



Government Report on Rural Policy

Based on cross-administrative preparation and
an inclusive process



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and an inclusive process

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Government Report on Rural Policy

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Abstract

The Government's Rural Policy Report describes the state of Finland's rural areas, the factors driving change, and presents a vision for 2040 along with objectives and recommendations for renewing rural vitality.

The report examines the distinctive characteristics of rural areas, regional differentiation, and place based opportunities. Rural areas function differently from cities, and societal changes create specific rural impacts, pose challenges, and open new opportunities. Demographic development is a key driver of change.

Rural areas hold significant potential for strengthening well-being, the economy, and comprehensive security. The report includes five cross-sectoral strategic objectives and 23 recommendations to realize this potential and renew rural vitality. These relate to accessibility, economic structures, local operating conditions, well-being and trust, knowledge of rural, and rural policy planning.

The report serves as a strategic tool for government decision-making and EU advocacy. Its time horizon extends into the 2040s.

This is the third report of its kind; previous reports were published in 1993 and 2009. The preparation of the report was carried out in a cross-sectoral manner, involving approximately 2,400 stakeholders. A more extensive situational overview, a report on the participation process, and a compilation of consultation feedback have been published as separate documents.

Keywords countryside, rural development, regional development, vitality, demographic development, housing conditions, services, economy, digitalisation, infrastructure, industrial and commercial activity, entrepreneurship, environment, civil society, well-being, participation, trust, comprehensive security, reports

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Valtioneuvoston maaseutupoliittinen selonteko Poikkihallinnollisen valmistelun ja osallistavan prosessin pohjalta

Valtioneuvoston julkaisu 2026:63

Julkaisija Valtioneuvosto

Yhteisötekijä	maa- ja metsätalousministeriö, sisäministeriö, puolustusministeriö, valtiovarainministeriö, opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, liikenne- ja viestintäministeriö, työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö, sosiaali- ja terveysministeriö, ympäristöministeriö		
Kieli	englanti	Sivumäärä	172

Tiivistelmä

Valtioneuvoston maaseutupoliittinen selonteko kuvaa Suomen maaseutumaisten alueiden tilaa, muutostekijöitä ja esittää vision vuoteen 2040 sekä tavoitteet ja suositukset maaseutujen elinvoiman uudistamiseksi.

Selonteko tarkastelee maaseutujen erityispiirteitä, alueiden eriytymistä ja paikallislähtöisiä mahdollisuuksia. Maaseudut toimivat eri tavalla kuin kaupungit ja yhteiskunnalliset muutokset aikaansaavat erityisiä maaseutuvaikutuksia, aiheuttavat haasteita ja luovat uusia mahdollisuuksia. Väestökehitys on keskeinen muutostekijä.

Maaseuduilla on merkittävä potentiaali hyvinvoinnin, talouden ja kokonaisturvallisuuden vahvistamisessa. Selonteko sisältää viisi poikkihallinnollista tavoitekokonaisuutta ja 23 suositusta potentiaalın toteuttamiseksi ja maaseutujen elinvoiman uudistamiseksi. Ne liittyvät saavutettavuuteen, talouden rakenteisiin, paikallisiin toimintaedellytyksiin, hyvinvointiin ja luottamukseen, maaseututietoon ja maaseutupoliitiikan suunnitteluun.

Selonteko toimii strategisena työkaluna hallituksen päätöksenteossa ja EU-vaikuttamisessa. Sen aikajänne ulottuu 2040-luvulle.

Selonteko on kolmas laatuaan. Aiemmat selonteot julkaistiin 1993 ja 2009. Selonteon valmistelu toteutettiin poikkihallinnollisesti ja osallistaen noin 2 400 tahoa. Laajempi tilannekuva, osallistamisprosessin raportti ja lausuntopalautteen kooste on julkaistu erillisinä julkaisuina.

Asiasanat	maaseutu, maaseutupoliittikka, maaseudun kehittäminen, aluekehitys, elinvoimaisuus, väestökehitys, asuminen, palvelut, talous, digitalisaatio, infrastruktuuri, elinkeinotoiminta, yrittäjyys, ympäristö, kansalaisyhteiskunta, hyvinvointi, osallisuus, luottamus, kokonaisturvallisuus, selonteot
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Statsrådets landsbygdspolitiska redogörelse På basis av den tväradministrativa beredningen och den inkluderande processen

Statsrådets publikationer 2026:63

Utgivare Statsrådet

Utarbetad av jord- och skogsbruksministeriet, inrikesministeriet, försvarsministeriet, finansministeriet, undervisnings- och kulturministeriet, kommunikationsministeriet, arbets- och näringsministeriet, social- och hälsovårdsministeriet, miljöministeriet

Språk engelska **Sidantal** 172

Referat

Statsrådets landsbygdspolitiska redogörelse beskriver tillståndet och förändringsfaktorerna i Finlands landsbygdsområden, presenterar en vision fram till år 2040 samt mål och rekommendationer för att förnya landsbygdernas livskraft.

Redogörelsen granskar landsbygdernas särdrag, regionernas differentiering och lokalt förankrade möjligheter. Landsbygden fungerar på ett annat sätt än städerna, och förändringar i samhället ger upphov till särskilda landsbygdskonsekvenser, medför utmaningar och skapar nya möjligheter. Befolkningsutvecklingen är en central förändringsfaktor.

Landsbygden har en betydande potential att stärka välfärden, ekonomin och den övergripande säkerheten. Redogörelsen innehåller fem tväradministrativa målhelheter och 23 rekommendationer för att förverkliga potentialen och förnya livskraften. Dessa gäller tillgänglighet, ekonomiska strukturer, lokala verksamhetsförutsättningar, välfärd och förtroende, information samt landsbygdspolitisk planering.

Redogörelsen fungerar som ett strategiskt verktyg i regeringens beslutsfattande och EU-påverkan. Tidsspannet sträcker sig till 2040-talet.

Redogörelsen är den tredje i sitt slag. De tidigare redogörelserna publicerades 1993 och 2009. Beredningen av redogörelsen var förvaltningsövergripande och inkluderande, cirka 2400 aktörer deltog i den. En mer omfattande lägesbild, en rapport om deltagandeprocessen och en sammanställning av utlåtandena publiceras som separat.

Nyckelord landsbygd, landsbygdspolitik, landsbygdsutveckling, regional utveckling, livskraft, befolkningsutveckling, boende, tjänster, ekonomi, digitalisering, infrastruktur, näringsverksamhet, företagsamhet, miljö, det civila samhället, välfärd, delaktighet, förtroende, övergripande säkerhet, redogörelser

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1 Introduction

This is the third time a Government Report on Rural Policy is submitted to Parliament. The report describes the current state and factors driving change in rural areas, presents a long-term rural vision, and sets out cross-administrative objectives and recommendations for renewing rural vitality. This serves as a strategic tool for government decision-making and elaborates on specific issues related to regional differentiation that were also highlighted in Part 1 of the Government Report on the Future.

The Government Programme, 'A strong and committed Finland', emphasises the importance of rural areas as key pillars of society as a whole. The aim is to promote opportunities across Finland, combat regional inequalities and strengthen the security of supply. The report supports the achievement of these objectives by complementing national strategies and programmes with rural knowledge, and by providing a context for national policy measures whose effectiveness depends on how rural areas function. The objective of sustainable growth is linked to the potential of rural areas, which have been identified as capable of being better utilised. The Government Programme emphasises growth conditions for SMEs, fair competition, RDI investments, and harnessing digitalisation and the data economy. Rural areas offer opportunities for investment, exports and wellbeing through diverse business activities and rural development structures. The objectives also include improving mobility, combating physical inactivity, strengthening remote work, providing incentives for relocation to rural areas and the archipelago, and securing biodiversity and access to clean energy.

The report identifies the distinctive characteristics, strengths and challenges of rural areas. The Government Programme acknowledges that EU decisions must be fair and consider regional characteristics. Finland is among the most rural countries in the EU and the OECD, and effective international advocacy requires precise knowledge of rural-specific issues. The report supports EU advocacy and national preparation for the next EU funding period.

Alongside this report, a National Food Strategy 2040 has been prepared, which was submitted to Parliament as a government report in spring 2026. Both documents respond to the European Commission's visions for agriculture, food and rural areas. The Government Report on Rural Policy creates a framework and conditions for achieving the objectives of food policy.

Rural policy is part of the broader regional development framework, operating in parallel with urban policy and island policy. The Government Report on Rural Policy is connected with the national objectives of regional development at multiple levels, in particular by strengthening the vitality, security of supply and sustainability transition of rural areas. The report supports the implementation of regional development by providing a knowledge base grounded in spatial data and rural research, which helps target measures to narrow disparities within and between regions and to renew vitality utilising a place-based approach. The need for a rural proofing was already identified in the 2009 report. Parliament called for its introduction in central government, and the need has since become more pressing.

Effective policy requires a comprehensive approach and more detailed monitoring than general statistics can provide. This report responds to that need. The report makes use of spatial data and social rural research, and its preparation has involved people of different ages and backgrounds from across Finland – a total of more than 2,300 individuals – as well as the Agriculture and Forestry Committee, the Rural Policy Council (MANE), the Island Committee (SANK) and the parliamentary working group on sparsely populated areas (HARVA). The draft report was open for comments on the Lausuntopalvelu.fi platform from 5 June to 18 August 2025 and received responses from a total of 217 stakeholders.

The official preparation of the report has been guided by a cross-administrative steering group chaired by Director General Minna-Mari Kaila from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. The steering group has been supported by a cross-administrative secretariat, chaired by Ministerial Adviser Antonia Husberg from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry.

The preparation of the report has been overseen by the Ministerial Working Group on Clean Energy, the Environment and Security of Supply (PEYH), chaired by Minister of Climate and the Environment Kai Mykkänen (until 24 January 2025) and Sari Multala (from 24 January 2025).

The report's time horizon extends beyond the current parliamentary term, reaching into the 2040s. Based on parliamentary deliberation and a parliamentary communication, a more detailed cross-administrative implementation plan for the Government Report on Rural Policy will be drawn up. The operating conditions in rural areas must be safeguarded by ensuring that the perspectives of rural areas are considered beyond parliamentary terms. Detailed funding decisions will be made within the appropriations set out in the General Government Fiscal Plans and Budgets.

2 Rural policy planning system

Both nationally and internationally, Finland is committed to promoting and strengthening place-based policy and development¹. Rural policy measures aimed at strengthening cross-administrative coordination were first introduced at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s². The operating model has been developed systematically and has been monitored since 1988. It is an internationally pioneering model.³. A place-based approach⁴ is the starting point for rural policy both nationally and internationally. Under this approach, policy, policy preparation, and development measures are tailored by identifying and addressing the needs, strengths and opportunities of different regions and localities (ibid.). However, a data mining review has shown that rural and local perspectives have remained overshadowed by urban and regional analysis within central government⁵.

1 OECD 2019a; Council of the European Union 2023.

2 Rural Policy Committee 1992.

3 OECD 2008.

4 Barca 2009; Lehtonen 2015; Luoto et al. (eds.) 2016.

5 Lehtonen et al. 2025a; cf. Hyyryläinen et al. 2021.

2.1 Definition of rural areas

More than 95 per cent of Finland's land area is rural, 68 per cent is sparsely populated⁶, and 15 per cent consists of archipelago areas⁷. Rural areas can be defined statistically⁸, based on administrative boundaries⁹, based on spatial grid data¹⁰, or as functional areas¹¹. The concept of rural areas is socially constructed and described based on lived experience and language¹².

In this report, rural areas are defined based on a spatial data based urban–rural classification¹³ which is independent of administrative boundaries (Figure 1, left). This classification divides Finnish areas into seven area categories using multiple criteria and 250-metre statistical grid squares. This enables different area types to be distinguished from one another and statistics to be calculated for them individually and in combination.

6 Kaupunki-maaseutuluokitus [Urban–rural classification] (website) (Finnish Environment Institute).

7 Saaristoluokitus [Archipelago classification] (Finnish Environment Institute).

8 Based on the population density (Statistics Finland 2025) or several other factors such as the population, labour force, workplace location, commuting and building data (Helminen et al. 2020).

9 Statistics Finland 2025.

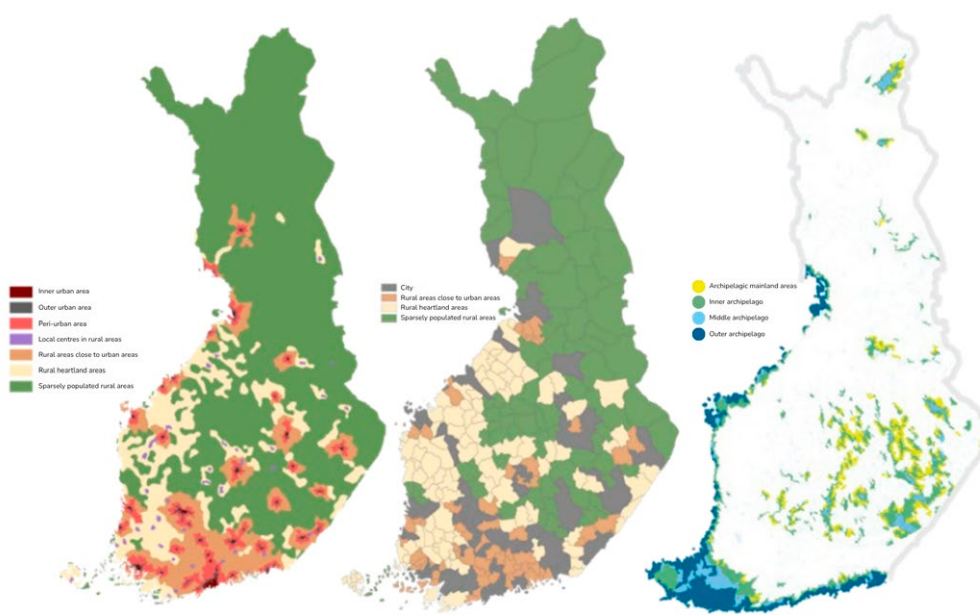
10 Kaupunki-maaseutuluokitus [Urban–rural classification] (website) (Finnish Environment Institute); Helminen et al. 2020; Penje et al. 2023.

11 Functional areas often encompass both urban and rural areas. Urban areas typically make up a small part, with the majority of a functional area being rural. Where there is no urban area, a rural local centre often serves as the centre. In sparsely populated areas, small centres are connected through service provision and commuting flows (Nurmio et al. 2017). The definition of functional rural areas is being developed at the EU level (Dijkstra et al. 2023; Stjernberg et al. 2023).

12 Leinamo et al. 2017; MacGregor-Fors et al. 2020; Kanner et al. 2021; Vihinen et al. 2024a; Maaseutubarometri [Rural barometer] (website).

13 Helminen et al. 2014; 2020.

Figure 1. The national spatial data based urban–rural classification (left), the generalised classification by municipal boundaries (centre) and the archipelago typology (right).
Source: Finnish Environment Institute (Syke) 2020; 2022.



The classification has been in use in its current form since 2013 and was updated in 2020. The Finnish Environment Institute (Syke) examined its use needs and potential reform in summer 2025. The most significant uses in central government are related to cross-administrative preparation and impact assessments, in which it serves as a strategic tool for understanding regional characteristics and for targeting policy. In monitoring rural and regional development, the classification provides more detailed information than the municipal or regional level. In urban policy, it is suitable for producing background information. Societal changes and transitions underline the dynamic nature of contemporary phenomena. The classification is intended as a stable framework for interpreting different areas and serves as an aid in structuring and understanding these phenomena. No need for major methodological changes has been identified, but it is considered necessary to refine the existing area categories, remove inconsistencies, improve communication about the classification, and provide training on its use¹⁴.

14 Helminen et al. 2025.

Classifications based on municipal boundaries are problematic due to the large land areas of Finnish municipalities. A given municipality or city often contains urban, rural and archipelago areas. A generalised classification by municipal boundaries has been created based on the urban–rural classification (Figure 1, centre), in which a municipality’s area type is determined by its dominant area category. Similarly, Statistics Finland’s statistical grouping of municipalities describes the degree of urbanisation, dividing municipalities into urban, semi-urban and rural municipalities based on the proportion of the population living in urban settlements and the population of the largest urban settlement¹⁵. This groups very different municipalities and cities into the same category (e.g. Helsinki and Kaskinen). When using the statistical municipality grouping, municipalities classified as rural or semi-urban are regarded as rural¹⁶.

The urban–rural classification covers archipelago areas, for which a dedicated classification has been developed. The archipelago classification (Figure 1, right) divides archipelago areas into four categories: the inner archipelago, middle archipelago, outer archipelago and archipelagic mainland areas. Areas not belonging to the archipelago are classified as other water-based and mainland areas¹⁷. In this report, rural areas are understood to also include rural archipelago areas.

At the international level, various definitions are used for rural areas. The Nordic Council of Ministers’ research institute, Nordregio, has developed a Nordic urban–rural typology (Figure 2) based on the Finnish model¹⁸. The global classification of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)¹⁹ is based on functional urban areas and identifies only the population density and travel time estimates as criteria for defining dense metropolitan areas. In this classification, rural areas are defined as one of three types of small regions (Territorial Level 3, TL3).

15 Statistics Finland 2025.

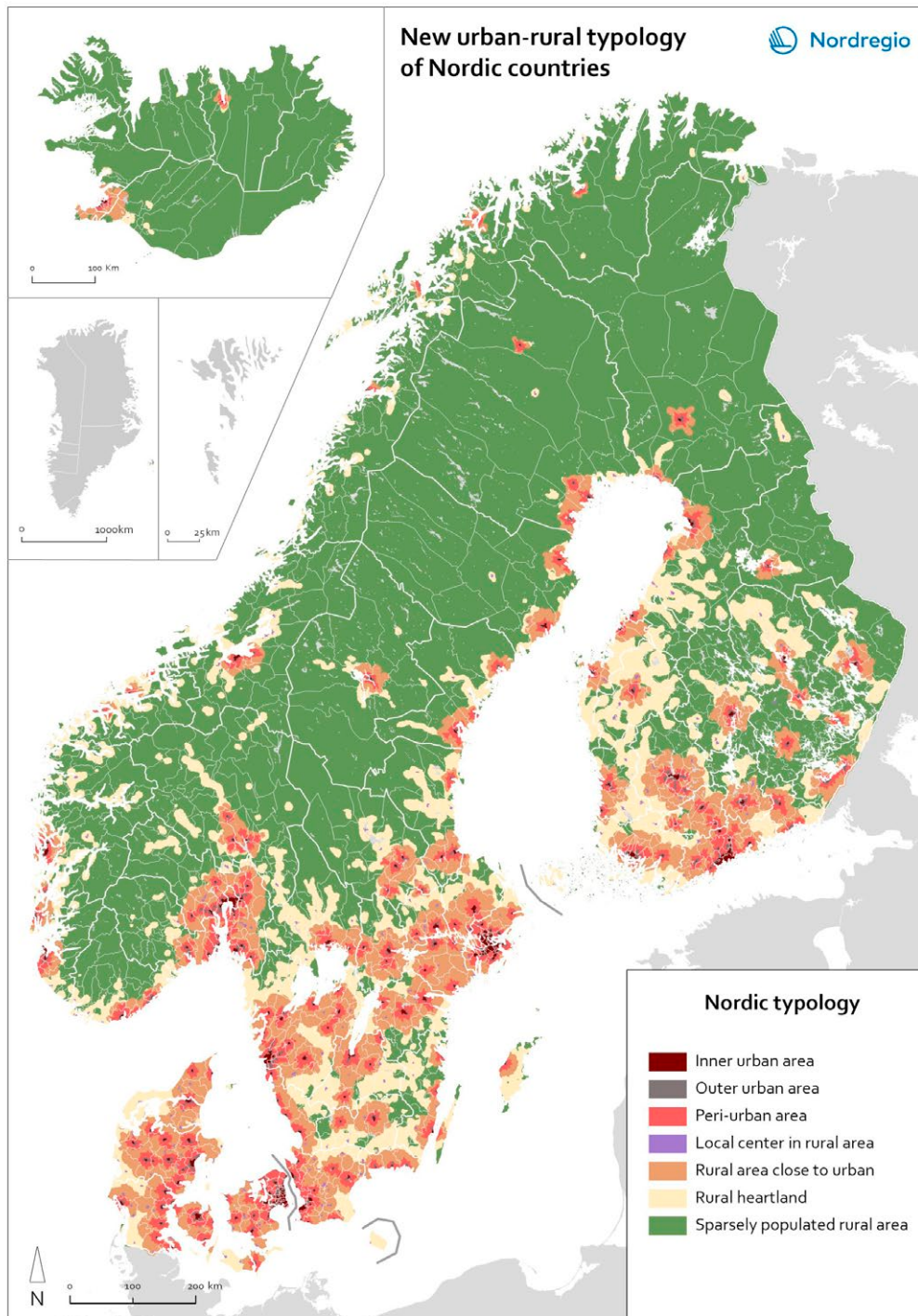
16 Other classifications also exist, including MDI Public’s (FCG) own grouping of municipalities, which identifies the urban or rural character of municipalities and more closely reflects the municipal division based on the national urban–rural classification than Statistics Finland’s municipality grouping does.

17 Saaristoluokitus [Archipelago classification] (Finnish Environment Institute).

18 Penje et al. 2023; Salonen 2024.

19 Fadic et al. 2019.

Figure 2. Nordic urban–rural typology based on spatial data. Source: Penje et al. 2023.



National urban–rural classification

The rural area descriptions under the spatial data based urban–rural classification are national generalisations that help to frame national rural policy issues. They are as follows:

Sparsely populated rural areas have a dispersed settlement structure with few built-up areas (and extensive uninhabited areas). Just under five per cent of the country's total population lives in this area type. These areas are located far from major centres and have a relatively narrow economic structure. Areas classified under this type are those rural areas that do not meet the criteria for either rural areas close to urban areas or rural heartland areas. The most common land use category is forest or marshland.

Rural heartland areas are economically diverse, relatively densely populated, and located at a distance from major centres. They represent an intermediate zone between rural areas close to urban areas and sparsely populated rural areas. Approximately 12 per cent of the country's total population lives in this area type.

Local centres in rural areas fall outside the catchment area of urban areas. They are smaller population centres with a maximum of 15,000 inhabitants and play an important role as service and administrative centres for the surrounding rural areas. They are delineated based on population size, population density, number of jobs and building density criteria.

Rural areas close to urban areas are rural areas that are functionally (e.g. as a labour market area) and physically close to urban areas. They are delineated in relation to already-defined urban areas. Approximately ten per cent of the population lives in this area type.

Archipelago classification

Archipelago areas cover approximately 15 per cent of the land area of mainland Finland. Of these, 70 per cent are sparsely populated rural areas, ten per cent are rural heartland areas, and 16 per cent are rural areas close to urban areas. The archipelago classification has also been implemented using statistical grid cells that are independent of administrative boundaries, although the criteria differ from those used in the urban–rural classification.

The **outer archipelago** is characterised by extensive open sea areas and long distances to other islands, which are mostly small, and some are accessible from the mainland via archipelago transport connections. The outer archipelago may also include dense archipelago areas surrounded by large bodies of water.

The **middle archipelago** serves as a transition zone between the inner and outer archipelagos. It is characterised by a large number of islands with relatively short distances between neighbouring islands. Archipelago areas in the middle archipelago are extensive and fairly dense. Fixed road connections from the mainland are very rare. The most significant islands are accessible from the mainland via archipelago transport connections.

The **inner archipelago** is defined by its proximity to the mainland and a higher proportion of land areas than water areas. It largely consists of archipelago areas with fixed road connections, which ensures good links to the mainland. The inner archipelago also includes open water areas.

Archipelagic mainland areas are mainland regions heavily fragmented by water bodies, where accessibility challenges resemble those in archipelago areas. They are primarily found in inland lake regions but also occur as small areas along the coast, consisting of individual peninsulas or narrow fragmented coastal areas.

Sources: Kaupunki-maaseutuluokitus [Urban–rural classification] (website) (Finnish Environment Institute); Helminen et al. 2014; 2020; Saaristoluokitus [Archipelago classification] (Finnish Environment Institute).

2.2 Rural knowledge and research

The achievement of several political and strategic objectives depends on how rural areas function and develop. Statistical data, situational analyses and assessments of the state of rural areas are required in decision-making and its preparation²⁰. Internationally, the importance of rural knowledge has become more prominent, particularly in the context of sustainability challenges and innovation systems²¹. An 'urban bias'²² has been identified, whereby cities are seen as the most effective agents in addressing sustainability challenges and driving economic activity.

The functioning of rural areas is influenced by geography, population, economic structures and socioeconomic factors, and these differ from those found in cities²³. Statistical data that accounts for rural areas is only available to a limited extent, is updated slowly and is scattered across different sources and data services²⁴. Among other issues, this creates challenges for its use in rural proofing and island proofing, which refer to the assessment of impacts on rural and archipelago areas respectively. The need for such assessments has become more pronounced in recent years. New research findings, more detailed statistics and analyses, national rural research and development projects, and international efforts, including those carried out by the OECD, have helped to dispel myths associated with rural areas²⁵.

In Finland, statistics are skewed towards cities, as more than 72 per cent of the population are registered as living in urban areas. This obscures and distorts the picture of rural areas, since many statistics and analyses are based on the permanent place of residence. National and regional reports produced by wellbeing services counties, ELY Centres, Regional State Administrative Agencies and regions often present results as national and/or regional averages which fail to accurately describe the actual situation and development of rural areas or rural municipalities.

20 Vihinen et al. 2025a.

21 European Commission 2021a; European Parliament 2022; Council of the European Union 2023; Government report 2021; McCann 2023; OECD 2022; 2023a; 2023b; 2024b; 2025a.

22 Ala-Mantila et al. 2022.

23 E.g. Lehtonen 2015; Lehtonen et al. 2022; Husberg et al. 2022; Kahila et al. 2022; Makkonen et al. 2022; Lehtonen et al. 2025b; Makkonen et al. 2025.

24 Vihinen et al. 2025a; cf. Lehtonen et al. 2025a.

25 OECD 2022; 2025a; 2025b; 2025d; cf. Sasso et al. 2025.

A data mining analysis in the Finnish Government publication archive (November–December 2024) shows that concepts describing rural areas appear unevenly and are concentrated in agriculture and forestry. Urban concepts are more broadly and increasingly represented in the publications of different ministries and are associated with societal structures, business life and services²⁶. This bias is also reflected in citizens' experiences, including those regarding the perceived regional fairness of climate policy measures²⁷. In policy planning, implementation and monitoring, there is a growing need to recognise and pay attention to the distinctive characteristics and needs of rural areas²⁸.

Key initiatives within the European Commission's long-term vision for rural areas²⁹ and action plan include research and innovation in support of rural communities (Horizon Europe) and the establishment of the Rural Observatory. The Observatory gathers rural data and statistics and produces analyses to support decision-making. In Finland, the statutory³⁰ duties of the Natural Resources Institute Finland (Luke) include the promotion of wellbeing and rural vitality. Luke has developed a data service³¹ that compiles natural resource data, but no equivalent service aggregating rural vitality data comparable to the EU's Rural Observatory has been produced to support societal decision-making.

The OECD emphasises the importance of rural research. Its Rural Studies series³² offers a rural perspective on societal change and is comparable to the national rural research and development projects financed through the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry's national rural policy funding. In Finland, rural research is of a high standard and is linked to rural policy R&D funding and network activities. Research has been funded since the late 1980s. However, the relevant appropriation has undergone significant changes and has decreased by more than 80 per cent since

26 Lehtonen et al. 2025a.

27 E.g. Maaseutubarometritutkimukset [Rural barometers]; cf. Alue ja Ympäristö [Region & Environment] 2023.

28 E.g. OECD 2019a; European Commission 2021a; Kattilakoski et al. 2021; OECD 2022; Husberg et al. 2022; McCann 2023; OECD 2025a; 2025e.

29 European Commission 2021a.

30 Under section 1 of the Act on the Natural Resources Institute Finland (561/2014) 'the purpose of the Natural Resources Institute Finland is to promote competitive economic activities and welfare based on the sustainable use of natural resources and the viability of rural areas.'

31 For example, the Natural Resources Data service (luke.fi/en) includes the results of Luke's natural resources monitoring, research projects and expert tasks.

32 OECD Rural Studies.

2011. R&D project funding has remained at around EUR 0.5 million in recent years. This funding has supported research critical to rural policy for which no other funding has been available. The results have been used to support efforts such as managing the seasonal labour crisis and increasing understanding of multi-location living, the renewal of vitality in municipalities with a declining population (the smart shrinkage phenomenon), the impacts of changes in service networks, the environmental justice of the energy transition, and the phenomena of energy and transport poverty. The funding has also served as seed money for broader research and as co-funding for the establishment of rural professorships at nine universities and the Rural Studies network. All of these were subsequently discontinued by the universities in the 2010s. At Finnish universities, only individual courses in rural studies are now available, and the sole remaining professorship in rural policy is held at the Natural Resources Institute Finland. Rural research and the interaction between research and development are also promoted in Finland through an association³³.

‘Mission: Rural Areas’ and the promotion of rural research in Sweden

In 2019, the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (Sveriges lantbruksuniversitet, SLU) was given a government mandate and national funding to strengthen rural research. ‘Mission: Rural Areas’ (Uppdrag Landsbygd) and its allocated funding are grounded in the government bill ‘A coherent policy for Sweden’s Rural Areas’ (En sammanhållen politik för Sveriges landsbygder, 2017/18:179). SLU’s Department of Urban and Rural Development (Institutionen för stad och land) is tasked with coordinating rural research, improving collaboration, strengthening interaction between researchers and developers, promoting the dissemination and use of research findings, and building bridges between science and development activities. It is also tasked with supporting the Government by providing compiled knowledge and analyses drawn from rural research and relevant to policymaking.

33 The Association for Rural Research and Development publishes the *Finnish Journal of Rural Studies* [*Maaseutututkimus*] and organises an annual Rural Researcher Meeting conference, which brings researchers, developers and policymakers together.

The background to this initiative is a recognised need to increase knowledge of how people can live, reside and work sustainably in all parts of the country. Knowledge and research have been seen as essential to strengthening the conditions of regions and rural areas and to achieving sustainable development. Over the long term, the increasing of research-based knowledge has been viewed as a means of enhancing the capacity of regions and rural areas to promote sustainable development, innovation, business, employment and social equality, as well as deepening the understanding of sustainable interaction between urban and rural areas. Investment in rural research supports participation in the EU's Horizon Europe research programme and, more broadly, the addressing of global challenges. The role of rural connectivity and sparsely populated areas in innovation has been identified as a central element of this development.

The current funding allocated to SLU for rural and regional development research (approximately EUR 360,000, SEK 4 million, in the period 2005–2008) is part of a broader rural policy and research framework, the national research programme for sustainable urban development (Nationella forskningsprogrammet för hållbart samhällsbyggande, Formas). The total Formas programme funding for sustainable urban development and rural and regional development amounts to approximately EUR 2.2 million (SEK 25 million) in the period 2025–2028.

Sources: Regeringens proposition 2017/18:179 [Government bill 2017/18:179]; Regeringens proposition 2020/21:60 [Government bill 2020/21:60]; Regleringsbrev för budgetåret 2025 avseende Sveriges lantbruksuniversitet [Appropriation direction for budget year 2025 concerning the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences]; Sveriges lantbruksuniversitet – Uppdrag landsbygd [Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences – Mission: Rural Areas] (website); Nationella forskningsprogrammet för hållbart samhällsbyggande [National research programme for sustainable urban development] (Formas); Government Offices of Sweden 2024.

2.3 Definition of rural policy

Rural policy involves the systematic and geographical examination of rural dimensions in societal decision-making, development and their preparation. At its core are people's wellbeing regardless of age, gender or background, and the opportunities and conditions that rural operating environments offer for a smooth everyday life, community activities, work, entrepreneurship and the building of the common good. The perspective in the analysis is human-centred and societal. The aim is to improve the relevance of policy measures in rural areas by generating knowledge, supporting decision-making, and mobilising various actors in society to work towards shared objectives³⁴. A place-based approach is applied³⁵.

Rural policy issues are cross-administrative and cross-sectoral. Societal rural policy is conducted in connection with various decisions, whether consciously or not. Particular rural impacts affect people living in rural areas, businesses and communities operating in rural areas, their structures and interrelationships, and more broadly rural development and the conditions for vitality. They also have an effect on urban–rural interaction, its balance and its functioning. Particular impacts also arise in archipelago areas. The geography of discontent and the generally lower levels of trust in public institutions found in rural areas are not isolated phenomena but rather reflect the extent to which rural perspectives have been identified and acknowledged in the planning, implementation and monitoring of societal decision-making. The geography of discontent refers directly to a sense of injustice in areas whose residents feel that their region has been forgotten by society and by policy.

Rural policy is part of the broader regional development framework³⁶ and operates alongside urban policy and island policy. The rural policy planning system supports the objectives of regional development and meets its information needs in terms of rural areas.

34 Kattilakoski et al. 2021; cf. Vaattovaara 2021.

35 Luoto et al. 2016; 2017; OECD 2019a; Kattilakoski et al. 2021; McCann 2023; OECD 2025a; 2025h.

36 Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2024.

2.3.1 National organisation: The Rural Policy Council and network

Finland has implemented nationally organised rural policy since 1988. During the 1990s, rural policy became established as an integral part of Finnish social policy and the broader regional development framework³⁷. National rural policy is characterised as network-based³⁸. The activities are based on the Government's decision on the tasks and operations of the Rural Policy Council (hereafter MANE)³⁹, the Act on the Financing of Research and Development Projects in Agriculture and Food Sector and Related to Rural Areas (1413/2011), and the Rural Policy Programme. The Rural Policy Programme for the years 2021–2027, 'Countryside renewing with the times'⁴⁰, is the seventh such programme.

MANE is the cooperation group referred to in section 5a of the Act on the Financing of Research and Development Projects in Agriculture and Food Sector and Related to Rural Areas (1413/2011) and continues the work of the earlier Rural Policy Committee. The Government appoints the cross-administrative and cross-sectoral MANE for coordinating the preparation and implementation of significant developments, as well as for foresight, monitoring and evaluation for a maximum of six years at a time. The Government designates the chairs of MANE. Since 2016, the Minister of Agriculture and Forestry has served as chair and the Minister of Employment or the minister responsible for regional development as vice-chair.

MANE is an independent body whose policy guidelines do not directly bind individual branches of government but instead function as instruments for information-based management. During the term from 18 February 2021 to 31 December 2025, MANE has had six specific tasks, the central objective of which has been to support the Government in the cross-administrative and strategically important preparation and implementation of national rural policy matters. MANE's principal instruments, practices and operational bodies (the network) are presented in Figure 3.

37 Objectives and planning of regional development (website) (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment).

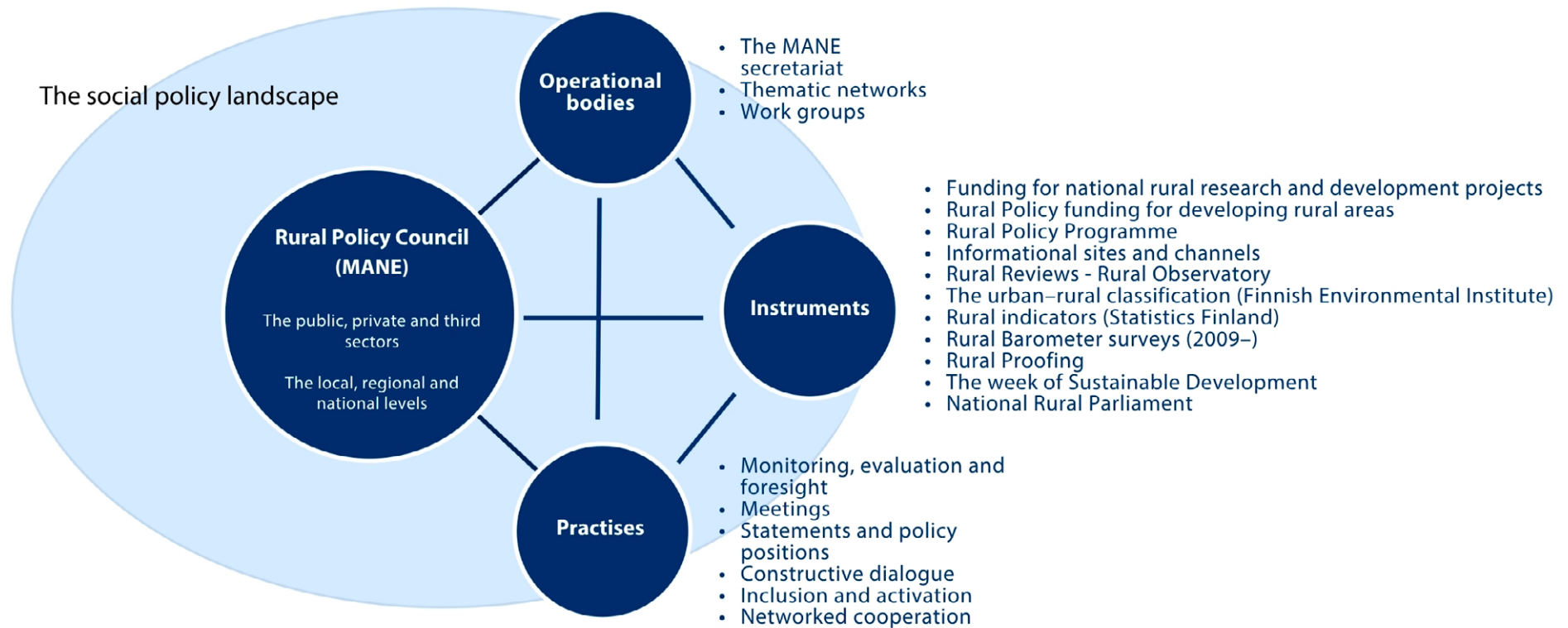
38 Henttinen 2008.

39 Finnish Government 2021a.

40 Kattilakoski et al. 2021.

Figure 3. Rural policy planning system: operational bodies, policy instruments and practices

Rural policy planning system: operational bodies, policy instruments and practises



As an independent body, MANE may establish its own bodies (secretariat) and working groups (e.g. the Community-Led Local Development Working Group, which cooperates with the Urban Policy Committee). The operational core consists of MANE's secretariat, Secretary General, Vice Secretaries General, networks and working groups. The key instruments include the Rural Policy Programme⁴¹ (2021–2027), as well as rural proofing and their supporting knowledge base through the funding of national rural research and development projects. The funding source for these projects was the Development Fund for Agriculture and Forestry (Makera) until 2025, and from 2026, the funding comes from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry's RDI item. The implementation of tasks and objectives requires initiative, active engagement and partnership on the part of stakeholders from the public, private and third sectors, as well as dialogue between them.

Within the Government, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry is responsible for rural development and rural policy⁴². Based on MANE's tasks, policy guidelines and the Rural Policy Programme, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry makes decisions to allocate funding for national rural research and development projects (including rural policy networks), the promotion of the Rural Policy Programme, the organisation of the national Rural Parliament event carried out in partnership (which is part of the preparation, monitoring and evaluation of rural policy), and other implementation of MANE's tasks.

The past and potential future development of Finnish rural policy has been described in several publications⁴³. The key documents include the Government's previous reports on rural policy⁴⁴. Several countries have looked and continue to look to Finnish national rural policy as a model, and MANE is frequently cited as a good example⁴⁵. The rural policy planning system constitutes an internationally exceptional support network for the implementation of rural proofing.

41 The current period is the seventh programme period: Kattilakoski et al. 2021.

42 Valtioneuvoston asetus maa- ja metsätalousministeriöstä [Government Decree on the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry] 242/2025; maa- ja metsätalousministeriön asetus maa- ja metsätalousministeriön työjärjestyksestä [Decree of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry on the Rules of Procedure of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry] 920/2025.

43 E.g. Rural Policy Committee 1992; Uusitalo 1998; Katajamäki et al. 2001; Ingberg 2002; Niemi et al. 2004; Henttinen 2008; OECD 2008; Uusitalo 2009; Sillanpää 2012; Vihinen 2018; Haila et al. 2021.

44 Government Report on Rural Policy of 1993 and 2009.

45 OECD 2008; Tillväxtanalys 2016; European Commission's Rural Pact Community 2023.

2.3.2 A comprehensive and targeted approach to rural policy

Nationally, rural policy is divided into a comprehensive and a targeted approach (Figure 4), which are coordinated by MANE. The comprehensive (or ‘broad’) rural policy refers to a whole-of-government and inclusive approach in which geographical and rural characteristics are identified and acknowledged in policy planning, implementation and monitoring across different branches and levels of government. Cross-administrative coordination and cross-sectoral dialogue and partnership are central, as is the availability of evidence-based rural knowledge and statistics⁴⁶. The principal instrument is rural proofing.

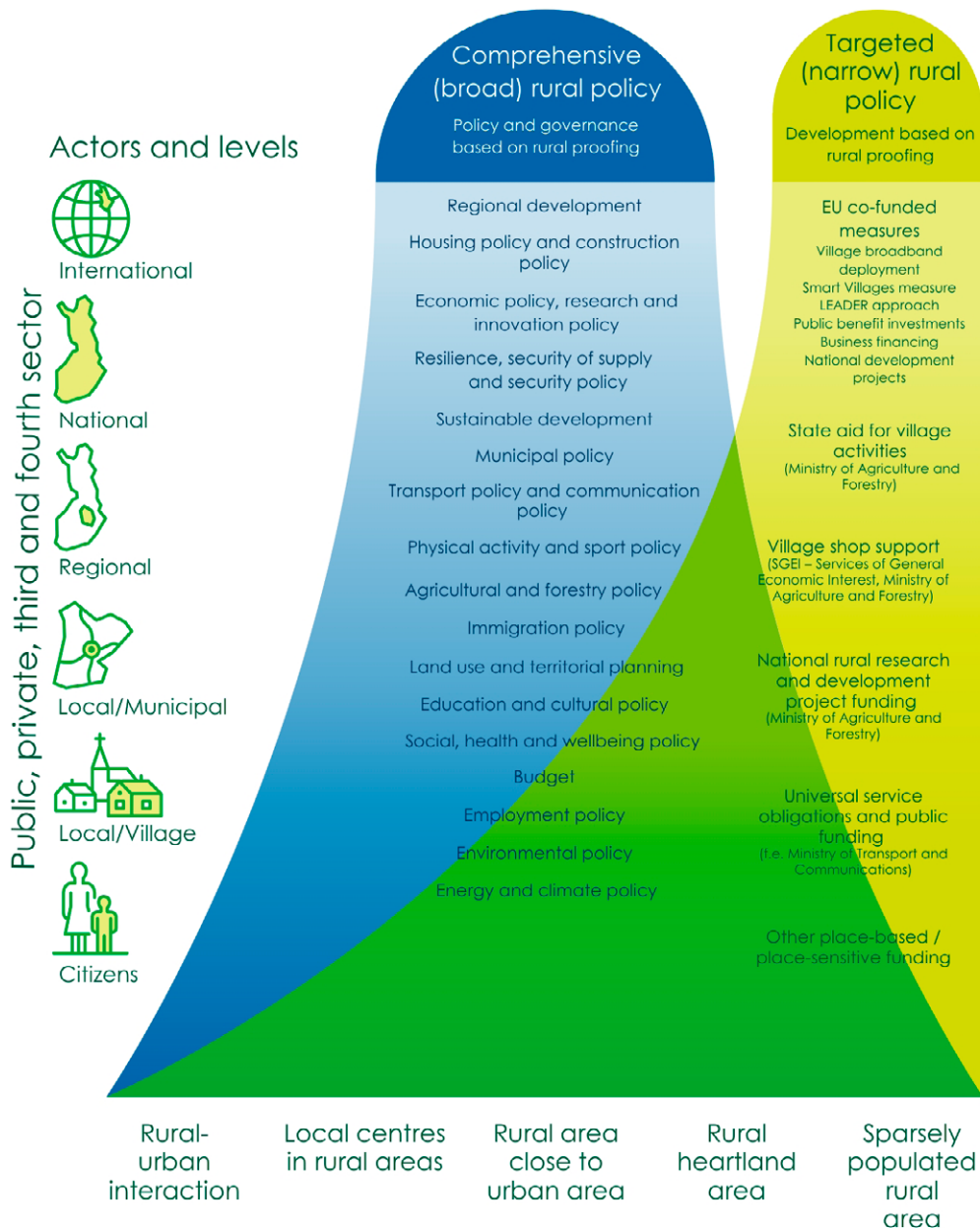
The targeted (or ‘narrow’) rural policy refers to specific instruments administered by different government branches, through which rural areas are developed in a manner that identifies and acknowledges local and regional characteristics, needs, opportunities and resources. The most central instruments within the government branch of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry are the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the rural development measures under the national CAP Strategic Plan (–2027), including Leader activities⁴⁷ and the general grant for the national development of village activities⁴⁸. Within the government branch of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, regional and structural funds (–2027) are an important instrument, and within the Ministry of the Interior, the Finnish Fire Protection Fund is a key instrument.

46 Kattilakoski et al. 2021.

47 Suomen CAP-suunnitelman (2023–2027) toimenpiteet maaseudun asukkaille [Development funding available to rural residents under Finland’s CAP Strategic Plan for 2023–2027] (maaseutu.fi).

48 Valtion talousarvioesitykset (momentti 30.10.63) [Budget proposals, item 30.10.63] (website); Applyforgrants.fi.

Figure 4. Comprehensive and targeted rural policy – updated based on the preparation of this Government Report on Rural Policy



2.3.3 Rural proofing

Matters under the responsibility of each ministry's branch of government affect all areas: cities, rural areas and archipelago areas. Rural areas are directly and indirectly affected by different government branches' steering instruments that are often

neutral in terms of place and region and give rise to particular societal rural impacts. Parliament called for the introduction of rural proofing as early as the 2009 Report on Rural Policy⁴⁹.

Rural proofing is an internationally recognised method that has been developed and adopted in various ways in different countries. In Finland, the method is included in the Guidelines for Impact Assessment in Law Drafting updated in 2022, and a separate guidance document has been produced for it⁵⁰. At the national level, the adoption of the method has been promoted since 2007 through rural policy and, under the leadership of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, on a cross-administrative basis. At the level of the wellbeing services counties and regions, it has been promoted through rural policy network activities and R&D projects. As the 2020s have progressed, MANE, the MANE secretariat and associated networks have increasingly acted as expert and implementing bodies for rural proofing at both the national and regional level⁵¹. The rural policy planning system constitutes an internationally unique system supporting rural proofing and implementation. In Finland, rural proofing does not hold the same status as environmental impact assessments or gender impact assessments, and no systematic monitoring of their adoption has been carried out in different ministries.

Rural proofing is implemented in various ways in different OECD countries, including Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Ireland and Sweden. The OECD recommends its use particularly in policy related to healthcare, telecommunications, the environment and transport⁵². The World Health Organization (WHO) also emphasises the importance of the method in addressing persistent health inequalities in health policy, particularly in policy planning, implementation and monitoring⁵³. The European Commission has elevated rural proofing to a central role in the development of legislative preparation.⁵⁴

49 Parliamentary communication 7/2010 vp.

50 Finnish Government 2023b; Husberg et al. 2022.

51 Maaseutuvaikutusten arviointi [Rural proofing] (ruralpolicy.fi).

52 Bryce 2024; Granular project (website).

53 Wilson 2021.

54 European Commission 2021a; European Commission (Better Regulation).

Island policy – a distinct national policy area

Measured by the number of islands and the presence of waterbodies, Finland ranks among the highest in Europe and globally. The prevalence of islands and waterbodies shapes Finland's community structure, making it fragmented and placing regions in an unequal position. Island policy dates back to 1949, and its aim is to mitigate the disadvantages arising from the prevalence of waterbodies and archipelago conditions. Island policy is pursued as a distinct policy area, and its activities are grounded in the Act on the Promotion of the Development of the Archipelago (the 'Archipelago Act', 494/1981) and the work of the Island Committee (SANK), a permanent body appointed by the Government under that Act. The Archipelago Act obliges central and local government to act in support of livelihoods, transport connections and other infrastructure, services and the environment in the archipelago.

Island policy and rural policy are independent parts of regional policy, yet they share common themes: the smooth functioning of everyday life, the basic conditions for economic activity, geographical accessibility, and the provision of basic and essential services. However, solutions must be sought on a place-based basis, considering the different operating environments involved.

A method for island proofing is currently being developed on the island policy side, with input and support from rural policy.

Sources: Laki saariston kehityksen edistämisestä [Act on the Promotion of the Development of the Archipelago] (1981/494); saaristopolitiikka.fi [islandpolicy.fi]

2.3.4 International framework

The 2008 financial crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine have all influenced the redefinition of rural areas in national and international policy⁵⁵. Comprehensive rural policy has been organised differently in different countries, but this organisation is supported by international frameworks, research and institutions.

2.3.4.1 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

OECD member countries have increasingly shifted towards more comprehensive rural development with the aim of strengthening the various dimensions of wellbeing in rural areas. The OECD's rural policy framework, 'Rural 3.0: A Framework for Rural Development', is grounded in extensive international research on the population, employment, use of technologies, entrepreneurship and innovation systems of rural areas. The policy paper underpinning the framework sets out the rationale for a comprehensive approach to rural development and harnessing the opportunities of rural areas⁵⁶. The framework highlights the diversity, economies and influencing factors of rural areas (including local market conditions and connectivity within and to the area), as well as their distinctive characteristics.

The OECD's rural policy principles⁵⁷ support implementation and emphasise the importance of place-based policy, multi-level governance and community-led development; the strengthening of rural resilience by identifying technological, demographic and environmental challenges and opportunities; and the importance of data at the right scale. Central to this are partnerships between the public authorities (particularly ministries and regional government), the private sector, civil society, and research and research funding institutions, as well as building connections between urban and rural areas. The framework is strongly reflected in the national rural policy planning system, and the development of the OECD framework has drawn on the Finnish model.

55 E.g. OECD 2019a; European Commission 2021a; Kattilakoski et al. 2021; OECD 2022; Husberg et al. 2022; McCann 2023; OECD 2023a; 2025a; 2025e.

56 OECD 2018.

57 OECD 2019b.

2.3.4.2 European Union

The EU does not yet have a comprehensive rural policy framework comparable to those of the OECD or Finland. During her 2019–2024 term, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen launched the long-term vision for rural areas, along with its associated action plan, the Rural Pact and the Rural Pact community, which in 2025 has approximately 3,500 members from different sectors, representing public administration, civil society organisations and the private sector.

The vision set ten goals and four areas of action aimed at strengthening the vitality of rural areas by 2040. The goal is a fair green and digital transition in which no one is left behind. A public consultation revealed that a large proportion of rural residents feel they have been forgotten. The Council of the European Union and other institutions expressed support for the vision and called for the Commission to develop it into a full EU rural strategy comparable to the OECD and Finnish models.

In 2024, von der Leyen launched a strategic dialogue on the future of EU agriculture⁵⁸, based on which a vision for a fair and competitive food system was published. It emphasises the role of living rural areas in food production, as well as their vulnerability, especially along the EU's eastern border⁵⁹. The vision underscores education, jobs, mobility, healthcare services and connectivity as key factors for rural vitality. In connection with the vision, the EU Rural Action Plan is being updated and the Rural Pact community is being strengthened. The current Commission's work is also informed by a review of the future of the EU's single market, which highlights the importance of services of general interest and underlines the 'right to stay' in one's home region⁶⁰. The review was authored by former Italian Prime Minister and Director of the Jacques Delors Institute Enrico Letta. The 'right to stay' is addressed in the Commission's basic proposal for the next EU funding period, put forward in summer 2025, and is being advanced under the Cabinet of Commission Executive Vice-President Raffaele Fitto⁶¹ and as part of the Rural Pact framework⁶².

58 Strategic Dialogue website (europa.eu).

59 European Commission 2025.

60 Letta 2024.

61 European Commission and Commission Executive Vice-President Raffaele Fitto's Cabinet 2024–2029.

62 Rural Pact Conference 2025 (europa.eu).

In its basic proposal for the 2028–2034 EU funding period, the European Commission emphasises synergies between agricultural, rural and cohesion policy⁶³. The distinctive characteristics, issues and opportunities of rural areas must be identified in the national and regional partnership plan (NRPP). Leader activities and cooperation continue as mandatory elements, but without earmarked funding as of autumn 2025⁶⁴. This report also contributes to national preparation for the next funding period.

2.3.4.3 Nordic Council of Ministers

The Roadmap for Nordic Rural Development by Nordregio, the research institute of the Nordic Council of Ministers, identifies the unique challenges and opportunities of Nordic rural areas⁶⁵. A comprehensive approach integrates various policy sectors and promotes integration and ecosystem-based thinking in rural development (cf. broad rural policy). The Nordic framework emphasises a place-based approach that recognises the diversity of rural areas and harnesses local characteristics to promote sustainable and inclusive development. Its key elements include multi-location living and flexible living and working arrangements, genuine stakeholder engagement and participation, and strengthened administrative capacity that improves the ability of local governments to implement effective rural policy.

63 European Commission, 16 July 2025.

64 In Finland, Leader groups have EUR 230 million available under the CAP Strategic Plan for the period 2023–2027 for making rural areas even better. Of this sum, 43% is EU rural funding, 37% comes from the Government, and 20% from municipalities. In addition, projects involve a significant amount of private funding and voluntary work. Leader activities (website) (Rural Network).

65 Salonen 2024.

Rural policy in other countries

An OECD publication describes the rural policies of various member countries alongside the OECD's rural policy principles and framework. National models differ significantly from one another. The administrative structures of each member country, the funding available from the EU (e.g. Finland does not receive funds from the Cohesion Fund), and the priorities of regional and rural development influence how rural policy is implemented. In Austria, for example, a review of rural development objectives is carried out every ten years to ensure coherence in the areas of digitalisation, infrastructure and skills. In Portugal, the emphasis is on promoting inter-regional and cross-sectoral cooperation, tourism policy, incentives for relocation to rural areas, and participatory budgeting at the local level. In Germany, ministries cooperate with the aim of promoting decentralised industry and the green transition through regional development programmes. Chile's recent rural policy framework promotes inter-ministerial cooperation and regional development.

The models of Ireland and Sweden (not covered in the OECD report) are of particular interest from a Finnish perspective. As in Finland, rural proofing plays a central role in both Ireland and Sweden. Like the Finnish model, the Irish model is strategic and comprehensive but also encompasses targeted measures. The Swedish model is policy- and administration-driven, with an emphasis on tasks assigned to specific authorities and their national monitoring.

Ireland

Rural policy implementation is coordinated by the Department of Rural and Community Development and overseen by a parliamentary committee. Policy funding is covered by the budgets of the relevant bodies.

Comprehensive rural policy and rural development are based on the Government's strategy *Our Rural Future* (2021–2025). Its vision is a thriving rural Ireland that is an integral part of national economic, social, cultural and environmental wellbeing and development. The strategy builds on the talent, skills and creativity of people in rural communities, the importance of vibrant and populated rural areas, and the opportunity to create high-quality jobs. The strategy guides investment and policy, and the vision was developed through extensive stakeholder consultation.

The aim is to ensure that government policies recognise and pay attention to the specific characteristics and challenges of rural areas, to anticipate the impacts of policy measures, and to ensure fair outcomes in rural areas. All ministerial departments are required to pay attention to the impacts on rural communities in their policy considerations. Each measure under the strategy has a designated responsible body within public administration.

The Government is committed to ongoing dialogue with people in rural areas. The Department of Rural and Community Development cooperates with higher education institutions and research organisations to support the knowledge needs of rural development. The Department also supports the establishment of a higher education network and engages in cooperation with international organisations.

Sweden

Nationally organised rural policy has been implemented since 2017. It is based on the conclusions of a parliamentary inquiry (SOU 2017:1), a government bill (N2018/04123), and the strategies and guidance issued to the public authorities based on the bill tasks (cf. performance guidance). The Ministry of Rural Affairs and Infrastructure is responsible for matters concerning rural areas, food, natural resource livelihoods, regional development, transport, infrastructure, housing and spatial planning.

The objective is to achieve vibrant rural areas with equal opportunities for business, work, housing and wellbeing, leading to long-term sustainable development throughout the country. This objective has been divided into three sub-objectives, and the government bill (2017/18:179) further specifies the areas of society in which rural policy operates and which it influences. The Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth has a government mandate to monitor a unified rural policy. Rural policy and regional development are coordinated through close cooperation and a national network including 28 different authorities.

Sweden's rural policy and regional development model is being evaluated during 2024–2026. Among other measures, a 2024 report by the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth recommends that the Government should draw up a tangible action plan enabling more structured implementation, clearer monitoring and evaluation; issue clear rural policy mandates and reporting obligations to the authorities; task key authorities with developing strategies for their own participation in rural policy and for including a rural policy perspective in their duties and assessments; and strengthen the monitoring system to enhance rural knowledge and understanding, as well as understanding of the effectiveness of different measures in relation to rural development and objectives.

Sources: OECD 2025a; Government of Ireland; Government Offices of Sweden: [Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth 2024](#); Livskraftiga landsbygder [Vibrant rural areas] (website).

3 Current state and drivers of change in rural areas

Finland is committed to implementing place-based policy and development⁶⁶. Chapter 3 offers an overview of the current state of rural areas and their key drivers of change. The compiled rural knowledge complements and supports other government reports and national situational pictures, strategies and programmes. A more detailed situational picture and a more thorough analysis of the drivers of change will be published as a separate publication.⁶⁷.

Chapter 4 moves from a description of the current state to a vision extending to 2040. The cross-administrative objectives and recommendations supporting the realisation of the vision are presented in Chapter 5. Based on this report and a parliamentary communication, a cross-administrative implementation plan will be drawn up to give tangible form to the recommendations presented.

The continuation of current rural demographic trends and the concentration of population growth only in the largest urban regions are considered to have serious implications for national security of supply, particularly through the economic value chains originating in primary production⁶⁸. These trends affect how the economic and wellbeing potential in rural areas can be used, how rural infrastructure can be maintained, how adaptation to climate change can be carried out, how climate risks can be prepared for, and how the management of cultural environments and landscapes that support biodiversity can be implemented. The effects of demographic trends on housing markets and the failure of those markets affect the conditions for the development of local and regional vitality. Decision-making regarding ownership, land use and the utilisation of natural resources is increasingly taking place far from rural areas, which weakens the relevance of the decisions and reduces local influence, participation and acceptance.

66 OECD 2019a.

67 Husberg et al. 2026 (forthcoming).

68 Lehtonen et al. 2025b.

Demographic trends are reflected in changes in the population's service needs, in the conditions governing mobility, and in the resources available for civic and voluntary activities, upon which many national and strategic objectives are dependent. Digital exclusion, transport and energy poverty, multilocality and the geography of discontent are phenomena that affect rural areas. These are influenced by several societal factors such as the availability and quality of telecommunications connections, the ways in which basic public services are organised, and the availability and support of public transport. People's sense of being able to influence the development of their own living environment has weakened. For social cohesion and the wellbeing of the country as a whole, it matters how rural demographic trends and the impacts affecting rural and archipelago areas are identified and acknowledged in policy planning and implementation, and how the public authorities and administration respond to changing needs.

In Finland and in several other EU and OECD Member States, growing disparities in development within and between regions are becoming increasingly apparent⁶⁹. Research and statistics have long shown that the vitality effects of growing urban regions do not extend to all rural areas⁷⁰. The OECD emphasises the need for place-based policy and development, as well as for place-based policy solutions suited to different operating environments. In Part 1 of the Government Report on the Future, the analysis of the scenario of enhanced cooperation notes that specific policy measures are necessary to address the differentiation of regions, cities and rural areas⁷¹. Such measures are necessary for different types of rural areas: growing urban regions; rural municipalities and small towns with declining population bases; the peripheral areas of regions and wellbeing services counties; the border areas of eastern and northern Finland; and the archipelago areas of southern Finland. The situational picture of rural areas is further elaborated in the following chapters.

69 Eurofound 2023; Monitoring and forecasting regional development in 2024; European Committee of the Regions 2024; European Parliament 2025; OECD 2021a; 2023a; 2024b; 2025a; 2025b.

70 Veneri et al. 2013; Lehtonen et al. 2014; Lehtonen 2015; OECD 2023a.

71 Finnish Government 2025d.

3.1 Demographic trends and population functional capacity

The declining population base of rural areas is challenging the sustainability of the dependency ratio. Positive municipal and regional development scenarios can support favourable development. Children and young people generally thrive and like living in rural areas. The number of older people living alone is increasing. The quality of life in many rural places is higher than in cities, even though health and functional capacity are persistently weaker on average. Multi-location living is bringing new population flows, although the phenomenon is not yet identified in the population statistics. Immigration offers an opportunity, but its realisation requires measures that support attachment to place. People are generally interested in moving to rural areas and the archipelago. The balancing of demographic trends requires that the habitability of rural areas and their capacity to welcome newcomers should be improved.

In rural areas, the number of people aged 15 to 64 is projected to decrease by more than 135,000, or approximately 20 per cent of the current situation, over the coming decade if current trends continue. This scenario is based on Statistics Finland's 2021 population projection and accounts for the fact that the population growth projected in the 2024 forecast is based solely on immigration and, consistent with realised migration patterns, is directed primarily to large cities and the Helsinki Metropolitan Area in particular. The projection is based on the assumption that the demographic trends of recent years' will continue unchanged. It does not account for municipal and regional development scenarios or for possible changes in policy, societal development (crises), investment or local development measures.⁷²

According to the projections, the most significant demographic changes will occur in the peripheral areas of regions, particularly in Central, Eastern and Northern Finland. In terms of the rural economy and the use of natural resources, it is noteworthy that demographic trends explain employment trends in many rural municipalities, especially in the peripheral areas of regions rich in natural resources. Unlike in cities, in many rural areas jobs follow the population. If the current demographic trends continue, the scenario analysis suggests that the working-age population decline in rural heartland areas and sparsely populated rural areas could be accompanied by the loss of more than 43,000 jobs by 2040 (ibid.).

72 Lehtonen et al. 2025b.

The majority of the country is in a phase of ageing societal development⁷³, with rural areas, particularly sparsely populated rural areas and rural heartland areas, leading the way. The dependency ratio, that is the number of people under 15 and over 64 in relation to the working-age population, is considerably higher in rural areas than in the national projection for 2045⁷⁴. In 2024, the demographic dependency ratio stood at nearly 95 dependants per 100 working-age persons in sparsely populated rural areas, and at more than 84 in rural heartland areas⁷⁵ (the figures were nearly 62 for the country as a whole and nearly 56 for the urban areas combined). The projection for 2040 is 109 per cent in sparsely populated rural areas and 95 per cent in rural heartland areas.

The birth rate fell to its lowest recorded level in 2023⁷⁶. The number of children has declined in 257 municipalities over the last 40 years, and the number of those aged between 0 and 14 is projected to decrease by 43,000 by 2040⁷⁷. In sparsely populated rural areas, the gap between the desired number of children (2.74) and the actual number (0.9) appears to be the largest in the country, although this finding cannot be generalised to the national level⁷⁸. The working group preparing the Population Policy Programme (2025) has compiled short- and long-term measures to support people to have children and boost the birth rate⁷⁹.

Between 2012 and 2022, 171 municipalities had no postal code area recording any population growth. Population growth occurred only in inner and outer urban areas⁸⁰. Net immigration has brought population increases to rural municipalities in various parts of Finland, including in the east and north⁸¹. However, the sixfold overrepresentation of people of a foreign background in internal migration and

73 Lehtonen et al. 2025b cf. Aro et al. 2023a; 2023b.

74 For the country as a whole, the projection is 60.1 by 2045. Statistics Finland. Population projection.

75 Maaseutuindikaattorit Taulukko: 142m [Rural development indicators, Table 142m].

76 Statistics Finland. Births 2024.

77 Aro et al. 2023b.

78 Sorsa et al. 2023.

79 Finnish Government 2025a.

80 Lehtonen et al. 2025b.

81 Hanell et al. 2023; Saastamoinen et al. 2024; University of Eastern Finland, Department of Geographical and Historical Studies 2024; Enbuska 2025a.

the concentration of 82 per cent of the positive net migration in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area mean that immigration has not provided solutions to labour availability or business succession challenges in rural areas⁸².

Finland's population growth is determined by immigration, and a large proportion of the internal migration of people of a Finnish background takes place between cities. The foreign-background population and immigration largely explain the phenomenon of urbanisation in Finland: urbanisation is not occurring at the expense of rural residence. In rural areas, the demographic trends are affected by phenomena such as natural negative population change, low birth rates, selective migration, the necessity to move from rural areas to cities to study (e.g. to be eligible for housing supplement for students), the concentration of immigration and the low proportion of people of a foreign background.⁸³

Research shows that the attraction and retention power of rural places is influenced by a sense of belonging and multidimensional attachment to place, its community, values, local cultures, nature and animals⁸⁴. Local cultural heritage and services such as cultural and library services play an important role in strengthening the attraction and retention power. Cultural heritage creates roots and promotes multilocality⁸⁵. These factors influence the choices of immigrants and other population groups such as women, young people, pensioners and return migrants to stay, return or move to rural areas.

A population projection is not a predetermined fate but rather a tool for planning and assessing future development. Projections are based on the assumption that current demographic trends such as declining birth rates, population ageing and negative net migration will continue without significant changes. Then projections alone do not tell the whole story; they are closely linked to rural development objectives and municipal and regional development scenarios, which offer alternative future outlooks. These scenarios help illustrate how demographic trends may change if circumstances or policies change.⁸⁶

82 Hanell et al. 2023; Vihinen et al. 2024b.

83 Aro et al. 2023a; Hanell et al. 2023; Saastamoinen et al. 2024; Lehtonen et al. 2025b.

84 Sotkasiira 2016; Pöllänen 2020; Pöysä 2022; Enbuska 2025a; 2025b; cf. Nordberg 2024; Lassander et al. 2025; Eriksen et al. 2026.

85 Finnish Government 2023a.

86 Hanell et al. 2023; Lehtonen et al. 2025b.

The mobility of the population between different places, regions and countries reflects both present and future population dynamics. The demographic trends and future of rural areas do not represent an unambiguous path of decline. Persistent negative development is not inevitable; instead, the direction of demographic change can be reversed if the attraction and retention power, or pull and hold factors, of rural areas is strengthened. The confidence intervals of population projections indicate that the population of sparsely populated rural areas could be as much as 23 per cent higher than the baseline projection by 2040 if the rural attractiveness grows, and policy measures actively support the realisation of scenarios that are positive in terms of rural vitality. This is a statistical possibility, but as the impact of policy measures is limited and unevenly distributed, such a forecast is unrealistic. Nevertheless, it is possible to balance demographic trends, and this requires a determined and long-term policy that recognises the significance of rural demographic development for comprehensive security, including security of supply, as well as for energy and climate objectives, bioeconomy objectives and regional development. It must also identify and pay attention to the basic conditions for the habitability of rural and archipelago areas (ibid.).

3.1.1 Quality of life

According to research, rural life and everyday living are strongly associated with an experience of a good life⁸⁷, which is built on a connection with nature, local community, neighbourly help, family and friends, and shared activities⁸⁸. The proximity to nature that characterises rural living, as well as people's close relationship with nature, have been shown to be significant for wellbeing⁸⁹.

Satisfaction with one's living environment and perceived quality of life – a good life – are generally at a higher level in rural areas than in urban areas in developed economies⁹⁰. This is noteworthy in a situation in which geographical and urban–rural disparities in socioeconomic and economic development in Finland are significant. Both in Finland and in most economies in Western and Northern Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand, the perceived quality of life is higher in predominantly rural areas. Quality of life has improved most among those who have moved to areas offering a quieter way of life, to smaller localities or to

87 Vihinen et al. 2024a; Kattilakoski et al. 2022a; HYVIS-hanke [HYVIS project] 2020–2021.

88 Nordberg et al. 2023.

89 Yli-Viikari et al. 2016; Bodman 2019; Tyrväinen et al. 2024.

90 Maaseutubarometritutkimukset [Rural barometers]; Hanell et al. 2024.

predominantly rural areas. The quality of life has also improved among those who have moved to cities when the reason has been access to the range of services available in cities⁹¹. The availability and accessibility of services play a central role in the experience of a good life and a safe everyday existence⁹².

In Finland, changes in perceived wellbeing have been moderate, but between 2020 and 2022, a significant deterioration in happiness and life satisfaction occurred in all population groups, particularly among young people⁹³. The experience of loneliness among young adults has grown and is influenced by factors such as feelings of exclusion and difference⁹⁴. The importance of close friendships is central⁹⁵. According to the Youth Barometer, faith in the future has collapsed (*ibid.*). The Futures Barometer also points to worrying changes in how young people view the future, as its findings suggest that young people experience their opportunities for influence as weak at the local level⁹⁶.

Socioeconomic disparities, geographical location, and physical and digital accessibility influence the phenomena of energy and transport poverty⁹⁷. Alongside the digitalisation of basic public services such as social welfare and healthcare services⁹⁸ and other services essential to smooth everyday life, these factors further reinforce digital exclusion and weaken the perceived quality of life, social inclusion and trust in society⁹⁹. Digital exclusion has particular rural characteristics that affect all age groups. Those in vulnerable positions include people who perceive their health as poor, those with low levels of education, those outside the labour market, older people, people with disabilities, immigrants and rural residents but also young people whose digital skills are insufficient in the area of managing public transactions or using services¹⁰⁰.

91 Hanell et al. 2024.

92 Vihinen et al. 2024a.

93 Karvonen et al. (eds.) 2022.

94 Finnish Red Cross 2025.

95 Happonen et al. 2025.

96 Rekola et al. 2025.

97 Vestinen et al. 2025; Lehtonen 2024.

98 See e.g. Vehko et al. 2025.

99 Korhonen et al. 2023; MaaseutuDigi – Digisyrjäytymisen arki maaseuduilla [Digital exclusion in rural areas] project and its webinar on solving the problems underpinning digital poverty.

100 Andersen et al. 2024; Mubarak et al. 2024; Shaban 2024; Wendt-Lucas et al. 2024.

Based on the results of a consultation with children and young people, the majority of children and young people living in rural areas are doing well. One in three young people living in rural areas would also like to live in rural areas in the future. The issues they considered important included improving the condition of the infrastructure, addressing the challenge of long distances, resolving service gaps, and responding to the wishes, needs and opportunities of girls and young women. The findings help elucidate and support observations from earlier research about why long-standing selective migration affects young people and particularly women. Solutions may be found in entrepreneurship, development activities created by young people themselves and recreational opportunities (such as hiking, horse riding and animal-related hobbies), in which young people should be given freedom and shown trust.¹⁰¹

3.1.2 Functional capacity of the population

Physical inactivity has been identified as a significant threat to the functional capacity of the Finnish population, the economy and comprehensive security. The costs of physical inactivity amount to EUR 4.7 billion per year and are reflected in disability pensions, sickness absences, and growing social welfare and healthcare expenditure¹⁰². Good aerobic fitness reduces sickness absences by as much as 67 per cent and improves work ability.

The costs of physical inactivity are 24 per cent higher in rural areas than in cities. Only 32 per cent of children and young people meet current physical activity recommendations, and nearly 40 per cent of children and young people are in such poor physical condition that it poses a risk to their health¹⁰³. Forecasts suggest that by 2040, only two per cent of 50-year-olds will have good aerobic fitness¹⁰⁴.

In rural areas, the morbidity index is 21 per cent higher, and the diabetes index is as much as 42 per cent higher than in cities¹⁰⁵. In northern Finland, the prevalence of multimorbidity is greater in municipalities belonging to sparsely populated rural and rural heartland areas and lower in those categorised as rural

101 Kankaanranta 2025.

102 UKK Institute for Health Promotion Research 2022a; 2022b.

103 Finnish National Agency for Education, 13 December 2023; Ministry of Education and Culture, 11 December 2024.

104 UKK Institute for Health Promotion Research, 17 March 2023; Vasankari et al. 2023.

105 UKK Institute for Health Promotion Research, 16 April 2025.

areas close to urban areas. In western Finland, there are no longer differences in multimorbidity between cities and rural areas close to urban areas, but the prevalence in rural heartland areas is higher than in northern Finland. In southern Finland, multimorbidity is most prevalent in rural heartland municipalities (there are no sparsely populated rural municipalities in the region). In eastern Finland, multimorbidity is the highest in sparsely populated rural and rural heartland areas. Work ability is perceived as better in cities than in rural areas¹⁰⁶. In northern Finland, the work disability index is significantly higher in sparsely populated rural municipalities, higher in rural heartland municipalities, and lower in municipalities belonging to rural areas which are close to urban areas than it is in cities. In western and southern Finland, the work disability index is lowest in cities. In eastern Finland, the work disability index is lowest in rural areas close to urban areas, where it is almost halved compared to the average for sparsely populated rural municipalities (ibid.). In the cities of eastern and northern Finland, as many as 27 per cent of working-age people consider themselves partly or fully unable to work, while this figure is approximately 17 per cent in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area¹⁰⁷.

Regional and intra-regional differences in health and functional capacity are not coincidental but are the result of structural inequality: the uneven distribution of education, services and opportunities for physical activity. The situation is particularly challenging in areas where long distances, more constrained conditions for mobility, increasingly poorer service networks (e.g. the closures of primary and lower secondary education facilities), obstacles in the built environment (limited walking and cycling routes, narrow roadsides, winter maintenance) and limited support networks undermine everyday activity and recreational opportunities. In sparsely populated areas, factors affecting work ability accumulate: lower levels of education, physically more demanding work, poorer health, significantly poorer service networks, gaps in telecommunications coverage, and the phenomena of energy and transport poverty and digital exclusion.¹⁰⁸

Among older people, limitations in their functional capacity, a lack of interest and financial factors have been identified as barriers to physical activity. Yard and garden work, walking and incidental exercise are the most common forms of physical activity. According to the results of the Ministry of Agriculture and

106 Lehtonen et al. 2024; University of Eastern Finland, Department of Geographical and Historical Studies 2024; Husberg et al. 2026 (forthcoming).

107 Saarttila et al. 2024.

108 Vestinen et al. 2025; MaaseutuDigi – Digisyrjäytymisen arki maaseuduilla [Digital exclusion in rural areas] project.

Forestry's youth survey (2022), nearly one in three young people and 34 per cent of those aged between 15 and 19 reported not engaging in any outdoor activities in nature. Hiking and berry picking are popular among women aged between 24 and 29, while fishing is popular among young men. Among children of primary school age, non-participation in hobbies is greater among boys than girls (*ibid.*); for girls, animal-related activities (including horse riding) have been identified as particularly significant¹⁰⁹.

The functional capacity of the population is a prerequisite for the continuity of business activities, civic and voluntary activities, and infrastructure continuity management in rural areas. Between 2014 and 2020, a total of more than 1,680 operational and investment projects with a physical activity theme were funded in Finland through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027).

3.1.3 Multilocal population

Alongside the ageing and decline of the permanent population, a significant parallel phenomenon is the growing number of part-time and multilocal leisure residents and occasional visitors. Multilocality is part of the daily lives of millions of Finnish people, and the associated population flows are primarily directed from cities to rural areas and particularly to rural areas close to urban areas, archipelago areas and sparsely populated rural areas¹¹⁰.

The phenomenon has become more widespread with place-independent work, the increase of leisure time, urbanisation, and developments in transport and communications technology¹¹¹. Multilocal living involves the seasonal nature of seasonal work and leisure-time residence, but it is also related to study, remote care and property ownership¹¹². Finland has between 2.4 and 2.9 million leisure-time residents in rural and archipelago areas, one in three municipalities have more

109 Ministry of Education and Culture 2024a; Kankaanranta 2025.

110 Admiak et al. 2017; Pitkänen et al. 2018; Kotavaara et al. 2020; Lehtonen et al. 2020; Yhdyskuntasuunnittelu-lehti [The Finnish Journal of Urban Studies] 2021; Voutilainen et al. 2021; Airikkala et al. 2022; Rannanpää et al. 2022; Vihinen et al. 2024a; Ministry of the Environment 2024a; Hirvonen et al. 2025.

111 Rannanpää et al. 2022.

112 Pitkänen et al. 2018; Vehkalahti et al. 2021.

second homes than permanently occupied homes, and approximately 85 nights per year (nearly three months) are spent at cottages¹¹³. A government resolution has been drawn up to promote multilocal work, study and living¹¹⁴.

The increase in population mobility is challenging administrative structures, including the definition of municipal residence. Multilocality has significant impacts on the demand for and use of services (such as social welfare and healthcare services, rescue services and infrastructure), as well as on public health and financial flows in both the public and private sectors¹¹⁵. The significant shift during the Covid-19 pandemic from permanent residences to second homes and remote work tangibly demonstrated the importance of the functioning of the rural and archipelago infrastructure, connections and services in a crisis situation¹¹⁶. The constraints of digital infrastructure pose challenges to the realisation of the potential of multilocality in municipalities¹¹⁷. It is critically important to pay attention to the phenomenon of multilocality in the planning, organisation and funding bases of services, particularly in cottage and tourism areas in the archipelago and sparsely populated rural areas¹¹⁸.

Multilocal and part-time rural residents are seen as a resource and can contribute to the organisation of services and the generation of demand¹¹⁹. However, the use of services near second home locations has declined¹²⁰. In cultural services, part-time residents bring new ideas and influences and strengthen local cultural life and activity. Given the scale of the phenomenon, the sustainability of multilocal living has begun to receive research attention in recent years¹²¹.

113 Voutilainen et al. 2021; Myllymäki 2025.

114 Finnish Government 2022d.

115 Lepistö 2020; Kauppinen 2022; Parhiala et al. 2022; Lehtonen et al. 2023a; Lehtonen et al. 2024; Myllymäki 2025.

116 Lehtonen et al. 2021; Kauppinen 2022; Saukkonen et al. 2022; Lyly-Yrjänäinen 2024.

117 Lehtonen et al. 2023a.

118 Lepistö 2020; Parhiala et al. 2020; Kauppinen 2022; Eskelinen et al. 2025.

119 Saukkonen et al. 2022.

120 Myllymäki et al. 2025.

121 Lehtonen et al. 2020.

Table 1. Key demographic indicators by urban–rural classification (Finnish Environment Institute 2020) and by major region: southern, eastern, western and northern Finland

Area type by urban–rural classification/ Statistic (source)	Sparsely populated rural areas	Rural heartland areas Local centres in rural areas	Rural areas close to urban areas	Urban areas *peri-urban areas **inner and outer urban areas	Whole country *combined
Dependency ratio in 2023 (Maaseutu-indikaattorit. Taulukko 143n [Rural development indicators, Table 143n])	90%	82%	70%	57%	62%
Economic dependency ratio (Vihinen et al. 2024)	1.78%	1.58%	1.29%	–	1.32%
Population trends in the 15–64 age group, projected change during 2022–2037 (Lehtonen et al. 2025b)	-33,998	-50,896 (-22,658*)	-28,033	-12,016* 326,361*	178,760*

Area type by urban–rural classification/ Statistic (source)	Sparsely populated rural areas	Rural heartland areas Local centres in rural areas	Rural areas close to urban areas	Urban areas *peri-urban areas **inner and outer urban areas	Whole country *combined
Multimorbidity in 2019 (%) ¹²² (University of Eastern Finland, Department of Geographical and Historical Studies 2024)	Southern Finland – Eastern Finland 52% Western Finland 49% Northern Finland 48%	Southern Finland 49% Eastern Finland 50% Western Finland 47% Northern Finland 44%	Southern Finland 46% Eastern Finland 49% Western Finland 43% Northern Finland 44%	Southern Finland 46% (48%) Eastern Finland 47% (47%) Western Finland 44% (45%) Northern Finland 45% (45%)	–
Work disability in 2019 (%) ¹²³ . (ibid.)	Southern Finland – Eastern Finland 157% Western Finland 133% Northern Finland 137%	Southern Finland 112% Eastern Finland 135% Western Finland 121% Northern Finland 134%	Southern Finland 96% Eastern Finland 103% Western Finland 100% Northern Finland 123%	Southern Finland 97% (105%) Eastern Finland 131% (116%) Western Finland 96% (103%) Northern Finland 143% (117%)	100%

122 The prevalence of multimorbidity was calculated by relating the number of individuals with multiple chronic conditions to the adult population (aged over 18) of each municipality. The prevalence was also age-standardised, enabling a comparison between different areas regardless of the population structure. Calculated from municipal data from the IMPRO research project.

123 The higher the index value, the more prevalent work disability is in the area. The prevalence has been age-standardised. The index value for the country as a whole is 100. Source: Finnish Institute for Welfare and Health. Sotkanet.

3.2 Housing as a driver of rural segregation

People in Finland are interested in living in the countryside and the archipelago, yet the national trend of regional segregation is intensifying. This is influenced by housing price trends and a dysfunctional housing market. Growth is concentrating in the largest expanding urban regions, particularly in the networked metropolitan area of southern Finland. In many rural areas, an oversupply of housing and low prices have led to low collateral values and have created problems for funding renovations. Technically, many properties would be repairable, but the technical repair backlog is turning into an economic one.

Living environments are changing. According to a Ministry of the Environment report examining regional differentiation at the national level¹²⁴, the structural change of rural areas is further intensified by the decline in the value of housing, which is the principal asset of most households, with wide-reaching consequences. In addition to demographic trends, the report looks at 16 other variables. It mainly focuses on typical rural built-up areas with 600 to 30,000 inhabitants that have housing owned and managed by housing companies. According to the report, the housing, housing stock and infrastructure of built-up areas in regions with shrinking populations are increasingly defined by adaptation to a growing amount of vacant housing, underutilisation and seasonality. It is anticipated that many one-family houses intended for permanent occupation may be changed into holiday, second or third homes, and that short-term rentals will become increasingly significant. These changes reflect the adaptation of the housing stock to new demands. The positive rural impacts arising from place-independent remote and hybrid work are concentrated in the networked metropolitan area of southern Finland, where extensive and diverse labour markets have become more accessible than before. In southern Finland, rural living benefits from moderate mobility costs and lower housing investment costs than in cities. Through housing and remote and hybrid work, the interaction between urban and rural areas is expected to intensify. Elsewhere in rural areas, the urban–rural interaction related to housing is characterised more by seasonality and leisure-time residence.

Owner-occupied housing is considerably more common in rural areas than in urban areas. People generally live in owner-occupied homes and detached houses, some of which have already been changed into second, third or holiday homes. The rental housing market has not developed throughout the entire 2000s. Living alone is also becoming more common in rural areas. In 2023 (cf. 2010), the proportion of

124 Ristimäki et al. 2025.

single-person households among all households was 49 per cent (cf. 44%) in local centres in rural areas, 45 per cent (cf. 39%) in sparsely populated rural areas and 42 per cent (cf. 37%) in rural heartland areas¹²⁵. The building stock is older than in the rest of the country, and the need for renovation is growing¹²⁶. Energy labelling does not account well for the diverse energy and heat sources that strengthen preparedness.

The average incomes of households in rural areas have risen to some extent but remain consistently lower than in cities (€43,620 vs €54,697 in 2023). This is particularly the case in local centres in rural areas (€40,872 in 2023) and sparsely populated rural areas (€41,579 in 2023)¹²⁷. A proportionally greater share of social benefits are directed to rural areas than to cities, meaning that changes in benefit systems also have a proportionally stronger impact on benefit recipients living in rural areas. In rural areas, it may prove very difficult in practice to sell an owner-occupied home and move to a cheaper form of housing such as rental housing.

The above report on regional differentiation shows that in many rural built-up areas, housing prices are falling, and new construction and renovation are scarce. Renovation costs are often higher than market prices, and low collateral values affect access to funding. Combined with the increasing oversupply of housing, this trend poses a broad challenge to the housing stock of rural built-up areas and rural living more generally. Local disparities in the housing stock are widening. The price gap between well-maintained properties and those requiring renovation is growing. The built environment of rural areas is increasingly marked by empty, abandoned buildings that cannot afford to be demolished. At the same time, the ageing population requires an accessible housing stock. The report finds that the write-down of property values weakens purchasing power and labour mobility.

The low collateral values of rural housing have wide-reaching effects on the rural economy¹²⁸. The impacts on housing collateral values and bank operations have been raised in a separate report supporting the preparation of this report and in a recent deliberative event concerning the major region of eastern Finland. As demographic trends continue, the ownership of buildings is becoming increasingly remote from their location, and the number of vacant properties is growing. The

125 Living environment information service Liiteri. Source: Statistics Finland.

126 Living environment information service Liiteri. Source: Population Information System/ Digital and Population Data Services Agency.

127 Living environment information service Liiteri. Source: Statistics Finland.

128 Norkio et al. 2024.

decline in building values affects not only the conditions for home renovation and energy efficiency improvements but also the purchase of homes in rural areas and the development of business operations. These are closely linked to the development of housing values and collateral values. A weak housing market makes it more difficult to obtain loans, which weakens the conditions for business development, especially for rural micro, small and medium-sized enterprises. The effect extends to local and regional economic development, further weakening the housing market and the habitability and attractiveness of rural areas.

Migration into rural areas is concentrated particularly in the catchment areas of urban regions with good transport connections and primary lower secondary schools nearby¹²⁹. However, families with children (1 to 3 children) are interested in living in sparsely populated areas, while people living alone are more interested in living in small or medium-sized towns¹³⁰. The time series of the Rural Barometers from 2011 to 2023 consistently shows that a larger proportion of people in Finland would prefer to live in a more rural environment than they actually do (ibid.). According to the 2023 results, 39 per cent of Finns would like to live in rural areas. Work is perceived as the greatest obstacle to the decision to move (ibid.). The availability of services and the receptiveness of local communities are strongly linked to the incentives for moving to rural areas¹³¹. Rural living and its opportunities also interest young people¹³².

Rural areas contain a large number of buildings that are part of Finland's cultural heritage, including old farms, manor houses, schools and churches. These buildings are historically valuable, but they also have wider value for local and regional identity, village landscapes, tourism and entrepreneurship. Their preservation and use may support local and regional vitality but require resources and planned management. The built rural environment can offer opportunities for activities such as creative endeavours and heritage-based entrepreneurship.

The dysfunctional housing market and difficulty in obtaining a mortgage directly affect the opportunities to move to rural areas and away from them. The web of housing challenges encompasses the prevalence of owner-occupied and detached housing, the availability and condition of rental housing, low incomes, the

129 Saastamoinen et al. 2024; cf. Lehtonen 2021.

130 Vihinen et al. 2024a.

131 Lassander et al. 2025.

132 Vihinen et al. 2024a; Kuhmonen et al. 2021; Pöysä 2022; Meijer et al. 2023; Nordregio 2023; Kankaanranta 2025.

functioning of the housing market, the rising costs of transport and energy, debt counselling and changes to service networks. Despite the negative cycle associated with housing, objectives that rely on rural nature, natural resources and economic activity have been envisioned for food supply and security of supply, the food and forest bioeconomy, the energy transition, restoration measures and nature-based wellbeing, for example.

With regard to municipal communities, shrinking populations and the development of municipal vitality have recently been examined through the framework of smart shrinkage¹³³, as it is necessary to complement the hard economic variables (population change, employment trends, the economy) used in vitality assessments with softer factors describing inclusion, community, wellbeing and sustainable development¹³⁴. Smart shrinkage, or smart adaptation, emphasises the simultaneous promotion of vitality and wellbeing¹³⁵, and accordingly, the concept has also been described as systematic long-term place-based adaptation or renewal in a socially, regionally and economically sustainable manner as the population and economic conditions change¹³⁶. This long-term transformation and the sustainable vitality of different types of municipalities in an ageing society can be monitored through an indicator-based analysis of sustainable vitality (smart shrinkage)¹³⁷.

133 Makkonen et al. 2022, Kahila et al. 2022, Kattilakoski et al. 2022.

134 Makkonen et al. 2022.

135 Kahila et al. 2022, Makkonen et al. 2022; OECD 2025a; 2025b; 2025c; 2025d.

136 Kahila et al. 2022.

137 Makkonen et al. 2022.

Municipalities with declining populations can shrink smartly and adapt sustainably

Smart shrinkage does not mean merely adapting to population decline, but above all seeking out and harnessing new sources of vitality in a long-term and sustainable manner.

The sustainable vitality of rural municipalities with shrinking populations has been studied in the SOMA project (Sopeutuvat innovatiiviset maaseudut, Adaptive and Innovative Countryside) at the Spatia Centre for Regional Research of the University of Eastern Finland. The study drew on an extensive statistical dataset (47 variables), municipal strategies and the regional division based on the urban–rural classification. It developed a sustainable vitality indicator combining economic variables (such as demographic trends, employment and municipal finances) with softer factors (such as inclusion, wellbeing and sustainable development). The indicator-based analysis has proved an effective means of identifying municipalities that perform well despite a shrinking population when measuring economic development, vitality and sustainable development in relation to other municipalities of the same rural type.

The findings suggest that municipalities that are ageing and declining in population while remaining sustainably vital have recognised the challenges of demographic change and have taken active and systematic steps to address them. These municipalities have developed innovative solutions such as housing experiments, adaptive reuse of buildings, expansion of digital services, and improvements to remote working opportunities. They have also strengthened resident participation and community. This approach is referred to as smart shrinkage, which means long-term place-based renewal in a socially, regionally and economically sustainable manner.

Based on this research, it is possible to monitor the sustainable vitality (smart shrinkage) of municipalities in rural heartland areas, sparsely populated rural areas and rural areas close to urban areas and to identify local means of adapting to demographic change. This helps to identify and promote the conditions for smart shrinkage at the national level.

Source: Makkonen et al. 2022.

3.3 The significance of civic and voluntary activity

The third sector is concentrated in areas where the need for the services it provides is greatest, and where the relative level of resources is lowest. In rural areas, civic and voluntary activity responds to needs and demand related to the roads, water supply and telecommunications infrastructure, rescue operations and preparedness, grocery trade and multi-service points, support for older people living at home and transport assistance, cultural and sports activities, and community spaces. Demographic trends, scarce resources and growing expectations from the public authorities are challenging the resilience and continuity of civic and voluntary actors in rural areas. This has implications for the wellbeing, sustainable growth and comprehensive security of Finland as a whole.

Civic and voluntary activity forms the foundation of vitality, local resilience¹³⁸, safety¹³⁹, adaptation to climate change¹⁴⁰ and sustainable development¹⁴¹ in rural villages, municipalities and regions. It plays an important role in economic activity and security of supply, as well as in the conditions for multilocality, including through the construction, maintenance and continuity management of infrastructure. In a survey conducted in 2022, only around one in four civic actors felt they had been taken into account in the preparedness work of the authorities¹⁴². The Government Report on Internal Security highlights that the coverage of the public service network and delays in receiving assistance have raised concerns in sparsely populated areas. This highlights the importance of voluntary and contractual security operators in these areas.

In proportion to the population, the highest number of civil society organisations operates in sparsely populated and rural heartland areas¹⁴³. Volunteers maintain many socially essential functions in rural areas, including rescue operations (voluntary and contract fire brigades, and maritime search and rescue)¹⁴⁴, private road maintenance associations, water supply and sewerage (water services

138 Mäenpää et al. 2025.

139 Eskelinen et al. 2025; Kattilakoski et al. 2025.

140 Virtanen 2023.

141 Kattilakoski et al. 2022.

142 Mäenpää et al. 2025.

143 TOTAL – Rural Economic Security and Vitality project.

144 Lepistö 2020; Haake 2022; Mäenpää et al. 2025; Eskelinen et al. 2025.

cooperatives)¹⁴⁵, the construction¹⁴⁶ and maintenance¹⁴⁷ of village networks (village network cooperatives) and executive assistance in large game matters (game management associations)¹⁴⁸. Village associations and village activities strengthen local preparedness and resilience through efforts such as village safety, local community preparedness, and village radio¹⁴⁹. More generally, local civic and voluntary activity covers cultural activities, services supporting older people to live at home and transport services, the maintenance of nature trails and sports facilities, the development and maintenance of community spaces and environmental action¹⁵⁰. Village associations, sports clubs, youth organisations and hunting associations¹⁵¹ offer recreational opportunities across the country and support physical and mental wellbeing. Multilocal part-time rural residents also participate in activities and benefit from services¹⁵².

In rural areas, demographic trends directly affect the organisational capacity and resilience of civic and voluntary activity¹⁵³. Needs and expectations are falling on an increasingly smaller group of working-age people, capable pensioners and active young people. Young people's interest in traditional associational activities has declined, which weakens the renewal of such activities. At the same time, the significance of the fourth sector, including collective voluntary work, neighbourly assistance and network-based activity, is growing, but its organisation requires new structures and forms of support (ibid.). In the 2022 survey mentioned above,

145 Eskelinen et al. 2025; Hallituksen esitys eduskunnalle laiksi vesihuoltolain muuttamisesta (HE 40/2025 vp) [Government proposal to Parliament for an act amending the Water Services Act].

146 Hirvonen et al. 2020.

147 Pimiä 2019.

148 Executive assistance in large game matters (Suurriistavirka-apu, SRVA) is an organisation maintained by game management associations that coordinates assistance provided by hunters to the police in conflicts involving large game. Its operations are based on the Wildlife and Game Administration Act and agreements between the police and game management associations. The participating hunters, dog handlers and hunting associations act as volunteers (Finnish Wildlife Agency).

149 The maaseutuverkosto.fi service compiles information about rural development measures co-funded by the EU (CAP Strategic Plan for 2023–2027), and its register of projects included 17 ongoing projects tagged with the keyword 'village safety' in October 2025 (maaseutuverkosto.fi). One of these projects was the nationwide Kylävara [Village preparedness] project (Finnish Village Movement Association).

150 Kattilakoski et al. (eds.) 2024; Mäenpää et al. 2025.

151 Pellikka et al. 2020.

152 Rantanen 2021; Rannanpää et al. 2022; Kattilakoski et al. 2022.

153 Kumpulainen et al. 2022; Kattilakoski et al. (eds.) 2024.

nearly 80 per cent of respondents considered it difficult to attract new participants, and more than two in three found the recruitment of volunteers challenging. In eastern Finland, the readiness and capability to operate is below average¹⁵⁴. The strengthening of civic activity and community is particularly important in areas of geographical vulnerability, in which the public sector's role and responsibility for cooperation is also critical.

Municipalities play a key role in strengthening democracy and inclusion, maintaining the functional capacity of communities and crisis resilience. In the cultural sector, public services such as library services and mobile libraries create the foundation for civic activity and education. From the perspective of the wellbeing services counties, it is crucial to have gathering and recreational spaces for civic and voluntary activities.

Civic and voluntary activity is directly linked to the local economy, resilience and the strengthening of inclusion and democracy. Participation is not evenly distributed across socioeconomic groups, and civil society organisations are not on an equal footing with one another. Professional and managerial employees are most active in civic and voluntary work, while entrepreneurs and agricultural entrepreneurs hold a high share of responsible roles. The polarisation of civic influence and the exclusion of some groups from active (digital) citizenship threatens the legitimacy of the democratic system. It has been recognised that civil society operators must renew themselves in line with structural changes, identifying the specific characteristics and issues of rural areas, as well as factors that support community resilience such as culture, multilocality and local actors.

The significant economic value of rural civic and voluntary activity is being studied in a national rural research and development project funded in 2025¹⁵⁵. At the national level, the value of voluntary work has been estimated at nearly EUR 3.2 billion per year, equivalent to around 1.3 per cent of gross domestic product¹⁵⁶. In development projects supported by EU rural funding during 2014–2021 (the Rural Development Programme for Mainland Finland), approximately 3.4 million hours of voluntary collective work were performed. Under the terms of the current CAP Strategic Plan (2023–2027), their value would amount to EUR 68–204 million depending on the use of machinery¹⁵⁷. For example, the Leader

154 Mäenpää et al. 2025.

155 TOTAL – Rural Economic Security and Vitality project.

156 Ministry of Justice 2024.

157 CAP Indicators/Voluntary work in rural areas (Natural Resources Institute Finland).

approach is based on local knowledge and partnership: community-led local development. Finland has 53 regional Leader groups, whose boards consist of local residents, communities and public administration representatives. Leader funding amounts to EUR 230 million during the 2023–2027 CAP Strategic Plan period. The leverage effect generated by Leader funding encompasses 3.3 million hours of voluntary collective work (ibid.). The economic significance of these inputs is considerable in areas in which other funding and public resources are limited.

The third sector is facing growing pressures. Funding has decreased particularly for cultural and social welfare and healthcare organisations, and the financial challenges of the municipalities and wellbeing services counties are transferring more responsibility to civil society. The third sector cannot meet the growing demand by relying on voluntary work alone. The organisation, administration and maintenance of physical premises require financial resources. The social economy is seen as part of the solution to the challenges of civic and voluntary activity, as it combines business with the pursuit of community-oriented public benefit¹⁵⁸. Development requires pilot experiments, new models for co-producing services and support for community entrepreneurship. Four key areas of development were identified at regional discussion events¹⁵⁹ held in 2022: bottlenecks in participation, the strengthening of inclusion in municipalities and wellbeing services counties, the promotion of wellbeing and safety through cooperation, and the structural and operational renewal of civic activity¹⁶⁰. The summary of the discussions titled ‘Hyvä elämä maaseudulla’ [Good Life in Rural Areas]¹⁶¹ identifies the following dimensions regarding civic and voluntary activity: community and inclusion, resource challenges and the need for cooperation, the creation of opportunities for young people’s participation, and the renewal of civic activity. Different themes were emphasised in different regions: in Kainuu, the importance of civic and voluntary activity for safety was highlighted; in South Savo, cooperation between leisure residents and local people was seen as a means of strengthening civic and voluntary activity; in Uusimaa, multiculturalism and community were seen as strengths and local associations as enablers of integration; and in Central Finland, civil society was viewed as an important part of comprehensive security and lifelong learning (ibid.).

158 Rinne-Koski et al. 2020; Kattilakoski et al. 2021; European Commission 2021b; European Commission, 13 June 2023; Töyli et al. 2024; Yhteisötalouden ja yhteiskunnallisten yritysten strategia 2025–2029 -hanke [Strategy for the Social Economy and Social Enterprises 2026–2030 – a project] (TEM090:00/2024).

159 The events were organised under a rural policy project promoting the conditions for good life in rural areas (Hyvän elämän edellytysten varmistaminen maaseutualueilla, HYMY) and contributed to the publication by Kattilakoski et al. (eds.) 2024.

160 Kattilakoski et al. (eds.) 2024.

161 Rural Policy Council 2023.

Private roads as a rural phenomenon

Finland's roads are divided into three categories: highways owned or managed by the state, municipal street networks and private roads. Road maintenance associations may be established for the maintenance and administration of roads. In rural areas, demographic trends and the limited resources of individuals and organisations affect the capacity of road maintenance associations to maintain infrastructure that serves national requirements. In rural archipelago areas, a special feature are road maintenance associations that operate private road cable ferries or ferries. These associations are very dependent on support from the central and local government.

Private roads make up a significant part of Finland's road network, particularly in rural areas. They are built and maintained using the resources of landowners. They are critically important for rural areas, urban–rural interaction and national security of supply.

The estimated number of private road users is more than two million. Among others, private roads serve residents, businesses, agriculture and forestry, tourism and the public authorities. They enable rescue operations, economic activity, multilocal living and recreational use of nature.

The estimated total repair backlog for private roads and private road bridges amounts to EUR 1.3 billion. Under the funding programme of the Transport 12 draft plan, the discretionary government grants for private roads would be increased by four million euros annually from 2030 onwards. Municipalities also make decisions on grants for the maintenance of private roads. Support for the construction and improvement of forest roads has also been available under the forestry incentive scheme.

The spatial data from the TIESIT project to secure wood and energy supply (Finnish Forest Centre) provides valuable information for prioritising the use of funds and increasing the activity, competence and cooperation of road maintenance association members.

3.4 State of rural economic structures

Rural areas have a great deal of untapped potential for a sustainable economy. Operations in rural areas affect the conditions for achieving calculated value added targets in fields such as the bioeconomy, food, tourism, agriculture, nature and forestry sectors. Self-employment and entrepreneurship are proportionally more common in rural areas. A shortage of new entrepreneurs and business successors is evident. Labour mobility contributes only partly to solving the labour availability challenge. The renewal of rural economic structures depends on demographic trends and habitability, the strengthening of skills and internationalisation, the improvement of access to funding and its conditions, and the reshaping of conceptions associated with rural entrepreneurship and innovation activities.

In rural areas, demographic trends affect employment trends, the rural economy and more broadly national security of supply¹⁶². There is demand for an updated understanding of rural areas. Research shows that rural areas and localities offer attractive, desirable and credible meanings for future sectors and urban–rural interaction¹⁶³. The ways rural areas function and are perceived also affect the conditions for achieving calculated value added targets in fields such as the bioeconomy, food, agriculture, forest bioeconomy, tourism and nature sectors, as well as the energy, climate and environmental sectors.

Since 2022, the most significant challenges for SME entrepreneurship and rural employers have included rising energy and raw material prices, access to funding and its high cost, elevated operating costs, the availability of skilled labour, business ownership transfers, fluctuations in demand and uncertainty in foreign trade (including uncertain supply chains, growing service exports)¹⁶⁴. Rural businesses have demonstrated strong resilience (i.e. adaptability, diversification and growth orientation) but their vulnerabilities have remained significant (energy, ownership transfers, labour and funding) (ibid.). In rural areas, population trends are manifested in shortages of both employees and entrepreneurs in all sectors¹⁶⁵.

162 Lehtonen et al. 2025b.

163 Lundström et al. 2019; Honkaniemi et al. 2019; Honkaniemi 2023; Maaseutubarometritutkimukset [Rural barometers] 2020 and 2023.

164 Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK) 2022; 2024a; 2024b, 2025; Pk-yritysbareometri kevät ja syksy 2023–2025 [SME barometers, spring and autumn 2023–2025].

165 Vihinen et al. 2024b.

3.4.1 RDI, public procurement and access to funding

The European Commission has noted that digital objectives are not being met¹⁶⁶. The digital divide between rural and urban areas widened between 2020 and 2024. The OECD emphasises the importance of digital accessibility, the rural proofing of national innovation systems, rural–urban connectivity, and the identification of the specific characteristics of rural innovation in national systems¹⁶⁷.

Several OECD countries have experienced weak growth in productivity and a slowdown in innovation, particularly in transformative innovations that enhance productivity¹⁶⁸. According to the OECD, productivity growth has nevertheless remained strong in rural areas outside metropolitan regions, even as urban areas have experienced a slowdown over the last decade¹⁶⁹. In Finland as well, competitiveness has not grown despite the increasing urbanisation¹⁷⁰. The OECD highlights the need to better understand and harness the innovation and growth potential present in rural areas¹⁷¹ and to address the long-standing trend of increasing regional inequality¹⁷². The knowledge economy and RDI activities affect all parts of value chains in rural areas, but their manifestations and connections to the broader development of rural and archipelago areas have been studied only to a limited extent¹⁷³. By 2040, automation, digitalisation and the green transition are expected to cause qualitative changes requiring renewed skills, innovation and investment in the adoption of new technologies and the building of new value chains.

Various sectors have significant potential for value added. In the food sector, the turnover could grow by 30 per cent at best, and value added by 39 per cent, with four fifths of this growth being related to exports¹⁷⁴. The Finnish Bioeconomy Strategy has identified potential for doubling the value added of the bioeconomy

166 European Commission, 16 June 2025.

167 OECD 2022; Marshalian et al. 2023.

168 OECD 2022.

169 OECD 2022; 2023b; cf. Vihinen et al. 2024b.

170 In the IMD World Competitiveness Ranking, which evaluates countries based on four competitiveness factors (economic performance, government efficiency, business efficiency and infrastructure), Finland's ranking was weakest in economic performance, in which Finland was ranked the 50th (IMD 2024).

171 OECD 2022.

172 OECD 2023b.

173 Purhonen (ed.) 2023; Rannanpää et al. 2023; Lehtonen et al. 2023b; Voutilainen et al. 2021.

174 Jansik et al. 2024.

by 2035¹⁷⁵. For the forest sector, calculations have been made of the possibilities of achieving a value added target of EUR 50 billion (cf. €10.9 billion in 2022) by 2035 under various scenarios¹⁷⁶. The Strategic Programme for Circular Economy has set a target of reversing the growth in natural resource consumption and doubling resource productivity and the circular material use rate by 2035¹⁷⁷. An analysis of Finland's material flows indicates that the targets set for halting the growth in natural resource use is achievable while supporting economic wellbeing, provided that circular economy measures are widely adopted in construction, industry, consumption, the energy sector and the food system¹⁷⁸.

These potential areas are strongly linked to skills, RDI activities, and the creation of new products and value chains. In Finland, less than five per cent of the total RDI expenditure was directed to rural municipalities between 1997 and 2017¹⁷⁹. According to a survey concerning government public procurement between 2018 and 2021, 97 per cent was targeted at cities and 75 per cent at Uusimaa¹⁸⁰. The goal of public procurement is not only to improve the efficiency of public spending but also to achieve economic, social and ecological sustainability¹⁸¹. Innovation may also be generated as part of procurement (ibid.). The disparities in regional allocation are noteworthy, given that rural areas account for 35 per cent of all businesses in the country and nearly 20 per cent of companies with a turnover exceeding ten million euros¹⁸². Based on the Confederation of Finnish Industries' rural business survey, 40 per cent of growth-oriented SME employer companies are located in rural areas close to urban areas and 23 per cent in sparsely populated rural areas¹⁸³. The manufacturing industry is the second largest employer in rural areas¹⁸⁴. The poor targeting of total RDI expenditure and public procurement in rural areas directly affects the conditions for renewing the economic structures of rural areas¹⁸⁵. In the growth measures of Finland's CAP Strategic Plan (2023–2027), key sectors include SMEs in the food industry, other industrial enterprises

175 Finnish Government 2022b.

176 Lintunen et al. 2023; Tapio 2024.

177 Finnish Government 2021b.

178 Savolainen et al. 2024.

179 Maaseutuindikaattorit [Rural development indicators]. Source: Statistics Finland

180 Makkonen et al. 2025.

181 Ministry of Finance 2023.

182 Maaseutuindikaattorit [Rural development indicators]. Source: Statistics Finland.

183 Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK) 2024a.

184 Vihinen et al. 2024b.

185 Vihinen et al. 2024b; Makkonen et al. 2025.

and companies operating in the bioeconomy sector. The results of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development have been effective in Finland. For example, 15,000 new jobs were created during 2014–2022, which has an effect on national GDP¹⁸⁶.

Among businesses operating in rural areas, the central focus is on practice-oriented innovation, which translates into service and product innovations and investments that enable businesses to develop and grow. Regional vocational education institutions are important innovation partners. Businesses also cooperate with other educational institutions, and innovation takes place through cooperation between businesses. Vocational education and training institutions play a key role in RDI activities in rural areas and are seen as part of the regional innovation system.¹⁸⁷

In rural areas, access to funding and the ability to obtain loans is affected and weakened by the state of the housing market and the deterioration of housing wealth¹⁸⁸. Statistical analyses suggest that the closure of bank branches is also associated with a decline in the volume of micro-enterprises' long-term loans. In 2022, approximately ten per cent of municipalities in mainland Finland had no bank branch at all, and half of all municipalities had only one. This development has been particularly pronounced since the 2008 financial crisis. While the situation is most critical in eastern Finland, the problem also arose in the deliberative events organised in all major regions during the preparation of this report¹⁸⁹. The development also has an effect on the declining number of companies using public financing instruments, some of which require significant self-financing as a prerequisite. The digitalisation of banking services is considered to have a negative impact on soft knowledge, that is, understanding of local economic activity, rural industries and businesses (ibid.).

Research shows that government public funding is directed to different areas with different emphases: revitalisation funding (such as funding for education, RDI funding, public procurement and government jobs) flows to cities, whereas rural areas receive maintenance support (e.g. social benefits, direct agricultural payments and central government transfers). The impact of maintenance funding

186 Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, 10 February 2025; Vihinen et al. 2025b.

187 Jauhola et al. 2016; Suutari 2019; Purhonen et al. 2023; Suutari 2025; Suutari et al. 2025.

188 Norkio et al. 2024; Ristimäki et al. 2025.

189 Norkio et al. 2025.

on the renewal of structures is limited. Research-based policy recommendations call for place-based and regionally informed policy planning, implementation and monitoring to renew economic structures.¹⁹⁰

3.4.2 Labour availability and skills

According to several barometers and studies, the availability of skilled labour is one of the most important factors constraining business activities¹⁹¹. Availability is linked to the pull and hold factors of places and regions, their habitability and accessibility, the availability of basic public services and funding, the built environment, and cultural and natural environments. It is also connected to the sustainable use of natural resources, the growth of local added value, the wellbeing benefits of nature, the creative industries, and the development of a sustainable food system, tourism and the forest bioeconomy.

The increasing service orientation of the industrial structure and automation are redistributing tasks within occupations, which affects skills requirements and highlights the importance of the supply, availability and accessibility of continuing education and retraining. It is assessed that current and future competence needs include security-of-supply competence across sectoral boundaries, sustainability competence (including product, materials, climate change and biodiversity knowledge), digital skills (including the adoption and use of technology), stronger basic business skills (management, specialist and evaluation competence, and remote and virtual services) and risk management skills¹⁹². A separate comprehensive research-based information package on the labour availability and future needs of rural sectors has been compiled, extending to 2040 and covering region-specific needs¹⁹³. Based on a national evaluation study of higher education in the field of bioeconomy, sustainability competence has already been well incorporated into curricula. Self-assessments suggest that ethical perspectives,

190 Makkonen et al. 2025.

191 Vihinen et al. 2025b; Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK) 2022; 2024a; 2025; [SME barometers 2023–2025].

192 Vihinen et al. 2024b; cf. Owl Group 2024; Finnish National Agency for Education, Competence Foresight Forum (OEF); cf. Virtanen et al. 2023.

193 Vihinen et al. 2024b.

systems thinking and foresight should be increased in teaching. One conclusion of the evaluation study is that future working life will increasingly require multidisciplinary competence¹⁹⁴.

Education levels have risen but remain lower than in cities. The number of people with a higher education qualification has increased. The majority of working-age people have a higher secondary qualification¹⁹⁵. The importance of workplace-based training is growing, and it is important to direct the education of those entering working life towards growing and emerging roles. Questions of retraining were prominent in the deliberative major-region event in northern Finland that supported the preparation of this report, but the issue is known to concern all rural areas based on research¹⁹⁶.

Vocational education institutions are significant anchor institutions with an impact on the development of regional vitality. Vocational education and training is being developed in accordance with the Government Programme. Education aims to meet the training and competence needs of regional populations, businesses and working life, to respond to changes in the labour market, and to take the objectives of regional economic strategies into account¹⁹⁷. The number of educational institutions decreased from 309 to 153, or by half, between 2007 and 2022. Closures have been concentrated particularly in sparsely populated rural areas, where only four institutions remained in 2022. The figure was 32 in rural heartland areas and nine in rural areas close to urban areas. The concentration of vocational education and training into larger units, changes in student numbers, the funding system and the structural change in agriculture are among the factors behind the declining number of institutions¹⁹⁸. The vocational education and training funding system has been reformed, with changes taking effect in 2026.

According to data from early 2025, an ownership transfer was imminent for 22 per cent of rural employer companies (23% in 2024)¹⁹⁹. Finding a successor is critical for entrepreneurs in rural areas who run profitable businesses and are

194 Aro et al. 2024.

195 Living environment information service Liiteri. Source: Statistics Finland.

196 Husberg et al. 2026 (forthcoming).

197 Ministry of Education and Culture website regarding vocational education and training in Finland.

198 Enbuska 2017; Suutari 2019.

199 Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK) 2024; 2025.

considering divesting their business. According to an analysis of rural enterprises based on an ownership transfer barometer, nearly 90 per cent of those planning to divest (n=406) estimated that this would happen by 2028²⁰⁰.

3.4.3 Structural change in agriculture and forestry

As a result of current population trends, productivity requirements are growing significantly in both primary production and processing. In 2022, rural heartland municipalities that were declining rapidly in terms of population and employment were home to more than 16 per cent of all businesses and as many as 43 per cent of farm enterprises and accounted for nearly 44 per cent of agricultural income²⁰¹. At the same time, the rate of the decrease in the number of farms appears to be accelerating, and the role of agriculture in local and regional rural vitality is changing significantly. The total number of farms in 2023 was 42,427²⁰². Structural change is rapid, and the number of farm enterprises operating in 2040 has been estimated at 27,273, with between 1,000 and 1,400 farm enterprises ceasing operations annually²⁰³. The largest farms, meaning the top 20 per cent, already account for nearly 60 per cent of agricultural output (ibid.). Only around 650 farms engaged in further processing in 2020. The development of the value of agricultural production has been positive in western Finland and negative in eastern Finland and Lapland²⁰⁴. Primary production in agriculture and forestry is now the second largest employing sector only in sparsely populated rural areas²⁰⁵. Women account for approximately one third of the paid workforce in agriculture and forestry. It is an important societal question how agriculture and the food sector are connected to the vitality of rural areas, and how activity in rural areas affects the conditions for a sustainable food system and the attractiveness of the food sector. In practice, this concerns how students of agriculture and the food sector view their future: in a survey conducted in autumn 2024, 67 per cent of respondents considered the strengthening of rural vitality to be the most important area of development for securing the food sector²⁰⁶.

200 Joensuu-Salo et al. 2022.

201 Lehtonen et al. 2025b.

202 Latvala et al. 2024.

203 Niemi, 28 May 2024; Natural Resources Institute Finland (Luke), Statistics, Structure of agricultural and horticultural enterprises 2024.

204 Natural Resources Institute Finland (Luke), Taloustohtori.

205 Vihinen et al. 2024b.

206 Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (15 November 2024).

The significance of the peripheral areas of regions is growing when their natural resources and natural environments are taken into account. Nearly 40 per cent of forest biomass is found in rapidly declining sparsely populated rural municipalities, which account for nearly 20 per cent of timber sales proceeds. Finland has more than 580,000 forest owners, whose average age is 61. Uusimaa has the largest number of forest owners (106,892, of whom just under 60 per cent live in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area). North Ostrobothnia has the second largest number (57,592, of whom more than 34 per cent live in Oulu)²⁰⁷. Slightly fewer than 46 per cent (29,050) of forestry and harvesting businesses are located in sparsely populated and rural heartland areas. Forest ownership and activities carried out in forests give tangible form to urban–rural interaction, the interdependence between regions, and the rural impacts of individual forest owners’ decisions (e.g. the effects of clear cutting on landscapes and living environments).

Changes in agriculture and forestry, settlement density, land use, natural resource use and energy production are transforming landscapes that have intrinsic value and significance for the attractiveness of environments, the maintenance of cultural heritage and biodiversity and the promotion of vitality. The management of cultural landscapes requires continuous work, in particular grazing. The decreasing number of livestock farms threatens the preservation of landscapes: the number of dairy farms has been estimated to fall from 4,229 to 1,336 by 2040²⁰⁸. Of the nationally valuable landscape areas (totalling 1.6 million hectares), the largest areas are in sparsely populated rural areas (933,686 ha in 2021), rural areas close to urban areas (307,253 ha) and rural heartland areas (265,758 ha)²⁰⁹. Well-managed cultural landscapes enhance the attractiveness of areas, maintain cultural heritage and enliven the cultural landscape. Well-managed landscapes attract tourism from near and far, and possibilities for recreation in nature have been developed for significant landscape sites. According to the national inventory of recreational use of nature (luonnon virkistyskäytön valtakunnallinen inventointi, LVVI), more than 45 per cent of the population participated in nature-based travel in 2020, with an average of more than seven trips made per person per year.

207 Finnish Forest Centre.

208 Niemi, 28 May 2024.

209 Living environment information service Liiteri. Source: Finnish Environment Institute (Syke).

3.4.4 Resilience of businesses and local economies

In addition to approximately 42,000 farm enterprises, around 70,000 businesses from other sectors operate in rural areas. Multi-sector entrepreneurship has become more common, as has multiple entrepreneurship, in which case the same family owns several businesses²¹⁰. This has been seen as significant in terms of resilience, which was demonstrated in practice during the Covid-19 pandemic. At that time, more than 80 per cent of government business support was directed to cities, yet the impacts of the pandemic were proportionally equal in both cities and rural areas.

The TOTAL project²¹¹ examines the structure and resilience of rural local economies in various crisis situations over a one-year observation period. The case studies cover the impacts of the financial crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Based on resilience calculations, crisis resilience varies significantly between different major regions and municipality types. The index value reflects the resilience of the local economy in relation to the national average (100): the higher the value, the less the economy deteriorated during the crisis (ibid.).

- During the financial crisis (2008–2009), eastern Finland demonstrated the strongest resilience (average 102.8), particularly in the sparsely populated rural (104.8) and regional centre (102.5) municipality types. Cities in western Finland fell clearly below average (95.5).
- During the Covid-19 pandemic (2020–2021), eastern Finland was again the strongest (108.4), particularly in sparsely populated rural (111.7) and rural heartland (107.8) areas. Southern Finland was the weakest (97.4) and the Helsinki Metropolitan Area (85.1) in particular.
- During Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine (2022–2023), northern Finland emerged as the most resilient region (103.7), particularly in the municipality types of rural areas close to urban areas (112.7) and rural heartland areas (105.4). Eastern Finland was the weakest (97.5) during this crisis, especially in urban municipalities (89.8).

The resilience calculations show that crisis resilience is not evenly distributed. It is influenced by both regional and local structural factors, and different crises affect cities and rural areas in different ways.

210 Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK) 2024a.

211 TOTAL – Rural Economic Security and Vitality project.

Table 2. Resilience calculations over a 12-month period from the beginning of the crisis by municipality type following the urban–rural classification and by major region (southern, eastern, western and northern Finland). Source: University of Eastern Finland.

Municipality type by urban–rural classification/ Crisis	Sparsely populated rural areas	Rural heartland areas	Rural areas close to urban areas	Urban areas (inner and outer urban areas and peri-urban areas)
Financial crisis	Southern Finland –	Southern Finland 100%	Southern Finland 99%	Southern Finland 97% (99%)
	Eastern Finland 105%	Eastern Finland 101%	Eastern Finland 101%	Eastern Finland 101% (103%)
	Western Finland 102%	Western Finland 99%	Western Finland 101%	Western Finland 96% (102%)
	Northern Finland 99%	Northern Finland 97%	Northern Finland 101%	Northern Finland 100% (97%)
Covid-19 pandemic	Southern Finland NA	Southern Finland 100%	Southern Finland 99%	Southern Finland 95% (104%)
	Eastern Finland 112%	Eastern Finland 108%	Eastern Finland 98%	Eastern Finland 104% (107%)
	Western Finland 99%	Western Finland 97%	Western Finland 97%	Western Finland 90% (98%)
	Northern Finland 99%	Northern Finland 95%	Northern Finland 102%	Northern Finland 103% (102%)
Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine	Southern Finland NA	Southern Finland 95%	Southern Finland 103%	Southern Finland 101% (103%)
	Eastern Finland 100%	Eastern Finland 99%	Eastern Finland 95%	Eastern Finland 90% (90%)
	Western Finland 98%	Western Finland 96%	Western Finland 107%	Western Finland 103% (106%)
	Northern Finland 101%	Northern Finland 105%	Northern Finland 113%	Northern Finland 102% (99%)

3.4.5 Growing sectors

Future opportunities lie in the knowledge economy, the food and forest bioeconomy, the mining and minerals sector, the circular economy, clean energy production, their new value chains and ecological restoration²¹². OECD, EU, Nordic and national research emphasise the importance of high-speed and high-quality telecommunications connections for realising these potentials – and the disparities between rural and urban areas are notable²¹³. Industry, including the metal and machinery manufacturing industries and the forest industry, are among the most significant employers in rural areas, and many export sector production chains are based on subcontracting carried out in rural areas. Their functioning is also essential for local and regional vitality in the future (ibid.). The work, career and business opportunities associated with them must be made more accessible to women, young people and people of immigrant backgrounds. The Government Report on Industrial Policy highlights that along with global drivers of change, the development of demographic and economic structures has long been contributing to growing regional disparities in Finland. It is important that industrial policy measures recognise and make use of the different strengths and resources of regions. Many sectors of industry are fairly location-specific due to aspects such as the logistics connections, the availability of raw materials, the subcontracting networks or the availability of skilled labour.²¹⁴

The social welfare and healthcare sector is the largest sector in all area categories, and the many service network changes in the public sector are considered to affect women's jobs in particular²¹⁵. In addition to more traditional sectors, future business and employment opportunities are assessed to be available in fields such as climate change adaptation, ecological restoration, nature-based wellbeing service production (e.g. Green Care, the horse industry), tourism, the creative economy and the food sector. Nature-based wellbeing could generate significant added value in terms of Finland's public health and economy, with health-economic benefits estimated at as much as EUR 2.5 billion per year²¹⁶. The local and regional economic impact of tourism is in many places decisive, as rural areas are home to many nature-based recreational opportunities, tourism centres and rural tourism enterprises²¹⁷. The business funding of nearly EUR 300 million from the rural

212 OECD 2022; 2023b; 2025f; Vihinen et al. 2024b; OECD 2019c.

213 E.g. OECD 2025g; Makkonen et al. 2025.

214 Finnish Government 2025e.

215 Vihinen et al. 2024b.

216 Tyrväinen et al. 2024.

217 Pohja-Mykrä et al. 2018; Finnish Government 2022c; Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2025; Laamanen et al. 2024; Nurmi 2024; Pokka et al. 2024; Bergström (ed.) 2025; Bogason et al. 2024; 2025; Visit Finland, Matkailun julkaisut [Publications on tourism] (website).

development programme (2014–2022) under the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, which was primarily targeted at growth companies, helped generate total investments of approximately EUR 1.5 billion in the food sector, tourism and metal industry, along with 15,000 new jobs. An evaluation study of the earlier 2007–2014 funding period showed that companies receiving funding also created jobs in other companies in the area that did not receive funding²¹⁸.

The creative industries offer rural areas new opportunities for diversifying business activities, promoting entrepreneurship and harnessing regional innovation potential. Design, audiovisual production, crafts, cultural heritage and food-related business, tourism and digital content may function in rural areas as livelihoods that are rooted in local resources, scalable and internationally networked. It is essential to make it possible for artists and cultural sector actors to work and live in rural areas. Creative economy and nature sector entrepreneurship may emerge from local stories, landscapes, cultural heritage and community. These can serve as the basis for developing products and services that strengthen the attractiveness and identity of an area. Digital solutions make it possible to distribute creative products and services globally, even when production takes place locally.²¹⁹

Based on statistical analyses, knowledge work has been characterised by concentration in urban areas. At the European level, it is observed that innovative and knowledge-intensive start-ups are increasingly emerging in rural areas (e.g. in robotics and energy) and in some regions at a higher rate than in cities²²⁰. Knowledge work in rural areas differs from that in cities both in volume and structure²²¹. Statistically, knowledge work appears to be highly concentrated, and it is clearly less prevalent in areas distant from the largest cities. Knowledge work and creative work carried out fully or partly in rural settings remains hidden from official statistics²²². According to official statistics, the number of women doing knowledge work did not grow in any rural area between 2007 and 2018 – it in fact declined (*ibid.*). Measures aimed at developing the knowledge economy in rural areas have sought to diversify activities and livelihoods, develop businesses already located in rural areas and renew the rural economic structure. The knowledge economy takes different forms in rural areas: 1) as place-independent knowledge work in research, consulting, software, digital content exports and care work; 2) as digital applications emerging in traditional rural sectors as part of global value chains; and 3) as new

218 Vihinen et al. 2019.

219 Finnish Government 2023a; 2024a; 2025c.

220 European Commission, 29 October 2025; Sasso et al. 2025.

221 Aro et al. 2021; Rannanpää et al. 2023; Vihinen et al. 2023.

222 Aro et al. 2021; Rannanpää et al. 2023.

rural-specific applications that make use of intangible resources such as silence and the sounds of nature. The active participation of public and private operators is important for integrating the benefits of the knowledge economy into rural areas²²³.

In accordance with the EU's REPowerEU Plan and Action Plan for Affordable Energy, energy communities are a central element in implementing the clean energy transition, strengthening energy security and combating energy poverty²²⁴. They enable local operators to participate in energy production, distribution and consumption, but in Finland, their development continues to be constrained by legislative barriers such as the requirement for community members to be physically located on the same property²²⁵. The Letta Report underlines the importance of local energy ecosystems as part of a socially just and sustainable single market; accordingly, the reform of national regulation, the enabling of decentralised and virtual energy communities, and the clarification of taxation and netting are necessary measures to strengthen rural vitality and resilience²²⁶. Agroecological symbiosis is an example of a local food production model which is self-sufficient in terms of nutrients and energy, and in which several farms and businesses form a cooperative ecosystem. The model combines organic farming, bioenergy (biogas, biochar), nutrient recycling and local processing (e.g. a bakery), reducing dependence on external resources and sequestering carbon in the soil²²⁷. The model has not become mainstream in Finland, and it has been noted that farmers have limited room for manoeuvre in the sustainability transition²²⁸.

The significance of mining is most tangibly felt in sparsely populated areas and sparsely populated rural areas in northern and eastern Finland. In these areas in particular, the significance of the Finnish mineral cluster is substantial in terms of the economy and employment. As a result of the clean and digital transitions, the demand for mineral natural resources is expected to grow significantly in the future²²⁹. A central objective of the National Mineral Strategy of Finland (2024) is to increase the national value added of the mineral sector and to raise the degree of processing of minerals extracted in Finland. The mission of the mineral strategy states: 'Sustainable exploitation of our mineral resources supports the Finnish economy and regionally balanced development as well as offers solutions

223 Vihinen et al. 2023; Vihinen et al. 2024b.

224 European Commission 2022; 2025.

225 Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2023.

226 Letta 2024.

227 Helenius et al. 2017; Koppelmäki et al. 2019; 2021; Koppelmäki 2023.

228 Kuhmonen 2023.

229 Kangaspunta et al. 2025.

to European and global challenges. Through our minerals sector and circular economy expertise, we will promote a responsible mineral economy and build new international business.'

3.4.6 Social economy

The European Commission is working to promote the social economy, networks of social economy enterprises, cooperation and synergies. A central aspect of the Commission's objectives and actions is to create the right conditions for social economy enterprises, or social enterprises, to operate and support growth and innovation. There are 2.8 million social enterprises in the EU, representing ten per cent of all EU businesses and employing 6.2 per cent of the EU workforce²³⁰. It is estimated that Finland has at least 5,000 social enterprises²³¹.

Rural areas, rural municipalities and villages have served as significant pilot areas for community-led social economy activities, as they are often areas that are unattractive or dysfunctional from a market perspective, with proportionally fewer resources²³². Research has confirmed that in rural areas, the roots of community-led social entrepreneurship lie in village activities²³³. The development of the social economy ecosystem is considered to require the development of a community entrepreneurship path, including more diverse funding opportunities, as well as the development of the use of social criteria in public procurement²³⁴. In the EU and in Finland, the social economy framework is built in a complex and multi-level manner, seeking to combine business, societal benefit and community.

3.4.7 Young people as makers of the future

European research on young people's visions for the future illuminates the many kinds of opportunities connected to rural areas and rural vitality²³⁵. These are also reflected in the 2021 and 2024 declarations of the national Rural Parliament, whose formulation involved young people from different parts of Finland²³⁶. Children's and

230 European Commission 2021b; EU Social Economy Gateway.

231 EU Social Economy Gateway, Finland; Yhteiskunnalliset yritykset Suomessa [Social Enterprises in Finland] (website).

232 Rinne-Koski et al. 2020.

233 Rinne-Koski et al. 2027; Rinne-Koski et al. 2023.

234 Töyli et al. 2024.

235 Kuhmonen et al. 2021.

236 Rural Parliament 2021; 2024.

young people's experience of and education about their home region is important in bringing out the distinctive features and perspectives of that region, as well as for reflecting on future employment opportunities in one's region²³⁷.

The accessibility and availability of general upper secondary and vocational education and training have a significant impact on life paths and career choices²³⁸. Young people living in rural areas are a population group from whom society requires mobility, even though few are willing to move²³⁹. The housing supplement for students is only available to those who move to the location where they study. Apprenticeship training is associated with good experiences in rural areas²⁴⁰. Young people's reasons for moving, as well as for staying and returning, are varied. They are related to opportunities for study, employment and entrepreneurship, as well as to a sense of belonging and the possibilities and conditions for living life on one's own terms²⁴¹.

Young people's entrepreneurship is strongly connected to their local environment, and the (digital) accessibility of educational opportunities is therefore important, as are place-based youth employment and entrepreneurship services and mobile services²⁴². Hobbies play a significant role in developing young people's entrepreneurial potential; for example, 4H entrepreneurship is well suited to increasing local service entrepreneurship and enhancing the vitality of municipalities²⁴³. The Youth Leader approach, co-financed by the EU, enables business activities and young people's own community-led local development, in which young people themselves decide on funding calls and can apply for support to establish a business²⁴⁴. Children's and young people's interest in business activities has grown²⁴⁵, and many young people, including those living in cities, see rural areas as innovative places for entrepreneurship²⁴⁶.

237 Armila et al. 2016; 2018; Suutari et al. 2021a; Suutari et al. 2021b; Pöysä 2022.

238 Armila et al. 2016; 2018; Vehkalahti et al. 2021; Pukkinen et al. 2021.

239 Armila et al. 2018; 2024; Vehkalahti et al. 2021.

240 Enbuska 2017; Suutari 2019.

241 Akateeminen vartti podcast, 22 November 2021; Vehkalahti et al. 2022; Meijer et al. 2023; Rönnlund et al. 2025; cf. Kuhmonen et al. 2021.

242 Moisala 2020; Pukkinen et al. 2021; Raappana et al. 2024.

243 Raappana et al. 2024.

244 Youth Leader funding is available to young people aged between 13 and 25, and it aims to support collaborative activities and entrepreneurship. For more information, see <https://maaseutu.fi/en/youth-leader/>.

245 Raappana et al. 2022; 4H, 12 March 2024.

246 Vihinen et al. 2024a; cf. Kuhmonen et al. 2021.

Table 3. Key indicators related to the rural economy by urban–rural classification.

Area type by urban–rural classification/ Statistic (source)	Sparsely populated rural areas	Rural heartland areas	Local centres in rural areas	Rural areas close to urban areas	Urban areas (peri-urban areas, inner and outer urban areas)	Whole country (*combined)
Economic dependency ratio (Vihinen et al. 2024)	1.78%	1.58%	–	1.29%		1.32%
Development of the number of jobs during 2021–2040 by municipality category, based on Statistics Finland’s 2021 population projection (ibid.)	-15,420 (-19.5%)	-2,799 (-11.5%)	–	4,197 (2.6%)	231,648 (11.1%)	192,426*
• development in the primary production sector,	-4,397	-10,821	-612	–	-5,424	-21,254*
• development in the processing sector and	-2,927	-16,583	-2,116	–	-52,719	-74,345*
• development in the public services sector (2021–2030)	-1,321	-5,340	402	–	19,232	12,973*
Proportion of entrepreneurs among employed people (Statistics Finland, Employment; Vihinen et al. 2024)	15%	15%	13%	–	9%	10%
Targeting of government public procurement in the area, 2018–2022 (%) (Makkonen et al. 2025)	0%	1%	–	2%	97%	100%
Population aged above 15 with a higher education qualification, 2022 (Maaseutuindikaattorit. C. Elinolot ja hyvinvointi. Koulutus [Rural development indicators. C. Living conditions and wellbeing. Education].	20%	22%	26%	27%	37%	33%
Population aged above 15 without a post-comprehensive level qualification, 2022 (ibid.)	31%	30%	29%	27%	24%	25%
Number of growth companies as a percentage of all growth companies in the country; companies employing at least 3 people and with a growth rate of at least 10% (Maaseutuindikaattorit. B. Talouden rakenne ja toiminta [Rural development indicators. B. Economic structure and activity].)	3.65% (414)	9.36% (1,060)	–	6.65% (754)	80.34% (9,102)	(100%) 11,330

3.5 Changes in service networks and accessibility

Negative demographic trends both drive and result from changes in service networks. An examination of the incentives for moving to rural areas and the archipelago highlights the critical importance of the availability and accessibility of services. The impacts of service network changes are particularly hard felt by women living and working in rural areas and by population groups in vulnerable situations. The prolonged public service network changes, their management, and the ways in which they are implemented are causing uncertainty and concern among rural residents, communities and businesses. Lower trust in public institutions and lower voter turnout reflect a sense of exclusion.

The importance of easy access to basic public services (including basic infrastructure) is indisputable for the habitability and functioning of rural areas and has been extensively researched and surveyed. Changes in service networks, the increasing remoteness of physical service points, the digitalisation of services, and the condition and functionality of infrastructure have direct impacts on the ability of people living in rural areas to access services, manage their affairs, and maintain their functional capacity and social relationships. They also influence the operating conditions of entrepreneurs and the development of livelihoods more broadly. Farm and forest industry entrepreneurs, for example, do not operate in isolation from society but need early childhood education services and primary and lower secondary education for their families, opportunities for physical activity in communal spaces, a well-maintained road network, reliable telecommunications connections, social welfare and healthcare services, advisory services, construction-related services, and grocery trade, pharmacy, postal, mail delivery and basic banking services.

3.5.1 Education and training services

The service network as a whole plays a significant role in whether rural areas are habitable, daily life runs smoothly, and entrepreneurship, the development of business activities and the building of new value chains are possible. It also influences people's access to information, trust and functional capacity.

Decisions concerning changes to basic public service networks are primarily made by municipalities, joint municipal authorities, employment areas, wellbeing services counties, and the transport and communications authorities, with central government playing a key guiding role. The change in school networks serves as an example of the change in basic public service networks: in 2015, Finland had

49 municipalities with one primary school and one lower secondary school and 12 municipalities with a single primary school; by 2024, there were 70 municipalities with one primary school and one lower secondary school, and 17 with a single primary school²⁴⁷. The centralisation of primary and lower secondary education has been shown to have a negative impact on the conditions for rural living and people's willingness to move to rural areas²⁴⁸. It affects children's and young people's physical activity and functional capacity due to long school journeys and increased sitting²⁴⁹. Longer school transport journeys and growing transport costs are challenging the availability and quality²⁵⁰ of primary and lower secondary education and more broadly the realisation of social rights²⁵¹. The accessibility of sports facilities and the role of schools as centres for hobbies and leisure activities play a central role in strengthening the functional capacity of the rural population.

In mainland Finland, the number of pupils in primary and lower secondary education in schools grew by 3.7 per cent between 2010 and 2020, while the number of educational institutions classified as comprehensive schools fell by nearly 24 per cent²⁵². In the coming decade, the significant decline in birth rates in the 2010s will lead to a reduction in the size of school-age cohorts in most areas, and at the local level in rural areas, relocation decisions of individual families are already playing an important role²⁵³. It has been estimated that in nearly 120 municipalities, fewer than one full school class of children is born each year, and that in one in three municipalities, fewer than 20 children will start school in 2029²⁵⁴.

Based on population forecasts, it has been estimated that the number of comprehensive schools will halve by 2040, with reductions of 60 to 70 per cent in Ostrobothnia, Satakunta, Kainuu and South Savo²⁵⁵. In South Karelia, the number of comprehensive schools has fallen the most: by nearly 40 per cent between 2014 and 2024. At the national level, the thinning of the comprehensive school network between 2012 and 2020 has above all affected rural heartland areas and rural

247 Living environment information service Liiteri.

248 Lehtonen 2021; cf. Tantarimäki et al. 2017; Rääkköläinen et al. 2022.

249 UKK Institute for Health Promotion Research 2022a; 2022b; Vasankari et al. 2023.

250 Sjöström et al. 2021, 2024; Tuuva-Hongisto et al. 2016.

251 Armila et al. 2016; Rääkköläinen et al. 2022.

252 Aro et al. 2022.

253 Kyösti et al. 2023.

254 The Association of Finnish Cities and Municipalities 2024.

255 Nyysölä et al. 2020; Kalalahti et al. 2025.

areas close to urban areas²⁵⁶. Between 2011 and 2018, 518 schools were closed in Finland, of which 66 per cent were in rural areas. Municipalities that lost their schools experienced greater population loss in rural areas than those where schools were not closed²⁵⁷. There is a clear connection between the thinning of the school network and population decline, and it is evident that the reduction in the number of school-age children is greater the more significant the school network changes are (ibid., p. 61).

The provision of education has been significantly reduced during this millennium, particularly in eastern and northern Finland. For example, in 2022, there were only four vocational education institutions in sparsely populated rural areas, 32 in rural heartland areas and nine in rural areas close to urban areas, compared with 8, 61 and 11 respectively in 2007²⁵⁸. According to the results of the supplementary sample of the 2017 Youth Barometer, seven per cent of those who had dropped out of upper secondary education cited an excessively long school journey as the reason, and ten per cent cited lack of money. Student dormitories are perceived as an extreme option and are often considered unsafe²⁵⁹.

3.5.2 Social welfare and healthcare services

As a result of the service network changes planned by wellbeing services counties, an estimated 20 per cent of those employed in sparsely populated rural and rural heartland areas may lose their jobs or have their workplace relocated to another area²⁶⁰. The gender segregation of labour markets also affects rural areas, where especially social welfare and healthcare services, education, and accommodation and food services are female-dominated, and industry, construction, agriculture and forestry are male-dominated. Public service network changes by the wellbeing services counties and municipalities therefore have the greatest impact on women living and working in rural areas. Overall, labour market gender segregation is somewhat more pronounced in rural areas than in cities²⁶¹.

256 Aro et al. 2022.

257 Lehtonen 2021.

258 Vihinen et al. 2024b.

259 Pekkarinen et al. (eds.) 2018.

260 Vihinen et al. 2024b.

261 Aro et al. 2021.

Mental health challenges among children and young people in rural areas are addressed through not only social welfare and healthcare measures but also civic and voluntary activity, rural development measures (under the EU Rural Pact Action Plan) and the European Solidarity Corps²⁶². The European Commission's communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health recognises that inequalities related to regional location affect mental health and access to care²⁶³. The National Mental Health Strategy and Programme for Suicide Prevention 2020–2030²⁶⁴ and its associated government resolution are grounded in a comprehensive approach to mental health in society. To achieve the objectives, it is considered necessary to pay attention to the needs of sparsely populated areas so that the availability of psychosocial forms of treatment can be improved. The government resolution recognises EU co-financed rural development measures (CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027) and notes that the 'smart village' concept promotes sustainable wellbeing, prevents segregation and inequality between people while improving integration, security and community spirit for immigrants²⁶⁵. The government resolution also highlights the significance of the measures under the National Forest Strategy 2035 (ibid.).

The World Health Organization (WHO) and the OECD emphasise that regional disparities are avoidable and unjust, and that it is crucial to narrow them to promote societal resilience and economic sustainability. The WHO recommends rural proofing²⁶⁶ in all policy areas, as well as the strengthening of primary healthcare, the development of physical activity infrastructure and the promotion of physical activity.

3.5.3 Cultural services

High-quality cultural, library and liberal adult education services belong to everyone regardless of background, language, location, age or financial resources. In rural areas, cultural and library services are organised and provided by

262 The European Solidarity Corps brings together young Europeans and organisations to build a more equal and just society. Activities eligible for funding include volunteering, young people's own solidarity projects, volunteer teams in priority areas and humanitarian assistance volunteers. For more information, see the website of the Finnish National Agency for Education or the EU Youth Strategy.

263 European Commission 2023.

264 Vormä et al. 2020.

265 Finnish Government 2024b.

266 Wilson 2021.

municipalities in cooperation with the third and private sectors²⁶⁷. Liberal adult education provides a regular income for many arts and culture professionals, alongside which it is possible to work on one's own arts and/or cultural projects. An assessment of the societal impact and accessibility of liberal adult education is being carried out in 2025 and 2026²⁶⁸.

Arts and cultural activities support the local economy, community, wellbeing and psychological resilience²⁶⁹. Public sector operations and funding are central to safeguarding access to cultural and library services in rural areas. Services cannot be secured through civil society organisations alone; professionally managed cultural services are also necessary. Rural areas require funding targeted at the arts and cultural sector, and one example are the special grants for cultural activities in sparsely populated rural areas awarded through the Arts Promotion Centre Finland (Taike) in 2022 and 2023²⁷⁰.

3.5.4 Essential services

The availability and accessibility of essential services such as postal services, newspaper delivery, basic banking services, cash withdrawal, grocery trade and pharmacy services are influenced by banks, operators, electricity companies (including those owned by municipalities), retail sector actors, and the management of land use and community structure. The number of supermarkets can be used to illustrate the change that has taken place: in 2024, Finland had 75 municipalities with a single small supermarket (cf. 43 in 2015) and 42 municipalities with no supermarket at all (cf. 8 municipalities in 2015). Of these 117 municipalities, 79 had at least one larger supermarket, but 70 municipalities had no supermarket, smaller department store or non-specialised shop of any kind. Only a single small supermarket was present in 23 municipalities, and 12 municipalities had both a single small supermarket and a single primary school (cf. 6 in 2015)²⁷¹.

267 Lavapuro et al. 2016.

268 Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) 2025.

269 Finnish Government 2024a.

270 Arts Promotion Centre Finland (Taike) 2023.

271 Living environment information service Liiteri.

In sparsely populated rural, rural heartland and archipelago areas, the availability of grocery trade services, some pharmacy services (access to prescription medicines), cash withdrawal, postal services (parcel services), the home delivery of convenience goods and fuel has been partly secured through the village shop support. In 2025, the support, which was made permanent in 2023, was paid to a total of 123 shops. The number of village shops has fallen considerably in recent decades²⁷².

The joint project between the National Emergency Supply Agency and grocery stores promoting a reliable shop network (Toimintavarma myymäläverkosto, TOIMIVA) also covers fuel distribution. The project's aim is to create a network covering 300 shops across the country so that in exceptional circumstances, the nearest operating shop and fuelling station would be no more than 50 kilometres away in cities and 150 kilometres away in rural areas²⁷³. The village shop support is therefore critical.

In recent years, rural residents' access to information has faced challenges, as legislative changes in postal services and Posti's business decisions have affected newspaper delivery and service timeliness. Annual increases in distribution prices have added particular pressure in sparsely populated areas. Newspaper delivery support secures five-day delivery in areas without commercial early-morning delivery, but the support does not currently cover less frequently published local papers. As part of the reform of the Postal Act (LVM060:00/2020), alternatives to the delivery support in sparsely populated areas were examined. However, it appears that no comprehensive separate review has been carried out that would combine the overall impacts of changes in postal and delivery services, changes affecting local and regional media, digitalisation and Yle's (the public broadcasting company) funding and operations on rural residents', communities' and businesses' access to information.

272 Finnish Food Authority 2025; Hirvonen et al. 2024.

273 National Emergency Supply Agency, 12 January 2024; Finnish Grocery Trade Association 2021.

3.5.5 Essential digital connections

The priority of digital public services is a policy objective that requires a strong electronic identification tool and reliable telecommunications connections. Finland has the EU's largest gap in the availability of modern high-speed telecommunications connections between rural areas and the country as a whole (urban areas)²⁷⁴. Local and intra-regional disparities in development are significant.

According to the data in the European Commission's 2024 country report on Finland, 5G covers 92.5 per cent of households in rural area²⁷⁵. Traficom's Bittimittari service measurements show significant differences in the average download and upload speeds of mobile networks in different area types under the urban–rural classification. In sparsely populated rural areas, rural heartland areas and rural areas close to urban areas, median download speeds of 24–45 Mbit/s (cf. 105–125 Mbit/s in urban areas) and upload speeds of 6–8 Mbit/s (cf. 10–24 Mbit/s in urban areas) were measured between 1 June 2023 and 30 April 2025. Local centres in rural areas are an exception, as median download speeds of 110 Mbit/s and upload speeds of 17 Mbit/s have been measured²⁷⁶.

In 2024, Finland had 34 municipalities in which fixed-network broadband with a download speed of 100 Mbit/s was available to fewer than 30 per cent of households. In slightly fewer than ten municipalities, this availability was below ten per cent of households (cf. 81 per cent of households at the national level). In 2025, rural areas continue to have mobile network coverage gaps, both in and near populated areas. Locally led initiatives based on civic and voluntary activity and supported by EU rural funding have helped to narrow the digital development gaps between rural areas and cities (€53 million has been allocated to broadband construction during the CAP Strategic Plan period of 2023–2027)²⁷⁷. Places that lack the resource of active and capable civic and voluntary actors have fallen behind in development and are unable to harness the potential of digitalisation.²⁷⁸

274 The Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI, 2014–2022); European Commission 2022b.

275 European Commission 2024.

276 European Commission 2024; cf. Traficom 2025a; 2025b.

277 EU:n maaseuturahoituksen laajakaistahankkeet [Information about broad band projects receiving EU rural funding] (Finnish Food Authority).

278 E.g. Hirvonen, et al. 2020; Lehtonen et al. 2023b.

Mobile network coverage is weakest in sparsely populated rural and rural heartland areas. According to Traficom's estimates, approximately 50,000 households are entirely beyond the coverage of fast mobile networks²⁷⁹. The decommissioning of 3G networks and the slow building of optical fibre connections, particularly in rural areas of eastern Finland, are affecting residents' ability to manage daily life smoothly, as well as their sense of safety, use of digital services, and the development of businesses and livelihoods. The availability of mobile and broadband connections has a direct impact on the conditions for using digital services, acting as digital citizens, receiving news and official communications, developing business and place-independent operations, and benefiting from remote work opportunities. This theme has been examined in several research projects²⁸⁰. In Part 1 of the Government Report on the Future (2025), the analysis of the scenario of technology giants notes that communities outside the digital network (so-called offline communities) may emerge if remote areas are not included in development (e.g. through optical fibre connections to rural areas and other forms of social development)²⁸¹.

279 Traficom, 4 October 2024.

280 E.g. Honkaniemi et al. 2016; Antikainen et al. 2017; Kurvinen et al. 2018; Makkonen et al. 2022; Lehtonen et al. 2023b; European Commission 2024; OECD 2025g.

281 Finnish Government 2025d.

Table 4. Availability of telecommunications connections in different types of areas
(Source: Traficom 2025a; 2025b; 4 October 2024)

Area type by urban–rural classification/ Statistic	Sparsely populated rural areas	Rural heartland areas	Local centres in rural areas	Rural areas close to urban areas	Urban areas *peri-urban areas **inner and ***outer urban areas	Whole country (*combined)
Median download speed, Mbit/s. Measured between 1 June 2023 and 30 April 2025.	24 Mbit/s	45 Mbit/s	110 Mbit/s	41 Mbit/s	65 Mbit/s* 124 Mbit/s** 105 Mbit/s***	–
Availability of connections with a download speed of at least 100 Mbit/s to households, 2024	45%	60%	81%	48%	*62% **91– 94%	81%
Availability of optical fibre network to households, 2025	45%	58%	78%	54%	*72% **72– 75%	68%

3.5.6 Physical accessibility of services

In Finland, the physical accessibility to services is generally good, but regional differences are significant and becoming starker. In urban areas, services are near and accessible in various ways, including by foot, whereas in rural and archipelago areas, long travel times and limited transport connections undermine the smooth functioning of daily life and equal access to services. Although digital services offer

solutions, they do not replace services requiring a physical presence and also have broader implications for inclusion, people's sense of trust, administrative practices and sustainable development objectives, as the OECD has underlined²⁸².

In a project to develop the monitoring of service accessibility (Finnish Environment Institute, Syke), data was compiled about the locations and geographical accessibility of services essential to people's daily lives based on the situation in 2023. The study covered grocery stores, educational institutions (comprehensive schools, general upper secondary schools and vocational institutions), health services, pharmacies, libraries and sports facilities. Travel times to different services were analysed for car, public transport and walking. Grocery stores are reachable by car within ten minutes for 75 per cent of the population, while five per cent live more than 30 minutes away²⁸³.

Pharmacies were accessible within ten minutes for 67 per cent of rural residents. Based on the 2023 service network situation, travel times to healthcare service points were already more than 40 minutes in sparsely populated rural areas. Libraries were well accessible: within 30 minutes by car. Public transport does not reach services in rural areas, which regional accessibility analyses also confirm. In sparsely populated rural and archipelago areas, travel times exceeded one hour. In the archipelago, ferry and cable ferry connections significantly affect travel times. The importance of passenger transport services grows with the ageing of the population. The regular monitoring of service accessibility can be used to assess the impacts of service network changes in rural areas, considering the specific characteristics of different area types (population, functional capacity, socioeconomic situation, income levels, mobility conditions and transport connections).

The European Commission has highlighted the principle of the right to stay in one's home region, which is closely linked to the availability and accessibility to basic public and essential services. The Commission has also emphasised the geographical dimension in identifying vulnerability, including in its communication on mental health. Nationally, it has been recognised that low-income older people living alone in detached houses are in a vulnerable position in terms of transport, energy poverty and digital exclusion. This type of vulnerability particularly affects sparsely populated rural areas. The Commission has also highlighted the importance of services of general economic interest (SGEI) and the appropriateness of using the universal service obligation. The social economy has been considered to offer solutions to the organisation and funding of services in rural areas, as it combines business, public benefit and community benefit.

282 OECD 2024a.

283 Heikinheimo et al. 2024.

Table 5. Key service-related indicators by urban–rural classification.

Area type by urban–rural classification/ Statistic (source)	Sparsely populated rural areas	Rural heartland areas	Local centres in rural areas	Rural areas close to urban areas	Urban areas *Peri-urban areas **outer and ***inner urban areas	Whole country (*combined)
Relative proportion of the population able to reach the nearest healthcare service point by car (Heikinheimo et al. 2023)	45% 10–30 min.	35% 10–20 min.	90% 0–10 min.	approx. 55% 10–30 min.	95–100% * ** *** 0–20 min.	–
Relative proportion of 16–18-year-olds able to reach the nearest vocational education institution by car (ibid.)	approx. 48% 30–60 min.	v	approx. 80% 0–20 min.	approx. 62% 20–60 min.	85%* 0–20 min. 98%** 0–20 min. 80% 0–10 min.	–
Relative proportion of the area's population able to reach the nearest pharmacy by car (ibid.)	approx. 25% 20–60 min.	approx. 32% 10–30 min.	approx. 95% 0–10 min.	approx. 45% 10–30 min.	approx. 65%*, 85%**, 99%*** 0–10 min.	–
Relative proportion of the population able to reach the nearest swimming pool by car (ibid.)	65% 30–60 + min.	approx. 55% 20–60 min.	approx. 75% 0–20 min.	approx. 75% 20–60 min.	25%* 20–30 min. 98%** 0–20 min. 100%*** 0–20 min.	–
Proportion of individuals who are well prepared to manage at home in various exceptional circumstances (Sentimentti 10/2023, Ministry of the Interior)	57%	51%	42%	53%	45%* 37%** *	41%
Proportion of people who move around throughout their place of residence at any time of day or night without fear (ibid.)	7%	12%	21%	14%	13%* 27%** *	23%
Participation of fire brigade members (voluntary and contract fire brigade members) in rescue operations (Ministry of the Interior)	92%	89%	52%	81%	44%* 15%** *	46%

A campaign to provide everyone with ID cards – addressing digital exclusion through locally led initiatives

Over the last decade and the current one, solutions to the challenges of service availability and accessibility in rural areas have been sought and implemented with EU co-financing and particularly through rural funding and locally-driven development. Community-led local development (CLLD) has provided an operating model that has responded to issues such as the reduction of service networks, accessibility problems and the lack of digital support services.

The model is underpinned by a broader societal question about the basic conditions for digital citizenship and the combined impacts of service network changes in various sectors on the local level in rural areas.

When a person has no access to a strong electronic identification tool, and their place of residence has no photographic studio, police licensing service point, bank branch or passenger transport services, the use of public services which have been transferred online may be difficult or even impossible. The quality of digital infrastructure, the availability of telecommunications connections and the individual's digital competence also affect the situation. The phenomenon is referred to as digital exclusion, and it has been recognised as having both geographical and socioeconomic dimensions.

The 'Henkkarit kaikille' [ID cards for all] campaign is a social innovation that resulted from community-led local development. It is based on strong civic and voluntary activity and a partnership between the private, public and third sectors. In North Savo, for example, more than 1,700 people in 17 municipalities have been assisted to obtain an identity card and access to a strong electronic identification tool.

The model was developed in North Savo with EU rural funding and has attracted national interest, with similar operating models being developed in North Ostrobothnia, North Karelia, Kainuu and Central Ostrobothnia. The critical question is: through what guidance and funding can equal conditions for digital citizenship and the use of public services be secured for everyone?

A second example of a locally and regionally driven service solution is the Mallu mobile unit in South Karelia. This was a mobile social welfare and healthcare service unit that flexibly met the service needs of sparsely populated areas from the beginning of the 2010s to September 2025. The Mallu unit demonstrated how mobile services can help address the challenges of organising public services in dialogue with village actors in a way that responds to the real daily needs of residents. The Mallu unit ceased operations in September 2025 and has been replaced by a reception point at a single fixed location.

Sources: Local Action Group Mansikka; Wellbeing Services County of South Karelia.

3.6 Triple crisis from a rural perspective

The triple crisis is reflected in rural areas at multiple levels: through the environment, livelihoods, culture, security and infrastructure. Rural areas offer important spaces for solving climate change, biodiversity loss and water pollution. The capacity to respond to these challenges depends on demographic and economic structures, skills, labour availability, entrepreneurship, financial resources and access to funding. Effective impact requires place-based policy measures, investment, local expertise and community.

The triple crisis refers to the combination of ecological crises resulting from climate change, biodiversity loss and the deterioration of water quality. Together, these three mutually reinforcing phenomena challenge the functional capacity of rural areas and the sustainability of ecosystem services. Rural areas have great potential for solutions, but the realisation of this potential requires consistent policy and equal processes that recognise rural operators and operating environments.

Climate change is the first dimension of the triple crisis. Its mitigation and adaptation are central goals in both EU and Finnish climate policy. Finland aims to achieve carbon neutrality by 2035²⁸⁴. The Climate Act (423/2022) emphasises fairness and sustainable development. However, according to the Rural Barometer,

284 Climate Act (423/2022).

more than 70 per cent of citizens feel that climate measures do not treat rural and urban areas equally, and that climate measures make mobility more difficult in rural areas²⁸⁵. Climate change causes concern among rural populations, but even greater concern is felt about personal coping, health, uncertainty about the future and the atmosphere in society²⁸⁶. Place-based approaches, inclusion, local acceptability and fairness are key to the successful resolution of the triple crisis and the related sustainability transition and bio- and circular economy²⁸⁷.

The impacts of climate change fall on the natural resource sector in particular, and adaptation to these impacts takes place largely in rural areas. Regional characteristics and vulnerabilities have been examined as part of the preparation of the National Climate Change Adaptation Plan until 2030²⁸⁸. Flood risks are expected to grow particularly in Ostrobothnia, Satakunta, Kymenlaakso and Lapland. Agriculture must prepare for drought, waterlogging, alien species and an increase in plant diseases. In forestry, the challenges include insect pests, storms, forest fires, snow damage and the absence of soil frost. In rural areas, climate change affects the infrastructure that serves large areas and wide-ranging purposes. The wear of road networks, frost heaving, erosion and growing maintenance costs undermine the smooth flow and safety of traffic, which is also reflected in rising maintenance costs for private roads (ibid.). Rail transport is particularly vulnerable to extreme weather events²⁸⁹. The vulnerability of Sámi livelihoods such as reindeer herding and fishing is more pronounced as a result of the impacts of climate change.

The decline in biodiversity, or biodiversity loss, is the second dimension of the triple crisis. Internationally, the target is to halt biodiversity loss by 2030 and progress towards nature-positive development. In Finland, this objective is being advanced through the EU biodiversity strategy, the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and national biodiversity policy²⁹⁰. The aim of restoration is to improve the

285 Vihinen et al. 2024a.

286 Kankare et al. 2023.

287 The OECD (2025e) calls for more place-based climate policy and locally driven initiatives to implement the sustainability transition; cf. Alue ja Ympäristö [Region & Environment] 2023; Kivimaa et al. 2023; Leino et al. 2023; 2024; Lyytimäki et al. 2023; Korhonen (ed.) 2025.

288 Virtanen et al. 2023.

289 Kantala et al. 2024.

290 Biodiversity and nature protection (website) (Ministry of the Environment); Kansallinen luonnon monimuotoisuuden strategia ja toimintaohjelma vuoteen 2035 – säädösvalmistelu ja kehittämishanke [National Biodiversity Strategy and an action plan extending to 2035 – legislative preparation and project] (YM039:00/2021).

state of nature in various environments, both in and outside protected areas. This requires various approaches to strengthening natural values in environments such as mires, forests, agricultural environments, fells, shores, marine areas and inland waters. Measures are targeted at existing protected areas and state-owned land, but for different habitat types to be adequately covered, action is also required on privately owned land and water areas. Areas in which the state of nature is being improved can remain in use. The majority of nature restoration happens in rural areas and is connected to the water cycle. Depending on the area, the measures have different rural impacts. Generally, improvements to the state of nature are expected to increase recreational opportunities and strengthen nature's capacity to withstand increasingly common extreme weather events, which should also improve societal resilience. The opening of dammed watercourses may both improve fish stocks and alter water levels, affecting shoreline habitation. Machinery contractors are required not only for the creation of restoration areas but also for their maintenance, including peatland rewetting and blocking drainage ditches, while work in peat extraction and forest harvesting may decline or change as forest management practices change. As part of national preparation²⁹¹, a comprehensive societal rural proofing was carried out at the Natural Resources Institute Finland (Luke) in autumn 2025 as a sub-project of the TalousEnna project.

The METSO, SOTKA and Helmi²⁹² programmes have been successful. Appropriation levels have limited participation. In Finland, around 30,000 hectares of traditional biotopes are under grazing and other management. The meadows included in them require continuous management. The target of the Helmi Habitats Programme, approved by the Government, is 52,000 hectares. The CAP Strategic Plan (2023–2027) emphasises environment payments, which include the management of traditional biotopes and natural pasturelands. Based on the situation in autumn 2025, its target is 38,000 hectares of managed traditional biotopes and natural pasturelands by 2027. The first data for the indicator describing the proportion of species and habitat types associated with agriculture became available in 2025²⁹³.

Air, water and soil pollution is the third dimension of the triple crisis. The ecological status of surface waters ranges from excellent to poor, and climate change may further deteriorate the condition of water bodies. Those working in agriculture,

291 Kansallisen ennallistamissuunnitelman laatiminen -säädösvalmistelu ja kehittämishanke [Preparation of the national restoration plan – legislative preparation and project] (YM055:00/2024).

292 Finnish Government 2021b.

293 Natural Resources Institute Finland: Statistics, Indicators, Finland's CAP impact indicators.

forestry, water management and fisheries bear responsibility for maintaining the state of water bodies and groundwater and ensuring the sustainable use of water resources. Groundwater areas are unevenly distributed across the country, making their protection critical. The CAP Strategic Plan and the Ahti programme aim to improve water quality, particularly in the catchment area of the Archipelago Sea²⁹⁴. With the exception of the Helsinki Metropolitan Area and the west coast, Finland's household and food sector water supply is primarily based on groundwater and artificial groundwater.²⁹⁵ The NOUSU programme has improved the living conditions of migratory fish and sought to restore the natural reproduction of migratory fish populations in Finnish watercourses²⁹⁶. The European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF) promotes sustainable fishing and aquaculture, the EU's common fisheries policy, and the increase of regional employment and cohesion. Ten fishery Leader groups (local fishery action groups) operate in mainland Finland, developing sustainable fishery livelihoods through locally led action²⁹⁷. The state of water bodies has significant impacts on the pull and hold factors, economy and safety of rural areas.

3.6.1 Energy transition

The energy transition aims to achieve a carbon-neutral society, mitigate climate change and advance the sustainability transition. In addition to climate change, economic and geopolitical changes and the energy crisis have highlighted the need for an energy transition²⁹⁸. From an energy self-sufficiency perspective, it is beneficial that energy production can be geographically dispersed and distributed between different technologies, avoiding dependence on a single or small number of sources. Energy transition measures are broadly directed to rural areas, particularly to sparsely populated rural areas in northern and western Finland, while consumption is concentrated in southern Finland.

294 Ministry of the Environment 2025.

295 Pohjavedet [Groundwater] (website) (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry).

296 Vaelluskalakantojen elvyttämisohjelma NOUSU [Programme to restore migratory fish stocks, NOUSU] (website) (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry).

297 Euroopan meri-, kalatalous- ja vesiviljelyrahasto (EMKVR) [Information about the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF)].

298 Huttunen et al. 2024b.

The rural impacts of the energy transition are witnessed in practice in land use²⁹⁹. Wind power is the most affordable form of electricity production in new power plants in Finland. Its construction effects are seen in the land use and diverse utilisation of rural areas, access to nature and landscapes³⁰⁰. For solar power, a significant number of industrial-scale plants are planned or under construction in Finland. Solar power plants are often located on former peat extraction sites, arable land and forested areas, also affecting the land use and landscapes³⁰¹. Connection costs to the electricity grid are a significant factor in location decisions. Research is emerging on the specific rural impacts of solar power construction³⁰². Untapped solar power potential has been identified on the roofs of rural buildings (residential buildings, public buildings, industrial properties and grocery stores),³⁰³ and its utilisation is being promoted³⁰⁴. Biogas production is still limited in Finland, with current production at just under 1 TWh annually. The technological and economic potential is as much as 10–11 TWh³⁰⁵. Biogas is a flexible, renewable, domestic energy source whose production advances climate objectives, nutrient recycling, water protection, and local and regional economies³⁰⁶.

Finland must implement the decentralised energy communities system required under EU electricity market legislation by July 2026. Local energy communities can strengthen the participation of rural operators in the energy transition. All types of energy communities are possible in heat production. Legislation also allows decentralised energy communities in electricity production in which there is a single seller. In autumn 2022, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment established a working group tasked with examining the further development needs

299 Alue ja Ympäristö [Region & Environment] 2023; Lund 2023; Huttunen et al. 2024; Land Use Justice for Green Transitions (JUSTGREEN) project.

300 Ministry of the Environment 2024b; Sorvali et al. 2023.

301 Muhonen (ed.) 2024.

302 AuvoRa-tutkimus- ja kehittämishanke [Rural impacts of solar power construction – research and development project].

303 Haapaniemi et al. 2016; Lassila et al. 2016.

304 Aurinkovoimarakentaminen [Construction of solar power] (website) (Ministry of the Environment).

305 Statistics Finland 2025; Marttinen et al. 2015; Hyppänen et al. 2022.

306 Marttinen et al. 2015; Helenius et al. 2017; Koppelmäki 2022; Pääkkönen et al. 2019; Winqvist 2019; 2021; Alm 2022; Ministry of the Environment 2022; Finnish Biocycle and Biogas Association 2025.

of energy community regulation. The working group recommended making it easier for decentralised energy communities and active customers to share energy across the whole of Finland³⁰⁷.

The energy transition and electrification rely on mineral resources found in rural areas. Mining takes place particularly in the sparsely populated areas of rural regions and may have significant local and regional impacts. The new Mining Act strengthens municipal decision-making authority regarding the approval of mining operations, and since 2024, approximately 60 per cent of mine tax revenues have been directed to municipalities³⁰⁸. The importance of rural proofing is well recognised in the National Mineral Strategy³⁰⁹.

It is necessary to create visions for the role of rural areas in a carbon-neutral and sustainable society: there is a risk that rural populations and communities will remain passive instruments in national measures requiring large amounts of land³¹⁰. The findings of the OECD, Nordregio, and national rural research and development projects emphasise that environmental and social justice are closely connected to the success of the rapidly advancing energy transition and to the conditions for implementing climate and environmental measures³¹¹. Research shows that the dimensions and procedures of environmental justice and broader fairness help ensure that the transition takes place equally, paying attention to the needs, resources and opportunities of all parts of society – meaning all places, regions and communities. These dimensions include distributive, procedural, recognitional, restorative and anticipatory justice³¹². The participation and acceptance of local communities are seen as critical to the resolution of the triple crisis and the success of the energy transition.

307 Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2023.

308 Mining Act 621/2011; Laki kaivoslain muuttamisesta [Act amending the Mining Act] 505/2023; Act on a Mined Minerals Tax 314/2023.

309 Kangaspunta et al. 2025.

310 Kuhmonen et al. 2022; Salonen et al. 2023.

311 OECD 2021b; Salonen et al. 2023; Leino et al. 2023; Kivimaa 2023; Kuhmonen 2023; Lund 2023; Alue ja Ympäristö [Region & Environment] 2023; Huttunen 2024; Towards a Clean Energy System – REPower-CEST project; Land Use Justice for Green Transitions (JUSTGREEN) project.

312 Lyytimäki et al. 2023.

3.7 Rural vitality within the framework of comprehensive security

In rural areas, people, communities and businesses form an important foundation of the country's comprehensive security. Regional resilience is strengthened by individuals, resilient businesses and municipalities striving for sustainable vitality, which together form communities that maintain structures and infrastructure. Changes in rural demographic trends, civic and voluntary activity, economic structures, infrastructure and service networks affect the vital functions on which comprehensive security rests.

The Security Strategy for Society recognises that security threats have become more diverse and are difficult to anticipate³¹³. In the strategy, comprehensive security is depicted in the shape of a diamond that describes society's vital functions and the interconnections and strong interdependences between them: psychological resilience; leadership; international and EU activities; defence capability; internal security; the economy, infrastructure, security of supply; and the functional capacity of the population and services. In the Security Strategy for Society operating model, society's vital functions are managed through cooperation between the authorities, businesses, organisations and citizens at the local (municipalities), regional (regions and wellbeing services counties), national and international levels. Following the update of the strategy, psychological resilience is highlighted, and the strategy emphasises the importance of individuals as key actors in societal security. According to the Government Report on Internal Security, mutual trust between individuals and trust in the authorities and the functioning of society's services in disruption situations are central factors in psychological resilience.

The interconnections and multiplier effects of the Security Strategy for Society's vital functions take different forms in rural and urban areas. In cities, the presence of the public authorities and the private sector is considerably stronger than in rural areas. In rural and archipelago areas, the focus is on permanent residents, their businesses and the communities consisting of both permanent and multilocal residents. In rural areas, the strength of individuals as part of their local community is emphasised, as is a high level of preparedness and the many roles that residents play in individual and community everyday life (e.g. a farm entrepreneur who is also a fire brigade member, a private road owner, a water services cooperative shareholder, a hunter, a project actor, a village association board member and a parent). It is important that society looks after the individual's capacity to cope and ensures the conditions for acting in support of shared security in various

313 Finnish Government 2025b.

areas, particularly in sparsely populated rural areas, the archipelago, border areas and cottage regions. The strength of rural areas lies in active civic and voluntary activity and a resilient business culture. Municipalities and regions succeeding in sustainable vitality are also a strength.³¹⁴

In rural areas, communities and civic actors have long maintained many societal functions that are handled by the public or private sector in cities. According to research, community-led activity creates strong baseline resilience, which supports crisis resilience and the ability to cope with disruptions³¹⁵. Operating conditions are influenced by factors such as basic and project funding for civic activity, access to communal spaces, and the availability and accessibility of basic public and essential services. Research indicates that the deterioration of operating conditions affects the experience of smooth everyday functioning and safety and erodes trust.

In rural areas, the density of civil society organisations in relation to the population is high, particularly in areas with a weaker socioeconomic status (sparsely populated rural and rural heartland areas). This reflects the strong tradition and potential of civic activity that is also drawn on in building comprehensive security through the maintenance and development of village safety, local preparedness, village radios and village shop activities, for example. These models have not yet been more broadly recognised at the national level but are increasingly acknowledged at the local municipal and regional levels³¹⁶.

Voluntary contract fire brigade members provide important safety services particularly in rural areas, where they carry out as much as 90 per cent of rescue service tasks. The role of fire brigade associations also extends to youth work, safety education and local community building, but their operations suffer from resource and staffing shortages³¹⁷.

The Finnish Border Guard supports the safety of sparsely populated border regions and the archipelago through first response activities and emergency medical services (*ibid.*). The presence of the police in rural areas is considered important, but the concentration of resources in cities weakens accessibility. The Central and Eastern Finland Police Departments have adopted a multi-role policing model in sparsely populated areas, in which general duty officers handle criminal investigation alongside traffic supervision and other tasks and serve as

314 Rural Policy Council et al. 2023.

315 Mäenpää et al. 2025.

316 Cf. the 72 hours concept (National Emergency Supply Agency), which is also recognised in the Agency's strategy for 2024–2027.

317 Eskelinen et al. 2025.

liaison officers to municipalities and stakeholders³¹⁸. It has been noted that police vehicle fleets have not been developed to meet the specific needs of sparsely populated areas, for example (ibid.). In 2024, the police harmonised its operating methods as a conclusion of the Harvaturva project. In October 2024, the National Police Board introduced a procedure deviating from the general police dispatch instructions for 26 municipalities in border areas between police districts, with the Emergency Response Centre Authority given separate instructions for these selected municipalities in sparsely populated areas. The operating model always offers emergency response centre dispatchers the patrol that can reach the scene most quickly, regardless of which police unit the patrol belongs to, or which area it is patrolling. In the coming years, police response times will be monitored with particular attention in these municipalities, and operations will be developed in accordance with feedback³¹⁹. The Harvaturva project has demonstrated that increasing police visibility improves people's sense of security³²⁰.

The securing of the food supply is part of security of supply³²¹ and more broadly of comprehensive security. Its continuity and that of the entire food sector depends on the vitality and habitability of rural areas. Adaptation to climate change, the availability of seasonal labour and the EU's common agricultural policy (CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027) directly affect self-sufficiency and security of supply³²². The regional implementation of security of supply is based on cooperation between the authorities, businesses and the third sector. Rural operators are central to the maintenance of services and infrastructure that are critical for security of supply, particularly in prolonged incidents.³²³

Abandoned farms and buildings pose a safety risk. From the perspective of comprehensive defence, rural infrastructure and its regulation must be planned in a way that also supports the requirements of military defence. The security of supply system supports this objective.

318 Kietäväinen et al. 2022.

319 National Police Board 2025.

320 Lepistö et al. 2020; Eskelinen et al. 2025.

321 Finnish Government 2022d; 2024c.

322 EU:n yhteinen maatalouspolitiikka [Common agricultural policy (CAP)] (website) (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry).

323 CAP-suunnitelma 2023–2027 [CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027]; Forsman-Hugg et al. 2025; TOTAL – Rural Economic Security and Vitality project.

Regional community-led projects and funding from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027) are strengthening preparedness and safety activities at the local level in different parts of Finland. The challenges of rural areas, including demographic trends, the increasing remoteness of services, gaps in telecommunications coverage and more constrained mobility conditions, highlight the need to develop local preparedness. Independent preparedness training and the dissemination of information are central measures. Cultural activities can support psychological resilience and a sense of community. Interaction between the authorities and landowners is important in the performance of official duties – for example, in reindeer herding areas.

Military defence rests on the support of all sectors of society and people's strong willingness to defend their country. The vitality, community and local actors in rural areas play a decisive role in building a sustainable and resilient society. In terms of comprehensive defence, it is important that preparedness for emergency conditions proactively pays attention to the operating conditions of military defence in normal conditions in areas such as legislative drafting, infrastructure development, policy measures and international cooperation. For example, the transport network currently involves military mobility and dual-use requirements throughout Finland, and particularly in northern Finland. The security of supply system is a key tool for supporting the objectives of comprehensive defence.

The most serious threat facing Finnish society is war, which underscores the importance of the defence capability. The defence administration has examined comprehensive defence in relation to the changed security environment, and the planning of the necessary follow-up measures is under way. Military defence rests on the support of all sectors of society and people's strong willingness to defend their country. Comprehensive defence includes all national and international military and civilian activities that secure the conditions for military national defence in all security situations. The Government's Defence Report³²⁴ sets out the development of Finland's defence as part of NATO. Finland's defence is based on a strong national defence capability as part of the Alliance's collective deterrence and defence. Defence is developed in a long-term, systematic and comprehensive manner to meet the growing demands of the operating environment. The development of the defence system is based on an assessment of possible military threats directed at Finland. Military defence rests on the support of all sectors of society and people's strong willingness to defend their country.

324 Finnish Government 2024d.

Developing village safety and preparedness locally, regionally and nationally

The Rescue Act obligates every citizen to engage in independent preparedness. Village safety supports this obligation and strengthens a sense of security that arises from well-functioning daily life, trust and community support. The village preparedness (Kylävara) concept is being developed into a national model, and its integration into municipal readiness and safety planning is important. The initiative for cooperation lies with the authorities, but local communities are at the heart of its implementation.

Village safety is an operating model developed by local communities that strengthens everyday safety and preparedness for incidents and crises. It has evolved in different parts of Finland based on villages' specific needs, and at its core principles are community, local knowledge and neighbourly assistance. Village safety activities are already extensive and are being developed through efforts such as the Kylävara [Village preparedness] project supported by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, which brings together local resources and cooperation with the authorities.

Village safety addresses tangible risks such as power outages, icy roads, telecommunications failures, medical emergencies and domestic violence. Safety activities may be sparked by a local tragedy, but their aim is to build safe life in villages now and in the future. The ageing population brings its own challenges, but local village networks provide support and security.

Village safety activities and the Kylävara concept are examples of how local communities can organise themselves and prepare for disruptions. Volunteers played a key role during the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, helping older people with errands and supporting everyday coping. Such activities not only increase safety but also strengthen community cohesion and wellbeing.

Village safety encompasses preparedness learning, training and the creation of shared plans. For example, in North Karelia, the rescue department has trained villagers in preparedness for natural disasters, and rescue groups mobilised to assist older people during the Covid-19 pandemic. Well-functioning telecommunications networks and roads are central pillars of village safety.

Sources: Kylämme.fi – kyläsuunnitelma verkossa [Online village plans]; Kylävara [Village preparedness] project.

3.8 Observations on interdependence and the geography of discontent

Finland is one of the most rural countries in the EU and the OECD. At the same time, it is urbanised and exceptionally characterised by multi-local habitation. This combination makes it unique. Urban–rural interaction is bidirectional and fundamentally interdependent.

Cities, rural areas and the archipelago form functionally interconnected broader regions. Rural areas produce food, renewable energy and raw materials required in the energy transition, the bioeconomy, and the technology and chemical industries³²⁵. Urban areas (inner and outer urban areas and peri-urban areas) offer markets, services and jobs and make use of the natural resources and land of rural areas in construction, renewable energy production, the electrification of society, meeting food and fresh water needs, and as places for recreation. Rural areas close to urban areas serve as residential areas for people commuting to urban areas and provide space for housing and recreation. Rural heartland areas produce a diverse range of goods. Local centres in rural areas (centres with fewer than 15,000 inhabitants) serve as important service hubs in areas where the journey to a larger centre is too long or difficult for daily mobility. Sparsely populated rural and archipelago areas are sources of natural resources, ecosystem services, carbon sinks, recreation and nature-based wellbeing. In rural areas close to urban

325 See also Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners (MTK) 2024.

areas, rural heartland areas and sparsely populated rural areas, business activities are predominantly run by micro, small and medium-sized enterprises and are connected to broader value chains that benefit the whole country.

Despite this interdependence, international and national research identifies a phenomenon known as the geography of discontent³²⁶. The phenomenon chiefly concerns areas whose residents feel their region has been forgotten by society and policy. In policy planning and implementation, these areas fall outside the sphere of influence of growing urban regions or are overshadowed by them. The geography of discontent – or a sense of regional injustice – is especially apparent in areas whose natural resources and land are exploited to achieve economic, energy and climate objectives, but for which these benefits do not materialise as local improvements in daily life, work, entrepreneurship or accessibility. These areas also have higher morbidity rates and lower functional capacity, lower education and income levels, and lower voter turnout than urban areas and rural areas close to urban areas.

The phenomenon extends to policy related to basic public services: changes in service networks make daily life more difficult, particularly in areas characterised by long distances, and small and ageing communities. The situation is compounded by the fact that societal responsibilities are increasingly being transferred to ageing civic and voluntary actors. In rural areas, they have long played a critical role in maintaining and developing services such as private roads, water supply, broadband construction, rescue operations, services supporting living at home and, digital support. Various functions (e.g. news services) are also being transferred to market-based operators, for whom sparse rural populations offer no profit. Meanwhile, it can be noted that public government funding is allocated differently to different area types: funding for revitalisation is channelled to large cities, and maintenance support and agricultural payments are allocated to rural areas. This trend challenges the sense of belonging. The phenomenon has been addressed to a limited extent in Finland (e.g. in the context of municipal or regional segregation), but it concerns all policy sectors, government branches and industries. The OECD emphasises that policy must be place-based and inclusive to respond to the specific needs of different areas³²⁷.

326 E.g. European Commission 2021a; 2023; Haavisto 2022; OECD 2021a; 2023a; Rodríguez-Pose et al. 2024; Ministry of the Interior, 26 October 2023; Kattilakoski et al. 2024; Vihinen et al. 2024a.

327 OECD 2012; 2019a; 2019 b; 2021b; 2023a; 2025b; 2025c.

The geography of discontent is influenced by the state of societal development, which in Finland can be observed particularly in sparsely populated rural areas and the archipelago but increasingly in rural heartland areas and local centres in rural areas as well. In an analysis of the major regions, eastern Finland and its extensive sparsely populated rural areas, rural local centres and cities are in a vulnerable position. At a more detailed regional level, it is evident that societal challenges have accumulated in the eastern and northern (administrative) border areas of regions and wellbeing services counties, regardless of whether one is looking at the north, south, east or west of the country³²⁸.

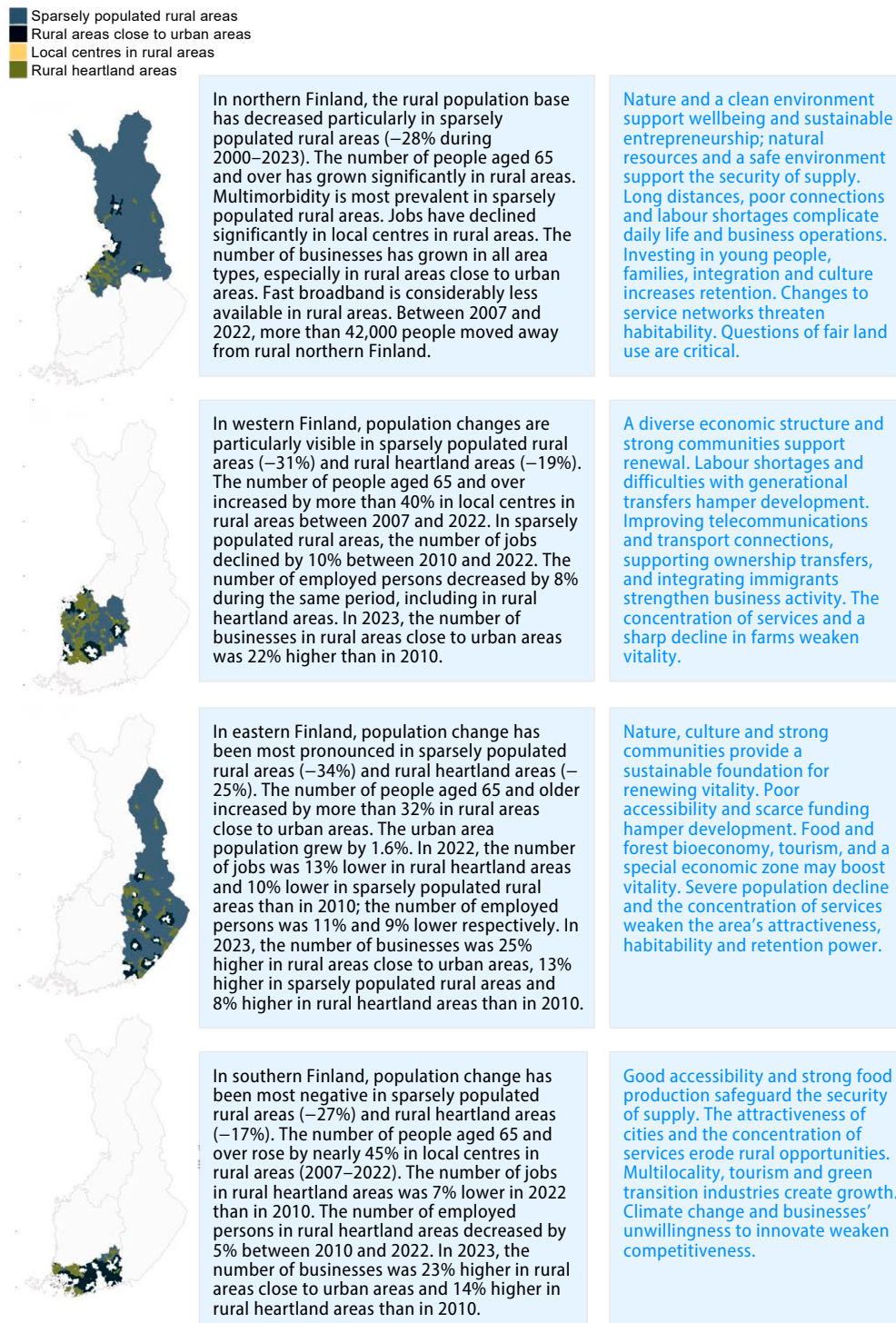
The sphere of influence of cities has been studied as part of the development of a place-based index. The place-based regional development index is an analytical tool designed to identify regional development needs and local conditions to target regional policy³²⁹. The index shows that it is not possible to apply a single model to all area types in regional development; instead, the model must be based on local conditions, resources and challenges. The index describes an area's development needs through two main factors. First, it examines how much the area can benefit from the economic development of nearby growth areas through factors such as commuting opportunities and mobility costs. Second, it assesses local development disadvantages that may limit employment growth in the area and weaken its growth potential. Such disadvantages include a narrow economic structure, low education levels and an ageing population. The index is based on postal code areas, which enables precise local-level analysis. Combined with rural proofing, the index of place-based regional development provides a practical instrument for place-based policy planning. In addition to rural proofing, the sustainable vitality index can also be used in other assessments.

For a democratic society, it is essential that the right to participation is realised regardless of place of residence, telecommunications coverage or mobility conditions. Initiative by public authorities is crucial. Comprehensive solutions that are also suited to different types of rural areas are required in the efforts to renew the vitality of rural areas in a socially and ecologically sustainable way, strengthen security of supply, combat regional inequality, reduce intra-regional development disparities, and harness the opportunities of the country as a whole. The need for place-sensitivity and coordination are emphasised in policy planning, implementation and monitoring.

328 Husberg et al. (eds.) 2026 (forthcoming).

329 Lehtonen 2015; Lehtonen et al. 2022; cf. Veneri 2013.

Figure 5. Rural areas of northern, western, eastern and southern Finland depicted on a map, important current trends and conclusions from the deliberative major-region events (Sources: University of Eastern Finland, Department of Geographical and Historical Studies 2024; Husberg et al. 2026 (forthcoming)).



Disparities can be observed between different types of rural areas

The situation of **sparsely populated rural areas** has long been critical. The population structure, increasingly thinner service networks, the deterioration of infrastructure, and weak physical and digital accessibility have undermined the vitality of these areas. The ageing population, low birth rates, the out-migration of young people and relatively limited immigration will further worsen the dependency ratio in the years ahead. Nature, culture and natural resources are important features of these areas, but so are also transport and energy poverty and digital exclusion, which affect residents of different ages and backgrounds. The need for place-based, flexible and socially sustainable solutions that also improve accessibility is great. The accessibility of education and youth services is particularly challenging in sparsely populated areas. It is crucial to succeed in renewing economic structures and strengthening economic activity. Village safety and local preparedness have emerged as important themes – similarly to all rural areas.

The challenges of **rural heartland areas** resemble those of sparsely populated rural areas. These areas have more industrial jobs and somewhat better accessibility. The population is shrinking rapidly, and the working-age population is expected to fall by 60,000 by 2040. The dependency ratio already exceeded 86 in 2023. Entrepreneurship is proportionally more common in rural heartland areas than in cities, but the need for ownership transfers is great. Education levels are lower than in cities, with the proportion of higher-educated people remaining below 30 per cent. Significant changes in the economic structure, the availability and accessibility of services, and in the condition of infrastructure have impacts on other areas.

The employment rate of **rural areas close to urban areas** was the highest in 2023 at 72.4 per cent, and the dependency ratio is closer to urban levels. These areas attracts families with children and remote workers, and multilocal living is common. Service accessibility is better than in other rural areas, but these areas are also affected by service network changes and the risks of digital exclusion. Cultural services are perceived as insufficient, particularly among women. The solar energy potential is high, and several pilots are under way. The impacts of the

energy transition on landscapes and land use are causing concern. The development of local energy communities offers significant opportunities.

Local centres in rural areas serve as hubs. Demographic trends and the concentration of services in regional centres are weakening their position and that of the broader surrounding areas. Trust in the security authorities is lowest in local centres, and societal discontent is pronounced. Young people's opportunities for participation depend on transport connections and parental support. Community-led entrepreneurship and civic activity play a key role in the maintenance of services. The burden of voluntary work is growing, as in all rural areas.

3.9 SWOT analysis of the current state and drivers of change

The SWOT analysis of this report brings together the key internal (endogenous) strengths and weaknesses and external (exogenous) opportunities and threats identified in the situational picture of rural areas. The analysis is based on an extensive statistical review, research knowledge, and the participatory process carried out to support the preparation of the report. The SWOT analysis identifies issues raised in a deliberative major-region events, the consultation of children and young people, and workshop discussions and the conclusions drawn from them. It also uses the responses to surveys conducted to support the preparation of the report.

The vision and target state presented in Chapter 4 and the cross-administrative objectives and development recommendations presented in Chapter 5 aim to enhance strengths and opportunities, address challenges, balance weaknesses and prepare for threats. A more detailed account of the SWOT analysis can be found in the extensive situational analysis and the description of drivers of change that support the preparation of the report.

Figure 6. Summary of the SWOT analysis of the current state presented in the report

4 National vision for rural areas

The ways in which rural areas function and develop directly affect the realisation of food policy, the forest bioeconomy, other value chains originating from rural areas and the improvement of the state of nature. Vital rural areas are a matter of will. Active agency and a solution-oriented and enabling living and operating environment in rural areas, which is created by policy and administration, is in the interest of Finland's resilience and national comprehensive security. The national rural vision for 2040 is:

Our developing rural areas – at the heart of building a safe, hopeful and sustainably vital future and of political solutions.

The target state for 2040: Finland has rural areas that are digitally and physically accessible, renew the economy, are sustainably vital, are creative in their services and have faith in the future. In such rural areas, people, communities, culture and entrepreneurship are valued. Rural agency is strengthened by the rural policy system, societal rural knowledge, rural proofing, and policy and well-functioning governance that are based on these.

The vision is grounded in the idea that:

- different areas are developed based on their specific situation;
- the societal potential present in rural areas is valued, recognised and put to use in a manner that respects local vitality and the carrying capacity of nature;
- the opportunities of rural areas are harnessed by identifying rural impacts and paying attention to them in policy and development;
- partnerships between people and organisations are reciprocal and target-oriented to ensure smooth everyday life, the habitability of rural and archipelago areas, and the conditions for economic activity;
- the vision creates the foundation of a Finnish social contract for renewing the sustainable vitality – smart shrinkage – of rural areas and provides a sound framework for the conditions necessary to achieve food policy and other nationally set objectives connected to rural areas.

The milestones for realising the vision are set through the cross-administrative objectives and development recommendations, which will be given tangible form in the implementation plan to be prepared following the political deliberation of the report. Detailed funding decisions will be made within the appropriations set out in the General Government Fiscal Plans and Budgets.

5 Cross-administrative objectives and development recommendations

The time horizon of this report extends into the 2040s, beyond the current parliamentary term. Its goal is to secure sustainable vitality by strengthening the habitability, inclusion and operating conditions of different types of rural areas. It also aims to promote the smart shrinkage of municipalities and regions, ensure the conditions for achieving nationally set objectives and strengthen the country's comprehensive security. This requires the systematic identification and consideration of rural areas in policy planning and implementation in all branches of government, in other words, a rural proofing.

This chapter presents five broader objectives and 23 comprehensive recommendations, developed through cross-administrative cooperation and refined based on consultation feedback. The cross-administrative implementation plan for the report will be drawn up based on a parliamentary communication. It will describe the objectives and recommendations in practical terms. Policy guidelines will be defined in connection with Government Programmes, and funding decisions will be made within the appropriations set out in the General Government Fiscal Plans and Budgets.

In Finland, rural areas are home to nearly 1.5 million people and the location of 35 per cent of all businesses. The shrinking of the registered population base and deteriorating habitability have wide-reaching impacts on the conditions for achieving nationally set objectives in security, the economy, culture and wellbeing alike. Among other documents, the significance of rural activity has been recognised in the Security Strategy for Society, the Government report on security of supply and the Government Report on Internal Security. The achievement of value added targets in the food sector, the forest bioeconomy and tourism, as well as the realisation of energy, climate and restoration objectives, also depends on the functioning of rural areas. The specific characteristics and issues of rural areas deserve national political and administrative recognition, interest and commitment.

Rural myths are being dismantled internationally, and they must be dismantled nationally as well. The systematic examination of geographical and rural dimensions is more critical than ever. The report has identified national expectations grounded in rural activity, the underutilisation of rural potential and the background factors

of the growing geography of discontent. The European Commission, the OECD and the WHO emphasise rural proofing, and the criticality of solutions suited to rural areas. The report supports the planning, preparation and implementation of policy, administration and research, which are key to delivering solutions.

The report complements other national strategies and provides a framework for the conditions necessary to achieve their objectives. This is supported by the rural policy planning system. The report is connected to and complements the following documents with rural knowledge:

- Ajassa uudistuva maaseutu – maaseutupoliittinen kokonaisuohjelma 2021–2027 [Countryside renewing with the times – Rural policy programme 2021–2027] (Publications of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry 2021:12)
- Development Perspectives for Land Use in Finland (Publications of the Ministry of the Environment 2024:21)
- Finland's CAP Strategic Plan for 2023–2027
- Innovation and Skills in Finland 2021–2027 (EU regional and structural policy programme)
- Itäisen Suomen ohjelma [Programme for eastern Finland] (Publications of the Finnish Government 2025:14)
- CSO Strategy 2023–2027: Government resolution on the development of civic space (Publications of the Ministry of Justice, Memorandums and statements 2024:22)
- Kansallinen luonnon virkistyskäytön strategia 2030: Valtioneuvoston periaatepäätös [National Nature Recreation Strategy 2030: Government Resolution] (Publications of the Finnish Government 2022:13)
- National Mineral Strategy of Finland (Publications of the Finnish Government 2025:67)
- National Programme to Promote Democracy and Participation: Government Resolution (Publications of the Ministry of Justice, Memorandums and statements 2025:22)
- Medium-term Climate Change Policy Plan: Towards a carbon-neutral society (Publications of the Ministry of the Environment 2022:20)
- Kestävä ja kannattava ruokajärjestelmä ja selonteko kansallisesta ruokastrategiasta [Sustainable and profitable food system and government report on the National Food Strategy] (MMM042:00/2023)
- Kulttuurimatkailun kansallisen kehittämisen tiekartta [Roadmap for the National Development of Cultural Tourism] (Publications of the Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland 2023:10)

- Kulttuuripoliittinen selonteko [The Cultural Policy Report] (Publications of the Finnish Government 2024:55)
- Kuntien normien keventämisen ja kokeilujen ohjelma [Municipal deregulation and trial programme] (VM119:00/2023)
- Luovan talouden kasvustrategia [Growth Strategy for the Creative Economy 2025–2030] (Publications of the Finnish Government 2025:61)
- Pohjoisen Suomen ohjelma [Programme for northern Finland] (Publications of the Finnish Government 2025:13)
- Archipelago as a National Treasure: National Archipelago Programme 2024–2027 (Publications of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry 2025:1)
- Get Finland Moving – a cross-administrative programme to promote physically active lifestyles and functional capacity: Programme document (Publications of the Finnish Government 2024:24)
- Teollisuuspoliittinen strategia [Industrial Policy Strategy] (Publications of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2024:49)
- Toimenpiteitä lapsitoiveiden tukemiseksi ja syntyvyyden kohentamiseksi: Väestöpoliittisen ohjelman valmistelutyöryhmän muistio [Measures to boost the birth rate and support people to have children: Report of the working group for the Population Policy Programme] (Publications of the Finnish Government 2025:35)
- Tulevaisuusselonteon 1. osa [Part 1 of the Government Report on the Future] (Publications of the Finnish Government 2025:82)
- Uudistuvat ja hyvinvoivat alueet: Valtioneuvoston aluekehittämispäätös 2024–2027 [Evolving and Prosperous Regions: Government's Regional Development Decision 2024–2027] (Publications of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2024:12)
- Government Integration Programme 2024–2027: Government Resolution (Publications of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2025:4)
- Valtioneuvoston kulttuuripoliittinen selonteko [Government Cultural Policy Report] (OKM/2024/84)
- Valtioneuvoston periaatepäätös kansallisen lapsistrategian toimeenpanosuunnitelmasta [Government resolution on the implementation plan for the National Child Strategy] (STM/2024/64)
- Government Resolution for the Cultural Heritage Strategy 2023–2030 (Publications of the Finnish Government 2023:21)
- Valtioneuvoston periaatepäätös mielenterveyden edistämisestä [Government resolution on mental health promotion] (STM/2024/161)
- Government Report on the Climate Plan for the Land Use Sector (Publications of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry 2023:12)

- Government Report on Internal Security (Publications of the Finnish Government 2025:87)
- Government Report to the Parliament on Industrial Policy (Publications of the Finnish Government 2025:65)
- Government Report on the Implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Publications of the Finnish Government 2024:63)
- National Transport System Plan; the preparation of an update is in progress (LVM029:00/2023)
- Vesienhoitosuunnitelmat 2022–2027 [River basin management plans 2022–2027] (Ympäristö.fi)
- Yhdessä enemmän – kestävää kasvua ja uudistumista Suomen matkailuun: Suomen matkailustrategia ja toimenpiteet 2025–2028 [Achieving more together – sustainable growth and renewal in Finnish tourism: Finland’s tourism strategy and measures for 2025–2028] (Publications of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2025:29)
- Strategy for Social Enterprises (Publications of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2022:5)
- Security Strategy for Society: Government resolution (Publications of the Finnish Government 2025:3)

5.1 Objective: Update digital and physical accessibility.

Recommendation 1: Ensure citizens’ and regional equality to achieve digitalisation objectives.

Society’s digitalisation objectives can be achieved by narrowing the digital divide between rural and urban areas and ensuring the availability of very high capacity network (VHCN) broadband connections in rural areas as well. Citizen and regional equality can be secured by:

- assessing the need for broadband funding in rural areas, paying attention to the cost–benefit perspective in the next EU funding period as well (cf. CAP 2023–2027);
- assessing the need to raise Finland’s broadband universal service obligation to a level that supports the renewal of rural vitality;
- assessing the quality and capacity obligations of licences in connection with the renewal of network licences in the early 2030s so that capacity meets the requirements for the renewal of rural vitality;

- updating Traficom’s guidance on the functioning of communications services at a single point on a property (the guidance is currently based on landline telephone connection technology);
- assessing the need for public support for the construction of VHCN connections and the total construction costs to central government, considering the impacts of broadband construction on rural employment, the availability and accessibility of services, entrepreneurship, economic activity (agriculture and forestry, the food sector), skills development and rural mobility conditions, and their multiplier effects on the conditions for achieving economic objectives;
- strengthening the competence of the operators involved in the construction of locally driven village networks and the sharing of experiential knowledge.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen the conditions for sustainable mobility, transport and logistics in rural areas.

Mobility, transport and logistics are among the basic conditions for the habitability and economic development of rural areas. The policy guidelines of the National Transport System Plan (Transport 12 Plan) guide related development. The Transport 12 Plan identifies and partly addresses the societal challenges of different area types. Rural areas’ ageing population, income levels and increasingly thinner basic public service networks affect car use, the need for passenger transport services, and the need and demand for mobile and home services. Through logistics, they also influence the conditions for the development of economic activity. The specific characteristics and needs of rural areas can be addressed by:

- securing opportunities for sustainable mobility, transport and logistics in a manner appropriate to the rural population, based on knowledge and in accordance with the Transport 12 Plan;
- paying attention to the regional concentration of service networks, securing access to basic public services cost-effectively, and the changes in mobility needs arising from demographic changes when the Government defines the target minimum service level for regional transport;
- strengthening cross-administrative cooperation and coordination between different authorities, particularly with respect to publicly supported passenger transport services;
- ensuring the conditions for logistics based on knowledge, covering the whole country and identifying the value chains originating from

rural areas that are connected to food supply and economic security of supply;

- ensuring the dual use of transport infrastructure where the impact of measures is greatest to generate broader societal benefit and support the renewal of rural vitality;
- identifying, assessing and paying attention to impacts on the rural operating environment, safety, livelihoods and population;
- in the plan for the use of the Social Climate Fund, paying particular attention to transport poverty in rural areas and the options for addressing it.

Recommendation 3: Improve the condition of private roads to strengthen the economy, security of supply and preparedness.

Private roads are recognised as crucial for the habitability of rural areas, the diverse economic activity of rural areas, agriculture and forestry, the energy transition, the regional management of climate risks and preparedness, rescue operations, security of supply and comprehensive security more broadly. The good condition and usability of the private road network can be ensured nationally by:

- increasing the discretionary government grants for private roads from 2030 onwards in accordance with the funding programme of the Transport 12 draft plan;
- considering the TIESIT project's assessments of the repair needs of the private road network and bridges and their impact on the broader basic conditions for comprehensive security and economic security of supply.

Recommendation 4: Ensure the functioning of archipelago transport services, including in exceptional circumstances.

As part of the project to amend the Archipelago Act, the provisions on commuter vessel services will be updated, uniform criteria will be developed for organising commuter vessel transport, and a service level will be defined for each route. Archipelago transport makes habitation and economic activity in the archipelago possible, as it is the only connection to the mainland. The archipelago transport services that are vital for the archipelago can be secured by:

- ensuring the functioning of road and cable ferries, commuter vessels and private road and cable ferries under both normal and exceptional conditions.

5.2 Objective: Strengthen structures that support economic renewal.

Recommendation 5: Renew rural economic structures to make full use of their potential.

The sustainable and comprehensive utilisation of the potential in rural areas is important for the economy and future of the whole country. Rural areas are not merely a resource repository or a source of commodities. The people living and the communities, businesses and livelihoods operating in rural areas make possible the objectives envisioned for the food and forest bioeconomy, the energy transition, nature restoration, tourism, the circular economy and the creative industries. The shift from the underutilisation of rural potential to its comprehensive and sustainable use can be achieved by:

- in accordance with OECD recommendations, assessing the rural impacts of the national RDI system, making visible the RDI activities carried out in rural areas, and ensuring that the RDI system and its conditions do not place micro, small and medium-sized enterprises and vocational education institutions at a disadvantage;
- strengthening innovation-driven growth in rural areas by supporting the RDI activities of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises and their cooperation with educational institutions through rural and regional development measures;
- recognising the criticality of access to funding instruments, seeking solutions to improve access to funding, and ensuring the conditions for rural areas' diverse micro, small and medium-sized enterprises and economic activity to the use of public funding;
- monitoring the targeting and multiplier effects of government public procurement in different area types and ensuring the application of procurement legislation so that micro, small and medium-sized enterprises can participate in tendering processes;
- strengthening the diverse entrepreneurship of young people, women and people of immigrant backgrounds in rural areas, supporting the conditions for successful ownership transfers, and bringing together rural business owners who are divesting their business and those looking to take over;
- promoting entrepreneurship and business in the creative industries, the nature sector and the horse industry by developing funding and advisory services;

- strengthening the position of different rural sectors in regional RDI systems and economic strategies, and particularly in innovations related to cultural heritage, digitalisation, sustainable development and the enhancing of functional capacity.

Recommendation 6: Implement rural proofing as part of the national preparation for the next EU funding period, ensure cross-administrative coordination and make broader use of existing rural development structures.

In accordance with the subsidiarity principle, EU Member States have the opportunity to adapt and reallocate funds based on their needs and circumstances within the EU funding period. The European Commission emphasises that all EU funds and programmes are available for use in rural areas. In Finland, this means that solutions suitable for rural areas must be built based on existing rural development structures, identifying the specific characteristics, needs and opportunities (potential) of rural areas highlighted in this report. The subsidiarity principle must and can be put into practice in Finland by:

- assessing rural impacts and implementing cross-administrative coordination between different funds in the preparation of the next EU funding period, including that of the partnership agreement;
- securing diverse rural development and the measures and EU co-financing that support it so that the renewal of rural vitality will also continue in the future;
- directing EU funding to the renewal of vitality, the economy and community structures in rural areas and to the strengthening of safety;
- making broader use of existing rural development structures such as the Rural Network, community-led local development (Leader activities) and Smart Villages, which combine resources, mobilise local and regional actors and ensure the leverage effect of private funding and voluntary collective work;
- avoiding the creation of new and overlapping administrative structures, recognising and considering limited local and regional resources, and thereby strengthening the generation of synergies between different government branches and funds, locally led agency for harnessing regional strengths, and equal urban–rural interaction.

Recommendation 7: Ensure the renewal of rural economic structures by improving the conditions for skills, education and ownership transfers.

The challenge of skills and labour needs is nationwide, with rural-specific features and needs in rural areas. Labour mobility or the growing population of urban regions will not resolve these needs. The skills, labour and business succession needs of rural areas can be addressed by:

- enabling general upper secondary education in areas where the number of young people will decline in the coming decades, as well as students' right to live in rural areas and to receive the housing supplement for students even when they live in a location different from their place of study;
- improving the conditions for skills development, education – particularly liberal adult education – immigration and integration in rural areas;
- further strengthening cooperation between vocational and higher education institutions and rural SMEs;
- further improving opportunities for further education and retraining as part of the reform of the vocational education and training funding system;
- promoting the solutions offered by employment-based immigration for rural ownership transfers and new entrepreneurs, and highlighting the national situation of ownership transfers and the opportunities this offers for entrepreneurship and employment;
- actively involving rural operators in the planning and implementation of solutions so that measures respond to local and regional needs and strengthen community and local receptiveness, and making full use of rural development structures and EU funding to identify and implement cross-administrative and cross-sectoral solutions in a place-based manner.

Recommendation 8: Strengthen the social economy as a driver of the sustainability transition.

Rural areas have proportionally more civil society organisations than cities. Organisations play a significant role as producers of local services and operators in the social economy that lies between the public and private sectors. The production of services in rural areas through voluntary effort alone is insufficient to meet the changing and growing demand from municipalities, wellbeing services counties and central government. Civic and voluntary actors have long raised the need for more permanent and diverse structures. The scale and economic significance of the

social economy has begun to be recognised; in the EU, it accounts for 10 per cent of all enterprises and 6 per cent of the workforce. Particularly in rural areas with no functioning markets, the social economy offers solutions. These solutions focus on societal objectives rather than profit-making, as well as the reinvestment of profit in operations and inclusive decision-making. The social economy can be strengthened in rural areas by:

- recognising in particular the role of general-interest enterprises and community-led social entrepreneurship that are based on rural civic and voluntary activity in filling service network gaps, creating local jobs, enabling skills development, providing opportunities for low-employability groups, and as key factors in democratic society and the development of their own regions;
- improving the opportunities of social enterprises to access funding and operate particularly in those geographical areas and key sectors in which the public or private sector does not provide basic public and essential services;
- enabling longer-term pilots (e.g. village shop support) to develop the social economy in different types of rural areas and particularly in sparsely populated rural areas, the archipelago and rural heartland areas;
- strengthening community-led social entrepreneurship by introducing social criteria in public procurement and improving financing opportunities;
- recognising the social economy as a significant sector of future industry in Finland as well, as has been done in the EU.

Recommendation 9: Enable scalable circular economy models and decentralised energy communities at the local level to support the renewal of rural economic structures, sustainable development and security of supply.

Combined with local communities of renewable energy, scalable circular economy and nutrient recycling models such as agroecological symbioses create a strong foundation for the sustainable renewal of rural economic structures. Symbioses produce renewable energy and nutrients that energy communities can distribute and store. Together, they form local business ecosystems that enhance security of supply, reduce dependence on fossil fuels, and create new opportunities for rural businesses and communities. Among other measures, circular economy and decentralised renewable energy production solutions can strengthen food, energy, climate and environmental policy objectives, as well as local and regional economies by:

- supporting investment in decentralised renewable energy production such as biogas, solar energy and energy storage as part of agricultural and food production symbioses and decentralised energy communities;
- developing regulation, a culture of experimentation and funding instruments that enable energy communities beyond property boundaries, circular economy models and community-based (general-interest) ownership;
- strengthening RDI activities and environments that combine circular economy production models (nutrient recycling, agroecological symbioses), renewable energy community solutions and local preparedness;
- incorporating local-level circular economy, nutrient recycling, agroecological symbioses and energy self-sufficient solutions in the strategic planning of regional development and security of supply;
- developing competence and education that supports local communities' ability to make use of the RDI system and create symbiotic and decentralised solutions.

5.3 Objective: Strengthen operating conditions, wellbeing, trust and confidence in the future.

Recommendation 10: Enable the habitability of rural areas by improving access to basic public services and ensuring the consultation and participation of people and communities in wellbeing services counties.

The vitality of rural areas and the renewal of economic structures rest on people's ability to live in, return to and move to rural areas, which requires accessible ways of organising basic public services that take the specific characteristics of different areas into account. European Commission Executive Vice-President Raffaele Fitto has emphasised that all Europeans must have a genuine right to stay in their home region. This principle is a central part of evolving cohesion policy. The Letta Report (2024) also highlights the 'right to stay' as an important principle in a sustainable and socially just single market. Sustainable and effective service solutions require planning based on spatial data (the urban–rural classification), cross-administrative cooperation and the involvement of local actors to secure equal opportunities for a good life in the whole country. As the roles of wellbeing services counties and municipalities change, interaction and cooperation structures are being renewed. For the smooth daily life and functioning of rural people, communities and businesses, it is important to:

- secure the habitability of rural areas through appropriate service organisation (early childhood, primary and lower secondary education, culture and library services, social welfare and healthcare services, advisory services) and funding solutions (e.g. the social economy, contractual arrangements) and by continuing efforts to strengthen the operating conditions of all types of municipalities and promote municipal renewal with due regard for the diversity of municipalities;
- in changes to publicly funded basic services and in the national and regional monitoring of those changes, implement participatory rural proofing and knowledge production based on the urban–rural classification area division (which can be combined with administrative boundaries such as those of municipalities and wellbeing services counties);
- draw up a cross-administrative and comprehensive service network analysis that identifies geographical dimensions and the phenomena of transport and energy poverty and digital exclusion, population ageing, persistently lower socioeconomic status and minority language groups affecting rural areas, and enable solutions and pilots suited to rural areas;
- encourage wellbeing services counties to make use of existing partnership and consultation structures and platforms and to make different area types visible in the data collected and in participation processes;
- promote smooth land use planning, good living environments, regional vitality and business competitiveness through measures such as the reform of the acts on civil engineering, urban development and land use;
- also promote the development needs identified in the Development Perspectives for Land Use in Finland, including the promotion of sustainable interaction between cities and rural areas;
- advance long-term strategic renovation measures concerning the building stock, promote the use of demolition grants in housing policy to encourage responsible demolition, and promote the managed rundown of housing companies in depopulated apartment blocks through the reform of the Limited Liability Housing Companies Act;
- also use EU funding instruments for the development of the built environment in rural areas;
- assess the need for parliamentary work to find solutions and means of adaptation to national regional segregation.

Recommendation 11: Increase physical activity and strengthen the wellbeing and functional capacity of rural populations by identifying and paying attention to regional characteristics and challenges.

The functional capacity of the rural population is critical for the vitality and resilience of Finland as a whole. Physical inactivity weakens functional capacity and increases morbidity and costs. Physical activity, sports and nature exploration are tools for strengthening the functional capacity of the population and renewing the vitality of rural areas. Physical activity, wellbeing and functional capacity can be increased in rural areas by:

- paying attention to the conditions for physical activity in rural areas, including long distances and travel times, mobility conditions, existing communal spaces and their maintenance, the significance of rural primary and lower secondary schools as places for hobbies and leisure activities, and the importance of pedestrian and cycling routes and roadside widths for physical activity;
- developing shared transport services, mobile services and reliable telecommunications connections to improve access to hobbies and sports activities, and increasing the number of sports and physical activity events organised by different actors in rural areas;
- extending the Finnish model for leisure activities to all municipalities and schools so that leisure activities can increasingly be offered in connection with the school day;
- securing rural sports and physical activity infrastructure and nearby leisure opportunities by ensuring the maintenance and use of communal spaces located in and used by villages, and by supporting local associations in increasing community-based physical activity through long-term funding and reducing the administrative burden on organisations;
- drawing up regional physical activity programmes that define shared objectives and measures through cooperation between regions, wellbeing services counties, municipalities and organisations by identifying, considering and involving rural actors.

Recommendation 12: Ensure local participation, fairness and acceptability in the implementation of the sustainability transition.

The fair distribution of the natural resources found in rural areas, rural land use, and the societal and economic benefits arising from them, as well as the disadvantages they cause, requires environmentally just methods. Solutions that are in line with these methods, including the return of a share of mine tax revenues to the local

level, along with their guidance and monitoring, are necessary particularly in the implementation of the green and digital dual transition (including the energy transition). The sustainability transition can be implemented fairly by:

- ensuring that the objectives aimed at resolving climate, environmental and biodiversity challenges serve the whole country, including the daily needs of rural people, communities and businesses, the renewal of economic structures, and operating, living and natural environments;
- improving the opportunities for local populations to participate in the implementation of the sustainability transition by providing tools, funding and opportunities for cooperation, for example;
- implementing rural proofing in a manner that strengthens the realisation of environmental justice principles as part of the planning, implementation and monitoring of energy, climate, transport, environmental, agricultural and forestry policy, as well as land use planning;
- in political planning, recognising the objective of preventing disadvantages arising in rural areas before they materialise (anticipatory justice);
- identifying and acknowledging various local experiences, needs and perspectives as part of planning, preparation and implementation (recognitional justice);
- ensuring the fair distribution of resources, benefits and disadvantages between different places and operators (distributive justice);
- guaranteeing opportunities for local and regional participation, transparent decision-making, and the use of local knowledge in preparation and implementation (procedural justice);
- remedying disadvantages and injustices that have already occurred (restorative justice).

Recommendation 13: Secure the operating conditions of civic and voluntary activity, recognising its critical importance in rural areas.

In rural areas, civic and voluntary activity is a critical resource that supports societal baseline resilience, functional capacity, culture, wellbeing, environmental management, inclusion and trust. An increasing amount of societal responsibility has been transferred to civic and voluntary activity, while its future is being challenged by demographic trends, changes to general grants, administrative burden and funding conditions such as access to basic banking services. The operating conditions of civic and voluntary activity in rural areas can be secured by:

- assessing the changes affecting civic and voluntary activity and their broader rural impacts. Changes are visible in discretionary government grants, wellbeing services counties (facilities, service networks, rescue operations), the funding and operations of liberal adult education, the availability and accessibility of essential services, and the widening of the digital divide;
- ensuring a level of government grants that is critical for civic activity, village activity and fire brigade operations;
- recognising the voluntary collective work performed as part of civic and voluntary activity as a self-financing contribution in the eligibility conditions of national and EU funding;
- promoting the availability, maintenance and development of communal spaces and their multifunctionality across sectoral and administrative boundaries;
- creating indicators for monitoring civic and voluntary activity and compiling them in a national rural observatory (Recommendation 16).

Recommendation 14: Ensure the availability and accessibility of services of general economic interest (SGEI).

The European Commission emphasises the role of services of general economic interest (SGEI) in promoting social and territorial cohesion, security of supply and climate objectives. In the light of the situational picture of this report, the availability and accessibility of essential services are critical in sparsely populated rural areas, rural heartland areas and the archipelago. These services include grocery trade services, basic banking services, pharmacy services and access to prescription medicines, postal and mail delivery services (including newspaper delivery), fuel distribution, telecommunications connections and passenger transport services. In Finland, the SGEI principle is applied in accordance with EU state aid rules, and an example is the village shop support. The availability and accessibility of SGEI services can be secured in areas from which public and market-based actors have withdrawn by:

- reviewing the rural impacts of changes related to universal service obligations and ensuring their appropriateness in terms of rural people and communities;
- assessing the societal multiplier effects of essential services and the public funding connected to them;
- securing and reviewing the level of the village shop support and extending it, recognising climate objectives and preparedness needs;

- reviewing the SGEI conditions of essential services in other services as well, including the importance of local media in ensuring access to information, freedom of expression and faith in the future for people and communities living in rural areas.

5.4 Objective: Increase, compile and make use of societal rural knowledge.

Recommendation 15: Strengthen rural research, rural education and coordination.

The objectives of many policies and strategies depend on how rural areas function and develop. Multidisciplinary research, development and innovation activities that recognise geographical dimensions is also necessary in rural areas and in the development of urban–rural interaction. Following the Swedish model, the structure of university research and education should better recognise the specific characteristics and issues of rural areas as part of societal development. Rural research, education and coordination can be strengthened by:

- examining the opportunities for and the responsible party in strengthening rural research and education in Finland;
- assessing the possibilities of compiling a master’s degree programme in rural studies;
- making full use of the opportunities of EU research and innovation policy by increasing applicable rural research in Finland.

Recommendation 16: Establish a national rural observatory for the systematic compilation and analysis of rural knowledge.

Knowledge of the functioning of rural areas is central to the conditions for achieving national objectives in fields such as food policy and the food sector, the forest bioeconomy, the environment and nature, energy and climate policy, the chemical industry and comprehensive security. Statistical data describing rural areas is scattered across various data sources, and statistics are produced and compiled in different ways, making the comparison and analysis of statistical data difficult. Compiled rural knowledge, and rural and archipelago policy analyses ensure that data is comparable. Compiled rural knowledge and analyses strengthen advocacy work to ensure that EU-level decisions affecting Finland are fair and take national and regional characteristics and the geographical dimension into account.

Decision-making and preparation require up-to-date statistical data, situational pictures and analyses of the state of rural areas. This broad need and demand can be met by:

- establishing a national data service compiling situational information about rural areas equivalent to the European Commission's Rural Observatory to support cross-administrative preparation, assessment and monitoring, EU-level advocacy, and the monitoring of the implementation of the Government Report on Rural Policy and the National Food Strategy;
- assigning responsibility for the establishment and maintenance of the data service (rural observatory) to the Natural Resources Institute Finland (Luke), whose statutory remit covers rural vitality and wellbeing;
- ensuring adequate resourcing for rural research and rural expertise at the Natural Resources Institute Finland;
- compiling data based on a sustainable vitality indicator, a place-based index, a rural civic and voluntary activity indicator, and the Rural Barometer surveys in the rural observatory, and producing analyses that support national and regional rural proofing as part of the data service.

Recommendation 17: Monitor the sustainable vitality – smart shrinkage – of municipalities with declining populations and use the knowledge to identify and promote good models.

Together, the recommendations of this report aim to strengthen sustainable vitality, or smart shrinkage, at the local and regional level. In the light of the report's situational picture, vision and consultation feedback, it is important to monitor population ageing, the thinning of the population base, sustainable development and economic development as a whole, also comprehensively identifying changes at the municipal level. To understand the sustainable vitality of rural areas, regions, and rural municipalities and small towns with shrinking populations and to identify and promote good models, we can:

- finalise, introduce and maintain a national sustainable vitality indicator based on research knowledge and the area and municipal division under the urban–rural classification;
- enable the monitoring of the sustainable vitality of municipalities and regions with shrinking populations and the deepening of understanding of the impacts of demographic trends on the development, functioning and mutual cooperation of municipalities and regions;

- promote the identification of good practices in sustainable vitality and the incorporation of this perspective into the decision-making of municipalities and regions to support sustainable development;
- use the sustainable vitality indicator to support cross-administrative cooperation in central government so that better conditions can also be created nationally for the sustainable vitality of municipalities and regions with declining populations.

Recommendation 18: Establish the statistical monitoring of multilocality to clarify national steering instruments.

Multilocality is a significant phenomenon related to the functioning of rural areas and the use of regions. The statistical monitoring of multilocality must be established to support the planning, dimensioning and societal preparation of services in various branches of government. To clarify the steering instruments for multilocality, we can:

- identify and pay attention to multilocality better than at present in statutory and regular planning processes and incorporate multilocality into the impact assessments of plans in accordance with the government resolution (2022);
- develop the statistical monitoring of multilocality through diverse methods, including by combining statistical datasets and regular surveys, while paying attention to data protection under the GDPR and sufficient regional precision;
- identify the dimensions of multilocality as part of the planning and practice of basic public services, preparedness, security of supply and crisis management.

Recommendation 19: Assess the impacts of rural demographic trends on the vital functions of comprehensive security.

The impacts of demographic trends and changes in the vitality of rural areas on comprehensive security give rise to widely shared concerns. The functional capacity of rural people, communities and businesses plays a significant role in strengthening society's vital functions and their interrelationships. This can be assessed by:

- identifying better than at present the critical specific characteristics and issues of rural areas and the areas requiring strengthening in the field of comprehensive security actors (one example being the village safety and preparedness model as part of national security of supply activities);

- anticipating and identifying better than at present measures affecting rural areas that have impacts on the vital functions described in the Security Strategy for Society and their interrelationships, as well as more broadly on the strengthening of comprehensive security;
- increasing cooperation and information exchange between key actors in rural policy and comprehensive security preparation (secretariats) to identify the specific characteristics and opportunities of rural areas.

Recommendation 20: Promote the use of the national urban–rural classification in national statistical institutes’ data services, maintain the classification and provide training in its use.

The national urban–rural classification has been in use since 2013 and was updated in 2020. The classification is static but can be used to help structure dynamic phenomena and understand the context of regional change. It enables rural and urban areas to be distinguished from one another and statistics to be calculated for different area types and their combinations. A municipality-based generalisation of the classification is also available, enabling the urban–rural analysis of municipality-based data. The classification is critical for understanding the specific characteristics and issues of different area types and can be used at the regional, national and international level (based on the Nordic typology). To improve the availability of rural statistics and knowledge, and to develop the monitoring, foresight and assessment of rural activity (including rural proofing), as well as to combat increasing regional inequality and to strengthen international advocacy, we must:

- promote the adoption of the urban–rural classification (Finnish Environment Institute 2020) in the data services of statistical institutes included in the Budget;
- maintain the classification and develop its use by adding layers describing dynamic phenomena (multilocality, accessibility) to better reflect the functioning of different area types;
- facilitate the usability of the classification data by providing training in its use (Finnish Environment Institute);
- complement the classification with the necessary variables so that it can be used in national regionally and spatially informed preparation concerning EU funding periods.

5.5 Objective: Sharpen and strengthen the rural policy planning system.

Recommendation 21: Clarify the Rural Policy Council's role and update the Act on the Financing of Research and Development Projects in Agriculture and Food Sector and Related to Rural Areas.

The Finnish rural policy planning system is internationally unique. It operates as an independent policy area within the broader regional development framework, alongside island and urban policy, and is led by the Rural Policy Council (MANE). The report identifies the need for a more effective rural policy, which can be promoted by:

- updating the Act on the Financing of Research and Development Projects in Agriculture and Food Sector and Related to Rural Areas and Archipelago (laki maa- ja elintarviketalouden, maaseudun sekä saariston tutkimus- ja kehittämishankkeiden rahoituksesta, 1413/2011);
- draft a decree on the establishment, tasks and network-based operating methods of MANE based on the purpose of the Act;
- clarifying MANE's statutory task and purpose through a separate government resolution;
- recognising the statutory task of rural policy and making use of MANE's agency in the preparation of Government Programmes to coordinate significant entities and in foresight, monitoring and evaluation;
- assigning MANE the task of monitoring the implementation of this report and preparing a report on its progress on a cross-administrative basis;
- also ensuring sufficient resources for MANE and the rural policy planning system in the future.

Recommendation 22: Regularise rural proofing in central and regional government and reinforce the rural policy structures that support its implementation.

Rural proofing are recommended at the national (Finnish Government 2023b), EU, OECD and WHO levels. However, in Finland, implementation remains fragmented and does not meet the needs, given the significance of rural activity for the conditions required to achieve several national objectives. The regularisation of rural proofing has been promoted through rural policy research, development and network activities and on a cross-administrative basis under the leadership of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (Husberg et al. 2025). The systematic use of

assessments supports the quality of decision-making, saves resources, strengthens the relevance of policy and increases trust in public institutions, particularly in rural areas. Unlike environmental or gender equality impact assessments, rural proofing is not statutory, but their neglect may lead to deficient legislative drafting. The regularisation and institutionalisation of rural proofing can be promoted by:

- assessing the need to enact legislation on the rural proofing procedure and taking the necessary follow-up measures based on that assessment;
- in Government Programme entries, identifying the policy objectives and measures for which rural proofing is a particularly important and required action;
- designating an internal central government body responsible for promoting and monitoring rural proofing; this task may be assigned to the cross-administrative and cross-sectoral body MANE, whose preparation, administration and Secretary General are the responsibility of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry;
- ensuring MANE's tasks, operating conditions and resources so that it can maintain annual data about the implementation of assessments and their effectiveness in different government branches, and producing a monitoring report and recommendations for the following government term during each government term;
- increasing dialogue between MANE, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, the Ministry of Justice, the Finnish Council of Regulatory Impact Analysis and the Agriculture and Forestry Committee on the progress of assessments and their implementation;
- ensuring funding to secure the participation opportunities of rural areas and to produce rural knowledge and research in support of rural proofing.

Recommendation 23: Strengthen the capacity of central government to examine dimensions related to rural areas, intensify cooperation and make broader use of the rural policy planning system.

Human-centred and societal rural policy issues are fundamentally cross-administrative, but they are significantly influenced by sector-specific solutions. As part of the preparation of this report, it has been found that the concepts of rural areas and locality are clearly overshadowed by the concepts of urban areas and regionality in central government documents. The ways in which ministries are organised vary in terms of the handling of regional, rural, urban and island policy. Rural policy is closely connected with the broader regional development framework and the conditions for municipal development. Rural areas are also found within

the largest cities. The cross-administrative and cross-sectoral Rural Policy Council (MANE), its secretariat, Secretary General and Vice Secretaries General, associated networks, and national rural research and development projects are the core of the national rural policy planning system. The MANE network that these constitute serves as a forward-looking shared platform for the public, private and third sectors for addressing rural knowledge and specific rural issues and drives efforts to find and advance solutions. It serves an increasingly broad range of knowledge users to break the trend of regional segregation and intra-regional disparities and to make full use of rural potential to improve the conditions for achieving national objectives.

The capacity to examine dimensions related to rural areas, the broader use of the rural policy planning system and closer cooperation can be strengthened by:

- promoting the systematic examination of geographical and rural dimensions in central government;
- promoting inclusiveness and dialogue by strengthening the participatory rights of rural people and actors in the formulation of national rural policy;
- ensuring the operating conditions and capacity of the MANE network to bring together actors from different levels and sectors and to jointly address and advance broad rural-related phenomena and the policies that affect them;
- intensifying the cooperation of the rural policy planning system and the MANE network with other independent bodies (e.g. in the areas of sustainable development, participation, physical activity and security);
- strengthening Finnish presence in the EU's Rural Pact community and ensuring a national rural policy social contract (cf. the rural policy programme, the rural policy declaration and sustainable development commitments);
- further developing cooperation with island policy in terms of the island proofing method, with urban policy concerning the community-led local development operating model, and with regional development in terms of national objectives and the knowledge requirements of rural areas;
- making use of the expertise of the MANE network in the preparation of the EU funding period so that the shared objectives of regional development and rural policy are achieved effectively, and the coordination of the policy programmes of funds supports place-based solutions.

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