forget that the countryside needs to be communicated positively and that it is a good place for people to live and to work".

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<sup>8</sup>See e.g. Moshavi (2001).

<sup>9</sup><https://helasverige.se/vad-vi-goer/vaara-prioriterade-fraagor/service/service-i-samverkan/>.



## Annex 1. Methodology used in the MAP

Data collection and knowledge formation was based on several, interconnected steps.

### Physical kick-off meeting

This meeting was held with the MAP in March 2020 in Helsinki. This meeting was held with the MAP in March 2020 in Helsinki. The aims included, getting to know each other (most people know each other already) and starting a nice and fun collaboration for the upcoming 2-3 years. We introduced the aims of SHERPA and the functioning, logic and operation of the MAP. Discussions included also the identification of key pressing issues and topics to work with in the future.

### Online Focus Group interview

This interview was conducted with four MAP members (plus facilitator & monitor) in June 2020. We had representatives from research, civil society and the public sector. We introduced the EU vision, and how the SHERPA project and the MAP can contribute. The questions discussed were organised around these topics:

- How has COVID-19 affected rural Finland? How resilient are rural regions?
- The list of topics raised at the kick-off
- Opportunities and challenges for the rural areas in the next 20 years?
- "The rural areas anno 2040" – a long-term vision and how to get there:
  - How is it to live, work and study in rural areas?
  - Who lives here?
  - What is happening in the rural areas – culture & other amenities?
  - How would the rural areas ideally be like?

The results were used to advance the Discussion Paper and to formulate survey questions.

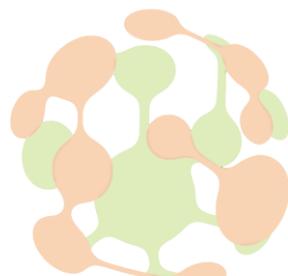
### Online Survey

The survey invited respondents to identify key challenges and opportunities, enablers and hindlers in rural Finland up until 2040. The survey contained 12 mostly 'quick click' multiple choice questions and respondents had the opportunity to answer in Finnish, Swedish and English. It was conducted between July and mid-September and received 93 responses. The majority of respondents was from civil society / NGOs. Respondents were told that a group of experts and different societal actors from the Finnish Multi-Actor Platform discussed a number of themes and topics they consider being relevant for rural areas. They were invited to state how important they perceive the topics, rank them and come with own suggestions. The results served as input for the Position Paper and the final consensus meeting.

The survey design and process was also discussed with other MAPs in June 2020.

### A final Consensus Meeting

This meeting was organised online on October 22. 6 MAP members participated in the meeting in addition to Facilitator and Monitor. MAP members received the draft Position Paper well in advance and we highlighted the points to be discussed. At the meeting, we focussed mainly on the survey results as well as on discussions of the 3 headline messages on the one hand and the enablers to the vision, on the other hand. To foster discussions, we made use of the Mentimeter tool – which added an interactive dimension and fostered discussions. The draft final version was developed after this meeting. Members, including those who were not present, had the opportunity to give comments to the final draft of this document.



## Annex 2. References

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