



Brussels, 29 January 2025  
(OR. en)

5744/25

LIMITE

AGRI 36  
AGRIFIN 8  
AGRISTR 5  
AGRIORG 14

**NOTE**

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From: General Secretariat of the Council  
To: Delegations

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Subject: Implementing the rural proofing principle  
- *Preparation of the Council debate*

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With a view to the meeting of the Special Committee on Agriculture on 3 February 2025, delegations will find in the Annex a note on the above-mentioned subject.

### **Implementing the Rural Proofing principle**

Rural areas are an essential part of Europe's economic potential and are responsible for maintaining food security for all EU citizens and providing public goods related to their social, cultural, economic, environmental and landscape functions. Their viability and long-lasting and cooperative links with urban centres are therefore essential for maintenance of the cohesion of the EU as a whole.

However, in many member states, rural areas are facing increasing challenges, not least concerning their demographic and economic situation. This is mainly due to different rates of growth and development of territories, which leads to a deepening inequality in access to civilisational, economic and social achievements.

Policy makers at EU as well as local, regional and national level should address these challenges to achieve a full integration of rural areas into development processes and ensure further investments in infrastructure, education, labour market, health, culture, and the environmental, digital and energy transformations.

Recognising and making good use of the diverse potential of rural areas, home to around 137 million inhabitants, is key to ensuring that they are stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous, as outlined in the *Communication from the Commission - A long-term vision for the EU's rural areas - Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040* (10404/21). This development model will address current and future challenges and ensure that Europe's rural areas continue to contribute to a secure and crisis-resilient EU.

Supply chains disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic, the effects of the war in Ukraine, geopolitical changes, and increasing adverse climate change - they all require an appropriate response from the EU. This response should take into account the role of agri-food operators in ensuring the EU's security and strategic autonomy.

One of the tools to achieve these goals is the effective implementation of the "Rural Proofing" mechanism and the dissemination of good practices in this area at the national, regional and local level in accordance with the recommendations of the *Long-term vision for the EU's rural areas*, referred to above. According to the assumptions, this mechanism is to allow for the adaptation of all policies as well as legal and organizational solutions to the needs and development challenges of rural areas. In the Council conclusions on a Long-Term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas (15631/23), the Council expressed its support to the implementation by the Commission of the concept of rural proofing. The Council called for strengthening rural proofing at all levels and to 'improve the effective implementation of territorial impact assessments (TIA)'.

Already now, when working on new initiatives requiring impact assessment, the European Commission applies the principles of "better regulation", which include, inter alia, the assessment of the proposed regulations in terms of their impact on rural areas (TIA). In case of initiatives that do not require an impact assessment, it is assumed that the Commission services should examine the impacts on rural communities in a qualitative way.

Nevertheless, conducting ex-ante and ex-post impact assessments of the proposed solutions on rural development is insufficient to ensure a real impact on maintaining their viability and adequate response to the economic and social challenges they face.

The Report from the Commission - *A long-term vision for the EU's rural areas: key achievements and next steps*, published in March 2024 (8360/24), shows the challenges behind implementing rural proofing and that the hitherto solutions have proven insufficient to verify the real impact of the EU policies and funds on rural development and to ensure that different sources of funding for rural development are effectively combined. This is also confirmed by the recommendations resulting of the *Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture* (13057/24) regarding the establishment of a "Rural Test" by the Commission. This test should check the rural inclusion performance of current and new EU legislation.

Therefore, a responsible inclusion of rural areas in development processes and strengthening their resilience to crises requires the use of the Rural Proofing mechanism not only in the sense of examining the impact of draft legislative solutions on the development of rural areas, but also by taking adequately into account the needs and challenges of rural areas at the stage of designing financial, organizational and strategic planning solutions.

In view of the above, the Presidency, invites delegations to react to the following two questions:

1. Should the Rural Proofing mechanism be improved, and if so, how? Please present your recommendations/suggestions/conclusions regarding Rural Proofing, which should be submitted to the European Commission, in particular in terms of strengthening the effectiveness of its implementation at the EU level.
2. How can rural development be better integrated into EU strategies, policies and funds other than the CAP in order to increase their real impact on cohesion and reduce urban/rural development disparities? Please provide examples of good practice in this area, applied at local, regional and national level.

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