RUSTIK & GRANULAR
FINAL CONFERENCE

24–25 June 2026 | Brussels, Belgium

Joint Final Conference highlights place-based solutions for Europe's rural future

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The GRANULAR & RUSTIK Joint Final Conference, held on 24–25 June 2026 at the Fondation Universitaire in Brussels, marked the culmination of four years of research and multi-actor collaboration under the Horizon Europe projects GRANULAR and RUSTIK.

Organised by Euromontana and the European Association for Innovation in Local Development (AEIDL) the event brought together more than 150 participants, including EU policymakers, researchers, local development practitioners, Local Action Groups (LAGs), and civil society organisations.

The conference explored **how granular data, functional territorial approaches, and participatory methods can support digital, ecological, and social transition pathways across Europe's rural areas**.

Through keynote speeches, panel discussions, and practical demonstrations, participants reflected on the projects' key findings and discussed how innovative evidence can contribute to more effective and place-based rural policies.

DAY 1 | EVIDENCE, DATA & TOOLS TO MEASURE RURAL TERRITORIAL COMPLEXITY

The first day, organised by AEIDL, focused on the conference theme "Evidence, data & tools to measure rural territorial complexity." Discussions examined how new forms of data and innovative analytical approaches can improve the understanding of rural diversity and strengthen evidence-based policymaking.

The conference opened with welcoming remarks from **Serafín Pazos Vidal (AEIDL),** who reflected on the close collaboration between the GRANULAR and RUSTIK consortia over the past four years. He highlighted the complementary nature of both projects and their shared ambition to provide policymakers with more accurate and nuanced evidence on rural territories.

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KEYNOTE 1 & INTRODUCTION | UNDERSTANDING TERRITORIAL COMPLEXITY IN EUROPE

The keynote address was delivered by **Michelle Marshalian** (Joint Research Centre), who explored the concept of territorial complexity through the lens of Functional Rural Areas (FRAs).

Rather than relying on administrative boundaries, Functional Rural Areas reflect the daily interactions, mobility patterns, and service networks that shape people's lived experiences. She emphasised that ensuring access to essential public services, particularly education, is fundamental to addressing depopulation and supporting citizens' "right to stay" in rural areas.

Project coordinators **Tristan Berchoux** (GRANULAR) and **Simone Sterly** (RUSTIK) then presented the complementary objectives of their respective projects. They argued that rural development policies must move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches and better acknowledge the diversity of Europe's rural territories, recognising that different areas require different policy responses.

ROUNDTABLE | DATA AND EVIDENCE TO CHARACTERISE RURAL AND TERRITORIAL CHALLENGES

A roundtable discussion on data and evidence, moderated by **Alessandro Sorichetta** (University of Milan), brought together **Ian McCallum** (IIASA), **Michael Kull** (Luke), **Louise Chasset** (Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée), **Demelza Jones** (Monmouthshire County Council), and **Marc Bournisien de Valmon**t (OECD).

Panellists discussed how granular datasets and functional geographies can provide a more accurate understanding of rural realities than traditional urban-rural classifications.

The discussion explored emerging data sources, including web scraping, mobility datasets, and qualitative evidence,, and their potential to better capture demographic change, service accessibility, and youth outmigration.

A common conclusion emerged throughout the discussion: the main challenge is no longer the availability of data, but the institutional capacity to interpret it and translate it into effective public policies.

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Michael Kull presented the science Policy perspective, emphasising what evidence policymakers need but d'ont have at different governance levels. He highlighted that current data fails to capture adequately several challenges such as the complex demographic dynamics and the multiple crises and transitions. Using the example of rural proofing of the finish replication lab in GRANULAR, he showed how rural proofing could be applied in practice can help turning data into shared territorial intelligence for place-based policymaking.

Demelza Jones presented the welsh case of the RUSTIK project, on the inclusion of younger-working-age residents in the citizen-voice evidence base in a rural welsh county. They investigated the younger residents' mobility decision-making and the lieability of the county for this age group at a time where local goverment tends to give priority to improve demgorpahic balance to support economic growth.

In France, **Louise Chasset** researched the tourists' travel habits during their stay in the Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée tto give greater coherence and imapct to public funding.

As **Marc Bournisien de Valmont** observed, projects such as GRANULAR and RUSTIK are valuable not simply because they generate more information, but because they enable policymakers to understand rural diversity beyond statistical averages.

ROUNDTABLE | RURAL DIVERSITY AND COMPLEXITY: ANALYTICAL APPROACHES FOR RURAL AREAS

The following session presented innovative analytical frameworks designed to better reflect the complexity and diversity of rural areas.

Francesco Mantino (CREA) introduced the Functional Rural Areas framework and the RUSTIK appraoch, highlighting the importance of identifying "rural hubs" connected through everyday mobility rather than administrative borders.

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He emphasised the difference and complementarity of the rural hubs, which show consistently positive demographic and labour market trands' across different regional contexts, the connected rural areas and the peripheral rural areas. He then presented the reassessment of rural areas after DEGURBA revision, and showed four different functional configurations and their policy implications using Italy as an example.

Carlos Tapia (Nordregio) presented a multidimensional rural typology developed at a 1 km² grid level. By combining indicators such as topography, land use, accessibility, and population dynamics, this approach offers a much more detailed representation of rural territories than conventional classifications, providing a stronger evidence base for planning and policymaking.

Representing Scottish Rural Action, **Theona Morrison** reflected on the importance of language in shaping rural policy. She argued that describing communities as "remote" reinforces perceptions of marginalisation and fails to recognise their cultural vitality and resilience. Instead, she advocated for terminology that better reflects the identity, strengths, and lived realities of rural and island communities.

From a European policy perspective, **Vasileios Margaras** (European Parliamentary Research Service) underlined the relevance of this research for ongoing discussions on the future Multiannual Financial Framework. He stressed that more granular territorial evidence helps policymakers better understand local realities and supports more informed and impartial decision-making during negotiations on future EU funding.

ROUNDTABLE | TOOLS & FRAMEWORKS TO UNDERSTAND RURAL COMPLEXITY

The final session of the day showcased practical tools developed through the projects to analyse well-being and support local decision-making.

Gundi Knies (Thünen Institute) presented research on the "rural happiness paradox", examining the relationship between subjective well-being and rural living conditions.

She presented the platform developed during the GRANULAR project to compare findings across Europe, and investigated what local context factors explain the rural subjective wellbeing advantage.

Drawing on the Dutch GRANULAR Living Lab, **Kimberly Wevers** (P10) demonstrated how locally tailored approaches can better address community needs than standardised policy solutions regarding the basic service deliveray needs and the rural housing policies.

Petya Slavova (Sofia University) introduced a GIS platform designed to connect local food production with tourism demand in Bulgaria, illustrating how spatial data can support more integrated territorial development strategies.

Closing the day, **Carole Esclapez** (DG AGRI, European Commission) welcomed the projects' strong multi-actor approach and highlighted the value of Living Labs in generating locally relevant knowledge. She also noted that ensuring the long-term sustainability and replication of these approaches across other territories will be one of the key challenges beyond the lifetime of the projects.

DAY 2 | FROM EVIDENCE TO ACTION: DELIVERING PLACE-BASED POLICIES AND RURAL PROOFING IN THE EU

The second day, organised by Euromontana, shifted the discussion from research to implementation under the theme "From evidence to action: delivering place-based policies and rural proofing in the EU."

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OPENING REMARKS |

The day opened with a keynote address by **Alexia Rouby** (DG AGRI, European Commission), who placed the conference discussions within the broader context of the EU Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA) and the emerging National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs) under the next Multiannual Financial Framework.

She highlighted the progress made since the adoption of the Long-Term Vision in 2021, including the implementation of the Rural Action Plan, increased investment in rural research and innovation, the establishment of the EU Rural Observatory, and the strengthening of the Rural Pact.

Reflecting on the contribution of projects such as GRANULAR and RUSTIK, she noted that while significant progress has been made in improving the evidence base for rural policymaking, important challenges remain. Better territorial intelligence, more dynamic and comparable data, and stronger analytical frameworks are still needed to capture the diversity of rural areas and support more effective rural proofing. She also stressed the importance of shifting the narrative from rural decline to rural opportunity by documenting successful local initiatives and ensuring that positive examples inform future policymaking.

Project coordinators then reflected on the main lessons emerging from their respective projects.

Presenting RUSTIK's experience, **Simone Sterly** argued that evidence alone is insufficient to influence policy. Drawing on the experiences of the Living Labs, she explained that rural transitions are neither linear nor uniform, requiring integrated, place-based approaches that cut across sectoral boundaries. She emphasised that governance systems, institutional capacity and trusted intermediary organisations are often more decisive than the availability of data itself. Effective policymaking therefore depends on combining quantitative evidence with local knowledge and ensuring that research is aligned with policy processes.

Tristan Berchoux presented GRANULAR's reflections on the role of territorial data in policymaking. While acknowledging the usefulness of existing rural typologies, he argued that density-based classifications alone fail to capture the functional diversity of rural Europe and can lead to inappropriate policy responses. Rather than replacing existing frameworks, he advocated for more flexible and modular approaches tailored to specific policy objectives.

He also highlighted the need for common European standards for local data collection, greater investment in local analytical capacity, and stronger collaboration between researchers and policymakers in defining data needs and indicators. Ultimately, he argued that effective rural proofing depends not only on better evidence, but also on the capacity to interpret and apply that evidence throughout the policy cycle.

PANEL |

MAKING RURAL PROOFING OPERATION: FROM METHODOLOGY TO POLICY IMPACT

The morning's first session, moderated by **Petya Slavova** (University of Sofia), explored how rural proofing can move from concept to practice.

Opening the session, **Giulia Martino** (Ecorys) presented the rural proofing framework developed within the GRANULAR project. She explained that rural proofing should be understood as more than an impact assessment: it is a structured process for examining how policies affect rural territories while integrating territorial knowledge and local perspectives into decision-making.

The framework combines three complementary dimensions: rural characteristics, policy objectives derived from the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, and territorial knowledge generated by local stakeholders. Through eight Living Labs, the methodology was tested across a range of policy contexts, demonstrating its ability to identify both positive and negative territorial impacts. While comprehensive, the framework also highlighted the resource-intensive nature of meaningful rural proofing and the importance of collaboration between different levels of governance.

Complementing this perspective, **Petri Kahila** (University of Eastern Finland) introduced the concept of Decentralised Rural Proofing (DRP). Rather than replacing conventional rural proofing, DRP provides a place-based methodology that allows territories to assess how policies affect their own communities. Drawing on five pilot regions, he demonstrated that although each territory followed a different pathway, common enabling conditions emerged, including institutional support, governance capacity, trust among stakeholders and clear policy entry points. The pilots showed that while the methodology is transferable, successful implementation depends on adapting it to local institutional contexts rather than applying a standardised model.

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The subsequent panel discussion brought together Bettina Bock (Wageningen University & Research), Francesco Mantino (CREA), Nicoletta Merlo (European Economic and Social Committee – EESC), Betty-Ann Bryce (OECD) and Alexia Rouby (DG AGRI, European Commission) to examine how rural proofing can become an integral part of policymaking rather than a procedural exercise.

Panellists agreed that rural proofing should be embedded throughout the policy cycle, allowing policies to be continuously reviewed and adapted as territorial conditions evolve. **Bettina Bock** stressed that rural proofing should be conceived as an ongoing process of interaction and learning, rather than a one-off assessment, and emphasised the need to recognise rural areas not only through their challenges but also through their assets and development potential.

Francesco Mantino highlighted the importance of combining robust needs analyses with assessments of existing policies, arguing that rural proofing must go beyond a simple checklist approach. He underlined that local knowledge is often fragmented and that intermediary actors play an essential role in translating territorial intelligence into actionable policy recommendations.

Representing the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), **Nicoletta Merlo** emphasised the participatory dimension of rural proofing, calling for local communities to be involved from the earliest stages of policy development. She also highlighted the importance of the "Right to Stay" concept, stronger capacity building at local level, and the creation of dedicated "rural proofing champions" within institutions to facilitate dialogue between policymakers and communities. She presented the ongonig EESC position document on rural proofing, due in September 2026.

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From an OECD perspective, **Betty-Ann Bryce** focused on the concept of "rural proofing intelligence", stressing that the value of evidence depends on how effectively it is translated and communicated to policymakers. She encouraged stakeholders to adopt a more proactive approach by identifying policy opportunities, understanding institutional constraints, and ensuring that local evidence reaches decision-makers in a timely and accessible way.

Drawing on the European Commission's experience, **Alexia Rouby** reflected on how projects such as GRANULAR and RUSTIK have contributed to operationalising rural proofing by providing practical tools, methodologies and examples. She highlighted governance, territorial intelligence and stakeholder participation as key ingredients for future implementation and emphasised the need for a whole-of-governance approach that integrates rural considerations across policy areas.

A recurring theme throughout the discussion was the importance of combining quantitative evidence with local knowledge. Panellists agreed that high-quality territorial intelligence depends not only on data availability, but also on the existence of institutions and intermediary organisations capable of interpreting evidence, facilitating dialogue, and connecting communities with decision-making processes.

The panel concluded that rural proofing should not be seen as a technical exercise carried out at a single point in time, but rather as an ongoing and participatory governance process that integrates evidence, local knowledge and stakeholder dialogue throughout the design, implementation and evaluation of public policies.

PANEL |
FROM EXPERIMENTATION TO REPLICATION: SCALING PLACE BASED SOLUTIONS FOR RURAL TRANSITIONS

The second panel on scaling place-based solutions for rural transitions brought together Mirta Sutter (Tuscany Living Lab), Ingrid Machold (coordinator of the Austrian Living Labs), Chen Wang (James Hutton Institute) and Jonathan Hopkins (James Hutton Institute) to discuss how Living Labs can generate, translate and scale knowledge for rural development.

The discussion, moderated by **Aimee Morse** (CCRI), explored the methodologies used across the Living Labs, the value of granular data for policymaking, the role of intermediary organisations, and the conditions needed to replicate successful place-based approaches.

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Opening the discussion, **Ingrid Machold** explained that all Living Labs adopted mixed-method approaches tailored to the specific characteristics of their territories. Depending on local needs, these combined focus groups, interviews, surveys, participatory mapping, observation tools and knowledge co-creation processes. Particular attention was given to integrating local knowledge alongside quantitative evidence and making information more accessible through dashboards and decision-support systems.

Across the Living Labs, data collection pursued several complementary objectives: making previously invisible territorial dynamics visible, capturing the perspectives of often-overlooked groups such as young people and migrants, improving understanding of quality of life at neighbourhood level, and informing local transition strategies. Ingrid highlighted that involving local and scientific partners from the outset created a strong foundation for the Living Labs and helped ensure that their findings informed both regional strategies and national policy discussions.

Drawing on the experience of the Italians Living Labs, **Mirta Sutter** illustrated how participatory data collection influenced the region's rural development strategy. Through focus groups, interviews and surveys involving forest workers, enterprises, civil society organisations and forest consortia, the Garfagnana Living Lab identified land abandonment and forest degradation as major territorial challenges. These findings prompted a strategic shift towards supporting the forest sector through innovation in agroforestry, strengthened forestry supply chains and tourism initiatives linked to forest landscapes.

Beyond influencing investment priorities, she explained that RUSTIK transformed the way the Living Lab works with communities. While participatory approaches were already in place before the project, the Living Lab now places much greater emphasis on co-designing initiatives with local stakeholders and supporting community-led projects. She also stressed that more granular local data will be essential for future programming and funding calls.

Chen Wang highlighted that one of the main contributions of the GRANULAR approaches has been to demonstrate that rural areas cannot be treated as a single category. More detailed territorial evidence reveals the diversity of opportunities and constraints faced by different communities, enabling more tailored and place-based policy responses.

Using examples from the Scottish Living Lab, he explained how combining mobility data, socio-economic information and local knowledge helped identify both connections and mismatches between everyday travel patterns and access to services. This evidence challenged traditional urban-rural classifications and encouraged stakeholders to rethink how functional territories are understood. At the same time, he noted that making effective use of granular data requires sufficient institutional capacity, long-term investment and the skills needed to analyse and interpret increasingly complex datasets.

Reflecting on the conditions needed to establish successful and scalable Living Labs, the speakers agreed that time, trust and collaboration are fundamental.

Jonathan Hopkins argued that Living Labs should not become exercises in data extraction but genuine participatory processes that allow all stakeholders to contribute meaningfully. Building trust and shared understanding inevitably requires time, but is essential for achieving lasting impact.

Overall, the panel concluded that scaling place-based solutions requires more than transferring methodologies or datasets. Long-term success depends on combining granular territorial evidence with participatory governance, strong intermediary organisations and sustained collaboration between science, policy and rural communities.

PANEL | PLACE-BASED POLICIES IN PRACTICE: THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY-LED APPROACHES

The final panel of the conference brought together Tom Jones (European Rural Community Alliance – ERCA), Piotr Sadłocha (European LEADER Association for Rural Development – ELARD), Niklas Johansson (Northern Sweden Living Lab) and Radim Sršeň (European Committee of the Regions) to discuss how place-based approaches can be translated

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into concrete action through community engagement, multilevel governance and future EU policy frameworks.

Moderated by **Valentine Neirinck-Fauvelle** (Euromontana), the discussion explored the role of local actors in shaping rural development, the importance of community-led governance, and the opportunities and challenges presented by the forthcoming Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and the proposed National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs).

Opening the session, **Tom Jones** emphasised that successful rural development begins with people and places, arguing that *"places make people and people make places*." He highlighted the importance of the partnership principle as a genuine process of co-creation rather than consultation, bringing together citizens, civil servants, politicians and local organisations to learn from one another and shape territorial development collectively.

Looking ahead to the next EU programming period, he encouraged local organisations to seize the opportunities offered by future European funding instruments while recognising that many smaller organisations still lack the administrative capacity to compete successfully for funding. Building this capacity, he argued, should become a priority to ensure that European resources reach local actors capable of driving change on the ground.

Similarly, **Piotr Sadłocha** stressed that democracy extends beyond elections and requires the active involvement of communities in decisions affecting their future.

Drawing on the LEADER approach, he underlined that effective rural development starts by asking communities about their needs and priorities rather than imposing predefined solutions. Because rural territories differ significantly, even within the same country, policies must remain sufficiently flexible to reflect local realities.

He illustrated this with the example of rural mobility, noting that large infrastructure investments alone do not necessarily improve accessibility. Small-scale investments, such as local roads or community transport services connecting villages to existing public transport networks, can often have a much greater impact on people's daily lives. This, he argued, demonstrates the continued relevance of Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) as a tool for delivering tailored solutions to local challenges.

Niklas Johansson reflected on how place-based approaches can support regions experiencing major industrial transformation. Unlike many other Living Labs, the Northern Sweden case focuses on mining, hydropower and green industrial investments rather than agriculture. While these developments create significant economic opportunities, they also generate new territorial challenges, particularly in attracting workers and ensuring that smaller municipalities have the capacity to respond.

Johansson highlighted the importance of working at the sub-regional level and strengthening cooperation between municipalities. Within the Living Lab, existing municipal networks helped smaller authorities share expertise and build collective capacity. Looking ahead, he stressed that municipalities will play a crucial role in implementing future rural policies but warned that increased flexibility under the proposed National and Regional Partnership Plans could make it more difficult to ensure that funding reaches local communities. He also expressed concern that the future Competitiveness Fund may not adequately support the wider local ecosystems needed to maximise the benefits of industrial investment.

Closing the panel and the day, **Radim Sršeň** highlighted the growing recognition of rural development within the European Committee of the Regions while emphasising that stronger evidence and analytical capacity remain essential for effective policymaking. He argued that rural development must evolve alongside broader societal changes, making better use of synergies between different policy areas and strengthening place-based approaches.

Reflecting on the discussions around rural proofing, Sršeň noted that although a variety of methodologies are emerging, the next challenge is to translate these approaches into concrete legislative and policy instruments. He encouraged rural stakeholders to frame their priorities within broader European policy debates, including themes such as the "Right to Stay", in order to strengthen the visibility of rural issues within the EU agenda.

The conference concluded with a shared call to build on the lessons generated through projects such as GRANULAR and RUSTIK, ensuring that future European policies continue to support community-led, evidence-based and territorially sensitive rural development.

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About RUSTIK & GRANULAR

RUSTIK is a four-year transdisciplinary research project aiming to **enable rural communities' actors and policy makers to design better strategies, initiatives and policies fostering sustainability transitions of rural areas.**
In consideration of increasing social and ecological challenges, the project envisages an analysis of current adaption requirements and the support of effective rural policy-making processes. The project contribute to an advanced understanding of different rural functionalities and characteristics as well as the potentials and challenges of rural areas.

GRANULAR is a four-year multidisciplinary and transnational project that has developed new datasets, tools and methods to better understand the diversity and dynamics of rural areas across Europe.
Through close collaboration with rural actors, policymakers and researchers, GRANULAR has **generated place-based knowledge to support just digital, economic and ecological transitions, tailored to the realities of different rural territories**. Ultimately, GRANULAR hopes to support rural actors in their efforts to promote sustainable territorial development.

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