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Rural Science-Society-Policy
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MAP Position Note

EMPOWERING RURAL AREAS IN MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE PROCESSES



SHERPA has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under Grant Agreement No. 862448. The content of the document does not reflect the official opinion of the European Union. Responsibility for the information and views expressed therein lies entirely with the author(s).

EMPOWERING RURAL AREAS IN MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE PROCESSES

MAP POSITION NOTE

MULTI-ACTOR PLATFORM SUOMI FINLAND

Final version
30 March 2023

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Citation: *Stjernberg, M., Salonen, H. (2023). Empowering Rural Areas in Multi-Level Governance Processes, MAP Position Note Suomi (Finland). DOI 10.5281/zenodo.8234133*

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1. Current situation based on background research and evidence

Finland is among the most rural countries in the EU with 95% of the country's land area being classified as rural (ruralpolicy.fi). As such, Finland has **long traditions** in developing rural policies as one component of overall regional development. In time, the policy work has resulted in a generally well-integrated system of governance, with structures and tools that have been shaped and re-shaped over the decades at different policy levels. As a general guideline, Finland has developed a practice of a "**broad and narrow rural policy**" (see figure 1). Here, broad policy refers to acknowledging the needs of rural areas and their people in all spheres of national policy making, and includes tools like the Rural Policy Council, while narrow policy encompasses the practical development tools involved, such as LEADER groups, state aid to rural movement, and rural development funding. This policy approach has gained interest also in other EU countries. (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2016). The Finnish rural policy is complemented by the [national island policy](#), which has overseen the regional development of the archipelago since 1949.

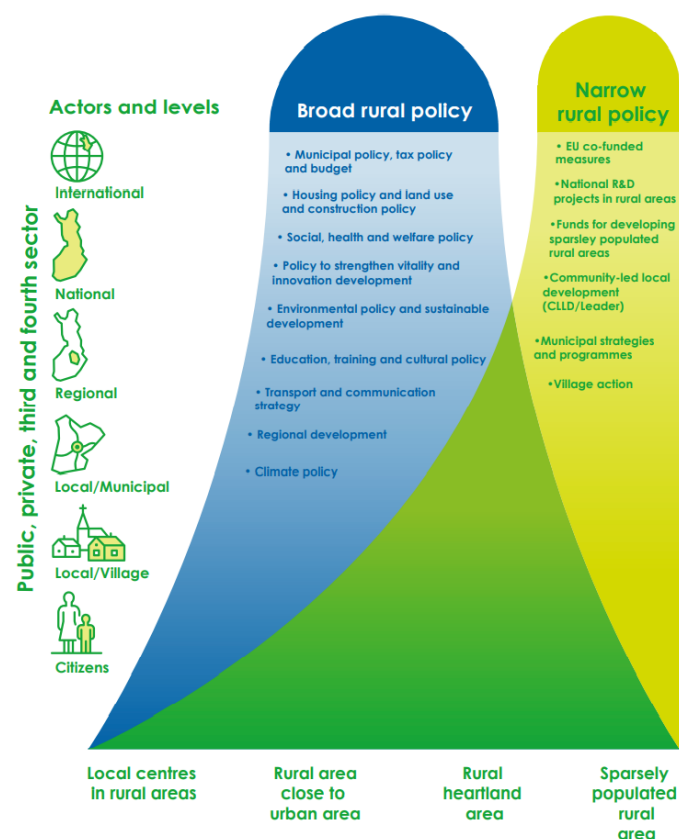


Figure 1. Broad and narrow rural policy. Source: Kattilakoski et al. 2022.

When looking at the **governance structure**, key actors at different territorial levels serve important roles for the implementation of Finnish rural policy. At the national level, relevant ministries and other government agencies are vital for steering and coordinating national rural policy. At the regional level, regional councils, including their regional cooperation boards are key for implementing regional policy, and engaging with central government authorities and cooperating with municipalities and other relevant parties within their regions. [Municipalities](#) play a paramount role and they are self-governing units at the local level in charge of different statutory duties such as land-use planning within their territories, and organising different public services for their residents (e.g., health and social, infrastructure, education and culture). From a rural development perspective, municipalities serve a central function in that they often place specific emphasis

on rural areas in their municipal strategies, visions, and plans, while also closely collaborating with citizens and other stakeholders in local rural communities. Different civil society organisations also serve an important function, and this is regarded as one of the key strengths for rural areas in Finland.

Established practices that have been shaped over time include network-based ways of action, work conducted within various programmes, the Rural Policy Council, research and development, rural proofing, place-based policy, partnerships, and effective communication. The [Rural Policy Council](#) (Maaseutupolitiikan neuvosto) manages and guides the national rural policy under the government. Within Finnish rural policy, **place-basedness** refers to a strategic orientation which utilises tools such as rural proofing and LEADER networks to develop rural areas from the bottom up. There are significant differences among Finnish rural areas and therefore it is important to consider their different types of specific needs and resources when assigning new rural policies (Åström and Kuhmonen 2016). **Community-based development practices** are important for ensuring the inclusiveness of rural policies. Important tools in this context are partnership tables, which offer a loose structure for reviewing solutions among different local actors, as well as a citizen participation mode, which serves as a discussion platform before an official decision (Jaakkola 2018). Other ways include contractualisation (new forms of collaboration between the public sector and local actors to decrease bureaucratic barriers), collaboration with NGOs like village associations, and rural proofing (Kumpulainen & Soini 2019; Kumpulainen et al. 2022). **Rural proofing** is a method for taking the impacts of different political decisions on rural areas into account in regional and municipal policies, so that rural aspects would also be integrated into national policies. It is currently a voluntary step in policy making, and although implementing it has been recommended by several governing bodies, it is not yet wholly established. In the future, this work will be channelled increasingly via the new [wellbeing services counties](#) (Eisto et al. 2006; Åström and Kuhmonen 2016; Muilu and Voutilainen 2021; Husberg et al. 2022; Rural Policy Council 2022; Finnish Government 2022).

In the previous SHERPA cycles, the Finnish MAP has worked with a variety of topics where the notion of multi-level governance has emerged as a central aspect. For instance, the Finnish MAP Position paper focusing on a [Long-term vision for rural areas](#) underlines the importance of existing networks and collaboration between actors, along with high levels of trust, a policy system enabling good partnerships, as well as a strong civil society, which are regarded as key strengths for Finnish rural policy (Kull & Stjernberg eds., 2020). More specifically in relation to [Digitalisation in rural areas](#), the Finnish MAP stresses the need of strengthening coordination and cooperation across policy levels, and that multi-level governance solutions are crucial for managing digitalisation efforts and alleviating digital exclusion (Stjernberg & Salonen eds., 2022). Another example is from the Finnish MAP Position Paper on [Change in production and diversification of the rural economy](#) where the importance of coordination between policy implementation at different territorial scales was emphasized in connection to the bioeconomy (Kull & Stjernberg eds., 2021).

2. Position of the Multi-Actor Platform

This chapter presents the position of the Finnish MAP concerning the key strengths and needs, successful and unsuccessful interventions and actions, and recommendations on what types of future rural policy interventions and actions are needed, along with recommendations for future research agendas.

2.1. Identified strengths and needs

The focus in this section is on the key strengths and needs relating to rural governance in Finland. It is worth acknowledging that these key strengths and needs are not separate, as many of the remaining challenges relate to the issues that can be considered as strengths from a rural governance perspective.

Several of the key strengths concerning rural governance are connected to the **long traditions of rural policy** in Finland. This means that institutional structures have been built and evolved over the decades and

that the principles and practices of working have become increasingly established and refined. This can be seen for instance in how different actor groups from multiple levels of governance engage in the development and implementation of rural policies. In this vein, dialogue, and cooperation between actors at different territorial levels and between policy, practice and research represent key strengths for Finnish rural governance and are vital for policy design and implementation. Due to the relatively well-established institutional structures, **coordination and interaction** between key actors at the national, regional, and local levels generally functions well. Municipalities have a strong role in Finland, and are vital for policy development and implementation at local levels. This situation has provided good conditions for enabling participation with citizens and other key stakeholders in local communities, either via municipal policies or civil society action. However, the traditional roles of municipalities has been challenged by municipal mergers, that have resulted in fewer but larger municipalities, as well as by increasing differentiation between municipalities. These developments are changing the environment of policy implementation and call for new types of approaches for participation and citizen engagement. Different civil society organisations also serve an important function and represent another key strength of rural Finland. This is enabled by the Associations Act (503/1989), which gives civil society organisations a strong judicial mandate to engage in rural development issues (OECD, 2021). Associations are supported also by the actions of various organisations and networks, such as rural communication coordinators and national rural networks. On the other hand, there is still a need to bolster the capacity of civil society and the structures on which different organisations operate, for instance by strengthening networks and skills, and by developing financial instruments.

Network-based ways of working and the notion of an open and mutually respectful dialogue between rural actors are important foundations for rural governance in Finland. Here, **participation and citizen engagement** methods, such as participatory budgeting and partnership tables, where different local actors and stakeholder groups come together to work around specific issues, play important roles. These types of approaches are crucial for developing and implementing place-based policies and for bringing a local dimension to discussions on equity and for identifying and addressing the different needs of rural areas.

Nevertheless, one of the remaining challenges is that the field of rural policy has become **increasingly complex**, and it consists of a wide range of overlapping structures, programmes, funding channels, and projects. At the same time, the resources available for policy development and implementation are quite limited, and there are fewer resources and people to coordinate and put the different initiatives into practice. Despite the many examples of well-functioning ways of engagement and interaction, there is still a need for improved dialogue and coordination and for clarifying the different roles as the institutional complexity increases. One of the remaining challenges is that the central government and the different ministries remain too siloed. For instance, linkages between rural and urban policy remain rather weak even though their importance is widely acknowledged. From the perspective of rural policy, the different sectors of government should be better at using a rural lens, for instance, in connection to rural proofing, but also regarding more broad, cross-cutting issues. Even though the rural policy field is dynamic and constantly changing, both municipalities and funding systems regarding statutory duties have rigid structures that often slow down progress and limit possibilities. On the other hand, initiatives to bridge silos already exist, including the actions of regional councils, the Rural Council, the Advisory Council on Regional Renewal (AUNE) and the discussions on regional development held between the government and regional councils (ALKE).

Another important issue for rural governance in Finland is connected to **knowledge-based decision making**. As there appears to be a genuine effort to use knowledge, data, and methods such as impact assessments for targeting policy measures, so that they are best adapted to the different specific contexts and local needs, it can be considered a strength. One example of using data to support policy action is the distribution of funding for development purposes, where different data and tools, such as the grid-based [Urban-Rural Classification](#) play a central role. The distribution of funding has improved over time by shifting from "spatially blind" policies to more place-specific policies. However, it is important that the indicators used are relevant in case they are used for the purpose of allocating funding. These aims have historically been strongly supported by rural research through e.g., the National [Rural Policy Council](#) (MANE), which

implements the overall national rural policy programme and provides support to policymakers on key rural policy issues. However, funding for rural research has now become more limited and increasingly fragmented, which restricts both the amount of research conducted as well as its thematic focus.

There are still several unresolved issues relating to how knowledge and data are used to support policy. For one, there is a need for more tools and instruments to support the development, implementation, and monitoring of place-based policies. For instance, one key question is how to best monitor the effectiveness of different projects and initiatives. Also, while plenty of knowledge and data already exists, it is not always sufficiently and effectively used as policy support. There are also more specific challenges and needs relating to data, including that it is often too general and fails to fully capture more place-specific characteristics, something highly important from a policy perspective. Other issues concern the fragmentation of data and knowledge, and keeping knowledge bases up to date. Some problems relate to access to data, which can be costly and not always available for all who could benefit from it. To make better use of digital solutions and to fully tap into the digitalisation opportunities for the benefit of rural Finland, major needs relating to a lack of sufficient digital infrastructure in rural areas as well as the lack of skills and capabilities must be addressed.

2.2. Existing interventions and actions

The focus in this section is on governance practices and various successful and unsuccessful interventions and actions within rural policy.

Practices with good experiences: Past and present

- Main guidelines: “broad and narrow rural policy”, [island policy](#), rural proofing (MVA).
- Established ways of working: incl. networks, working groups and participatory processes.
 - Four thematic network under the Rural Policy Council: [HYMY](#) executing tasks related to strengthening the preconditions for a good life in rural areas, [KEHA](#) developing employment tools and multilocational work; [TUUMA](#) promoting new opportunities for work and entrepreneurship in Finnish rural areas, as part of the sustainability transition; [SALT](#) dealing with archipelago areas, particularly from a child and youth perspective.
 - Other networks and initiatives include: the [Sustainability Week](#) highlighting sustainable solutions and ideas from the perspective of rural development; participatory budgeting and partnership tables such as the [Otakantaa](#) platform for citizen opinions on current projects; the [HAMA](#) parliamentary working group supporting vitality of sparsely populated regions; the [Harvaturva](#) network bringing together authorities and organisations working on the security of remote regions; the rural association cooperation network “[Eläköön maaseutu](#)” starting in 2023; and the [Network for leaders of small municipalities](#) coordinated by the Association of Finnish Municipalities.
- Smart villages and smart ruralities: the Smart Village thematic working group (2019–2020) and the smartest village in Finland competition; central theme for LEADER work in the CAP programming period of 2023–2027; the [Finnish Village Movement Association](#) (Suomen Kylät ry.) established a multi-level Smart Village Task Force in 2022 discussing and sharing good practices on Smart Villages, involving both governmental and non-governmental actors.
- LEADER groups and related networks, including urban LEADER action and urban-rural collaboration, Fishing LEADER groups and maritime policy groups (see also Text box 1).
- Knowledge-based decision making:
 - Allocating rural development funding to areas of Centres for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment ([ELY Centres](#)); data on wellbeing, health and services; Grid

Database with more than 100 variables (including demography, socio-economics, households, buildings, number of workplaces by sector, etc.) and data at municipal level (free of charge); place-based index and a novel indicator to follow social and wellbeing development of the rural population during the current CAP programming period.

- Institutional coordination and collaboration across administrative sectors
 - The broadband network deployment information website ([Laajakaistainfo](#)); work across ministries and authorities, results-based management; work across regions in cooperation groups and rural departments of associations; primary education network experiment (2022–2024) (inter-municipal collaboration to find new solutions for ensuring education also in shrinking regions); municipal association coordinators and village advisory boards.
- The welfare reform is currently in its early stages but there are expectation that it will help solve existing structural problems. This reform, however, requires new types of cooperation structures between wellbeing services counties, municipalities, NGOs and other actors.
- volunteering, especially with regard to everyday security (extensive volunteer fire brigades and rescue volunteers, and other local security actions in rural communities).

LEADER strategies as a way of mobilising diverse local actors

- All Finnish rural regions are a part of work done under LEADER groups, which have been the main instrument of rural development funding in Finland since its accession to the EU.
- The 53 LEADER groups of Finland are a successful example of a truly place-based and inclusive programme development, with a democratic selection process, and inclusive evaluation committee, two phases of evaluation, and a feedback loop. Co-learning and co-creation procedures, feedback workshops and transparent evaluation criteria make the action participatory and relevant to the local needs.
- The 2023–2027 period has mobilised many actors (up to 2,500 per group) from various backgrounds, including often neglected groups (e.g., seniors, youth, immigrants, and Sami people).
- Youth LEADER groups involve people between 13–25 years in planning and implementing their own projects, such as events or entrepreneurial experimentation with supported funding. Activities happen across rural-urban borders.
- The upcoming programme period has a strong focus on smart village action, smart adaptation, multilocality, and climate actions and circular economy, with an aim for social, economic, and environmental innovation.

Text box 1. LEADER strategies as a way of mobilising local actors.

Practices that have caused problems in the past

- The central **administration is too siloed**, e.g., regarding company subsidies, while there is also a need for stronger linkages between rural and urban policy.
- Regarding **funding**, there is a need for a critical review of how development funds are directed:
 - Mismatches in directing funding, including certain national actors (e.g., the Just Transition Funds) receiving significantly more funding than some regional ones, such as the LEADER groups, and the achieved results not reflecting this mismatch.

- The methods for determining which areas are eligible for funding are prone to change and they are affected by e.g., changes in definitions and criteria.
- Problems with allocating funding using the urban-rural typology: e.g., if certain types of subsidies are only available for a specific category of rural areas, there can be issues concerning how boundaries are drawn and which areas and project are eligible for funding.
- Certain problems with allocating funding according to demographic challenges: demographic trends such as shrinking rural regions pose additional strain to allocating funding, leading to difficult value-based decisions / political choices.
- Need for better coordination between funding instruments and for making better use of existing coordination instruments so that smaller municipalities and other actors such as associations have better possibilities in seeking funding even with limited resources.

2.3. Recommendations from the MAP

In this chapter, the Finnish MAP presents its key recommendations on what types of future rural policy interventions and actions are needed along with recommendations for future research agendas and what research needs and knowledge gaps currently exist.

2.3.1. Recommendations for future rural policies

The section addresses the following two questions: *What kind of policy support could help to improve governance and stakeholder engagement at multiple levels of governance (at national, regional, and local levels)? How can the EU support these interventions?*

An important prerequisite for improving governance and stakeholder engagement at the national, regional, and local levels is **longevity and long-term commitment** in policy development and implementation. At the national level, this requires perseverance in parliamentary work focusing on the development of rural areas in Finland, but long-term engagement and actions are vital at all governance levels.

Despite relatively well-functioning cooperation structures between key actors, there are still needs for improvement. Policymakers and decision makers would benefit from having a broader understanding of rural development, going beyond specific actions such as CAP, LEADER, and different community-level interventions. To achieve a more **holistic understanding** of rural areas, policymakers and practitioners would benefit from more cross-sectoral learning. The Rural Parliament is an example of how this kind of learning and knowledge exchange can be promoted, as well as of horizontal and holistic execution. Besides quantitative knowledge, qualitative knowledge is also needed to support policy work. Researchers working to improve rural policies should also have access to the data they have produced, free of cost.

The role of **participation and stakeholder engagement** has grown increasingly important, which is widely recognized and supported at different governance levels. As different participatory methods have become more widely used, it is crucial to raise awareness about these approaches, to strengthen the knowledge base on their most effective use and about engaging those citizens who are most difficult to reach. Before, there was an extensive effort to spread information of topical developments in rural policy, which could still benefit policy integration. Citizen science is an approach that has emerged in recent years, but one challenge concerns anchoring actions at the local level and achieving long-term engagement from local communities. Another approach consists of [electronic welfare reports](#) aiming to encompass the different operational environments across municipalities (linked to impacts of preventive work and rural proofing).

From the perspective of using knowledge to support policy, one important aspect relates to **monitoring progress** and the impact of interventions, and here it is crucial to pay close consideration to how objectives are set and what indicators are used to measure these targets. Improving governance and stakeholder

engagement practices also requires adequate resources and funding. More concretely, there is a need for stronger support of place-based rural policy interventions, but also for more resources for specific actions on the ground, such as for arranging workshops with local stakeholder groups.

How could the EU best support these interventions?

The rural vision of the EU, including the Rural Pact, represents an important initiative that may serve as **supportive tool** for policies such as Rural proofing and for committing various actors. In general, support needed from the **EU level** firstly pertains to a need for a better coordination of policies and to overcome sector silos and space blindness. EU rural policies would benefit from incorporating the notion of **place-basedness** better, which is one of the key strengths of Finnish rural policy. Specifically, there should be a stronger emphasis on acquiring more **nuanced and granular knowledge** about the diversity of European rural areas and the significance of matters in different rural contexts. More specific actions that would benefit the governance of rural areas across the EU include placing a stronger focus on **rural proofing** to ensure that rural policies suit the purposes of different local conditions. Also, while the importance of participatory approaches for citizen engagement is widely accepted, more consideration should be placed on ensuring that these types of methods are implemented in practice.

A specific area of focus that should be prioritised by the EU relates to **attractiveness and wellbeing**, and there is a great need for funding and support of these specific issues in rural contexts. As already highlighted in this paper, LEADER groups are highly important in the Finnish rural policy context, and to sustain the local development work carried out within this framework, there is a need for more funding to **LEADER and CLLD** activities as a part of the CAP pot. While funding for LEADER activities is not a major problem in Finland, in some EU member states very rigid structures limit what kind of activities can be funded by LEADER. An important issue relating to actions carried out within LEADER, but also more broadly regarding policy interventions, is how to best measure impacts with different indicators to better demonstrate the positive effects that these actions have on local communities.

In general, Finland is highly dependent on and benefits from the EU in terms of acquiring new ideas and perspectives through various funding, for instance relating to investments towards the green transition. The current crises (the aftermath of Covid and the war in Ukraine) have raised concerns related to Finland's relatively isolated geographic location and its implications to the country including its rural areas, underlining the importance of EU cooperation.

Summary of main recommendations for future policies

- 1) Longevity and long-term commitment, as well as adequate funding and resources need to be ensured as these are vital for policy development and implementation at all levels of governance.
- 2) A broader and more holistic understanding of rural areas should be promoted and endorsed, e.g., through increased cross-sectoral learning and research-based knowledge on rural areas.
- 3) Overcoming sector silos and space blindness is crucial for policy development, and the notion of place-basedness should be better integrated into policies at all levels.
- 4) The governance of rural areas would benefit from placing stronger focus on rural proofing, and from ensuring that these types of methods are taken into practical and effective use.

2.3.2. Recommendations for future research agendas

The section addresses the following two questions: *What are the knowledge gaps on governance and stakeholder engagement, and what future research projects are needed to address these gaps? What could be specific research questions that should be answered?*

Research directions

Coordination and alignment of research emerges as a challenging theme also in relation to research needs to the point that it may not only be difficult, but impossible. This is partly because the rural field of operations is fractured, leading to a situation where many actors are unaware of each other's actions. These challenges also point to the current research needs: there is an overall need for **creating a better overview** of the current situation to better direct policymaking. The consistency and validity of policies from the rural perspective could be supported by having more and better follow-up research from all political sectors. At the moment, however, gathering, storing, and maintaining knowledge resources on rural development is currently under no one's responsibility. Thus, current research needs point not only to the need of addressing certain issues but to addressing the conditions for research, as well.

Resources and funding

It appears likely that the public funding will shrink in the coming years. Hence, there should be solutions on how to **ensure a sufficient funding base** for the structures of rural policy also under more austere conditions. There is a significant risk of having to make difficult trade-offs in a situation where there are many aims and interests to consider, for example regarding rural natural resources and the related economic and nature protection perspectives. Making compromises around them will thus remain a key issue that could also be addressed via research.

Key research questions for the future

Research could explore **the question of impact** from several possible angles. For example, exploring the impact of current governance to discover whether it is generating the results it aims for could be further examined. Moreover, the rural proofing practice is generally effective but could still be further improved. Participation, as another key policy priority, is another important research theme, which could be examined by looking into municipal and welfare service county structures, or more broadly examining the notion of a participatory society. As a more specific research question, more knowledge is needed on the urban-rural typology within the whole EU to avoid assuming that rural regions are similar across the union. For example, for Finland it is not pertinent to classify vast regions as "functional rural areas". There are already research projects addressing these questions, such as the EU Horizon funded Giving Rural Actors Novel data and re-Useable tools to Lead public Action in Rural areas (GRANULAR) project. In addition, rural development and its limitations remain an important theme for future research, including examining the tools in use and the current development trends. In this context, also smart adaptation and resilience are relevant issues.

Summary of main recommendations for future research

- 1) Follow-up research on policy impacts can support the consistency and validity of rural policies.
- 2) Gathering and maintaining comprehensive knowledge about rural issues, including rural indicators, should be better administered.
- 3) Territorial typologies need to take better account of local specificities and nuances of different rural areas.

3. Conclusions

This final section summarises the main conclusions and key recommendations from this Position Note.

- Improving governance and stakeholder engagement at the national, regional, and local levels requires longevity and long-term commitment in policy development and implementation.
- There is a need for supporting a broader and more holistic understanding of rural development.
- Monitoring progress and the impacts of interventions is central, and here it is crucial to pay close consideration to how objectives are set and what indicators are used to measure these targets.
- As participation and stakeholder engagement have grown increasingly important, there is a need to strengthen knowledge on how to use participatory methods most effectively.
- Improving governance and stakeholder engagement practices require adequate resources and funding, and there is particularly a need for stronger support of place-based rural policy interventions and specific actions on the ground.
- Despite integrated and diverse collaboration across governmental organisations and sectors, it remains the needs of better coordination of policies and overcoming sector silos and space blindness.
- Place-basedness should be widely pursued, which requires more nuanced and granular knowledge about the diversity of rural areas and what things actually mean in different rural contexts.
- Rural proofing is important for ensuring that policies correspond to local conditions and needs.
- Community-based and inclusive tools, such as LEADER groups, have the best potential to address the specific local needs of rural areas.
- The EU classification of “functional rural areas” is potentially more divisive than useful unless it is considered very carefully according to different localities.
- Finland has been successful in knowledge-based decision-making in certain areas, and to ensure future success, research should be directed and funded with the aim of achieving a holistic overview.

Acknowledgments

This MAP Position Note has been developed through a co-creative process by Mats Stjernberg (Facilitator of the Finnish MAP), Hilma Salonen (Monitor of the Finnish MAP) and the members of the Finnish MAP: Ann-Sofi Backgren, Virpi Hariluoto-Juola, Antonia Husberg, Mari Kattilakoski, Hanna-Mari Kuhmonen, Michael Kull, Olli Lehtonen, Kati Pitkänen, Meri Remes, Petri Rinne, Sami Tantarimäki and Taina Väre. The Facilitator and Monitor who have coordinated and managed the work want to express our gratitude to the MAP members for their active engagement throughout the process.

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Annex 1 Methodology used by the MAP

This MAP Position Note has been developed through a co-creative process involving the Facilitator and the Monitor and the members of the Finnish MAP. The Finnish MAP consists of twelve members (see list of contributors), with four members representing each of the three main domains of the SHERPA project (policy, research, civil society).

The work on this paper was started on 13 December 2022, when the first MAP meeting of the last SHERPA cycle was held online via Teams. The purpose of this meeting was to firstly introduce the thematic focus and the general guidelines for the SHERPA MAPs in the final cycle. This was followed by a discussion about how to best anchor the theme of governance into the context of Finnish rural policy. Next, Jamboard was used as a tool to discuss the following key questions in workshop format: 1) Key strengths and good practices relating to multi-level governance, 2) Key challenges and unsuccessful practices relating to multi-level governance, 3) Policy support needed for improving governance and stakeholder engagement at multiple levels of governance, including support from the EU, 4) Knowledge gaps on governance and stakeholder engagement, and future research needs to address these gaps, including more specific questions. This was followed by discussion and agreement on the process for drafting the Finnish MAP Position Note more concretely. Here, it was decided to work through a co-creative process, similarly as in the previous SHERPA cycle, using a common, shared working document that all members can edit.

During January-March 2022, the Facilitator and Monitor together with members of the Finnish MAP, drafted text in a shared working document. On 9 March, a second MAP meeting was online to present and discuss a draft version of the Finnish MAP position Note and to agree on the coming steps for finalising the paper. The purpose of this meeting was to gather input from MAP members regarding the key messages and recommendations, as well as other reflections on the paper and any further development needs. Based on the input gathered, this MAP Position Paper was finalised in March 2023 through successive rounds of commenting and editing.