



# CoP Public Infrastructure and Social Services

## Example of Good Practice

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Natural Resources Institute Finland, Luke

Ulla Ovaska

ulla.ovaska@luke.fi

## Rural Policy Networks

Living Lab Helsinki, Finland

**Key words: networks, rural policy, multi-level governance**

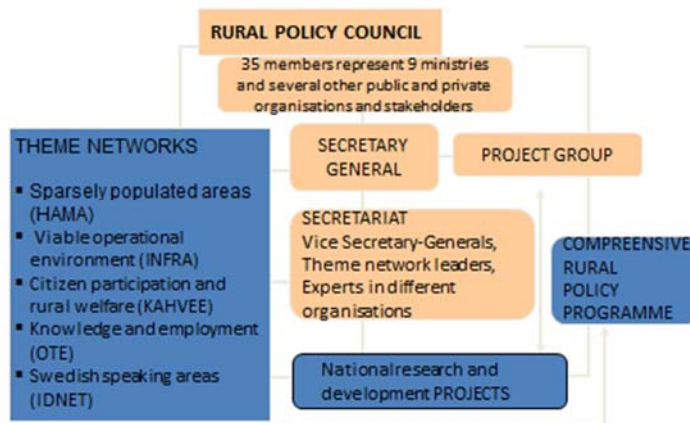
### 1. Introduction

The Rural Policy Council is responsible for national rural policy in Finland. Its background is in the law on regional development. Similar policy councils function also for urban and archipelago policies. It is appointed by the Government for a four-year-term (currently 2016-2020). Its chair and co-chair are ministers of Agriculture and Forestry, and Economic Affairs and Employment, respectively. The Council consists of 35 members, representing all policy areas pertaining to everyday rural life and entrepreneurship. The Council is cross-sectoral: it consists of both public, private and civil society actors. Of the 35 current members, 9 are ministries, and 24 umbrella organization representing both private and public actors such as Local and Regional Authorities, Social- and Healthcare NGOs, advocacy organisations (research, enterprises, church, farmers, environment, hunting, youth, women etc.), Leader groups and Village Action.

The Government sets the tasks, members, and term of office to the COUNCIL. The Council organises its work in a multi-annual comprehensive policy programme, where it states the main themes of action. The themes are implemented by the Theme networks. The topics of the Theme networks are considered regularly in order to safeguard that the work of the Council is up-to-date. The Theme networks are operated as Rural Policy Council – funded projects, for which there are opening calls. Their funding period is normally 3 years, but the funded networks are evaluated annually. The Council also welcomes different actors taking responsibility of its themes: the idea is to avoid a closed circle. Moreover, the functioning of

the Rural Policy Council is regularly evaluated both externally and internally. The rural policy structures are considered well-networked.

Figure 1: Rural Policy Networks in Finland



Source: Luke 2020

The Rural Policy Council is a cross-sectoral network, and consists of the work of its members who act both nationally, regionally and locally. All members are equal, irrespective if it is a ministry or an NGO. The Council has few full-time workers, such as the Secretary General who is responsible for the operative work and is the Head of the Secretariat, and part-time workers. The Secretariat consists of members whose organisations are active in rural policy. Their (part-time) work is funded by their own organisations, except for those who run a Theme on a project-basis. Theme network project leaders are called special advisors in their theme, and they are always members of the Secretariat. They are employed by their background organization, and work from different parts of the country.

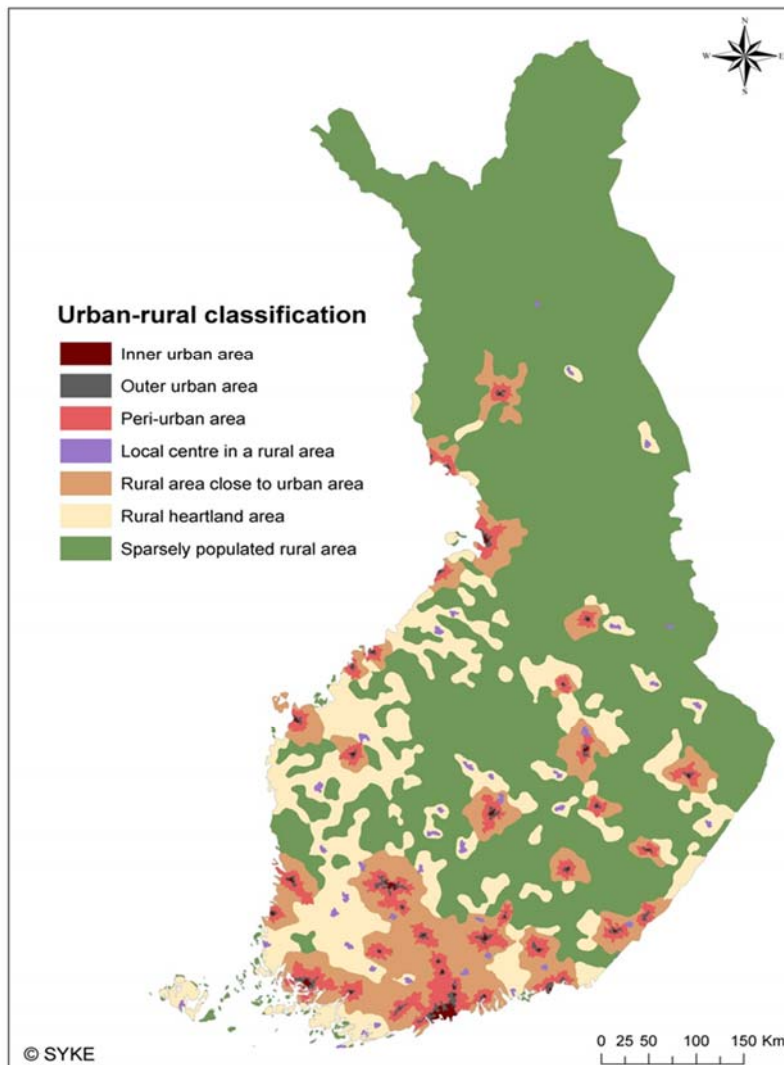
In their respective themes, the Theme networks function nationally and are responsible for the development of rural policy and the preparation of policy measures in line with the guidelines of the Rural Policy Council. The networks are funded by the research and development resources of the Council. The activities are prepared and coordinated by specialist experts hired on a network-by-network basis.

The current five national networks (2017-2019) are:

- Sparsely populated areas (HAMA) (as to the area, see the map below)
- Viable operational environment (INFRA)
- Citizen participation and rural welfare (KAHVEE)
- Knowledge and employment (OTE)
- Swedish speaking areas (IDNET)

The spatial scale of the networks are the rural areas of Finland (mainland).

Figure 1: Urban-rural classification in Finland



Source: SYKE

## 2. Background information

Rural policy encompasses all sectoral policies that affect rural areas and their populations, industries and actors. Rural policy forms a national structure that operates via its networks both regionally and locally. The aim is to support the government in cross-administrative and strategically important rural policy issues. The work of Rural Policy Networks is central to the promotion of rural policy objectives. Currently, rural perspectives are not always visible in the national policymaking.

Rural Policy Networks aim to enhance social, economic and ecological sustainability in rural areas. They aim to improve and maintain public infrastructure and social services, and to promote rural livelihoods and living. In the rural-urban context, the aim of rural policy is to contribute to a better consideration of the rural perspective in decision-making. Rural policy contributes to the vitality of rural areas and to the well-being and living conditions of the people who live and work in the rural areas. Rural public infrastructure and social services form a key aspect of the work. Rural Policy Council provides the nation and its decision-makers with a rural lens: valorizing the rural dimension of health, education or infrastructure issues, but it has also a small budget to fund research and development projects.

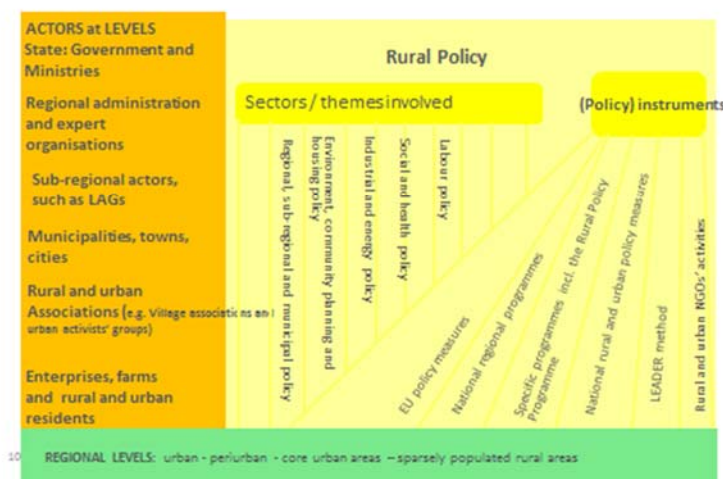
The work of rural policy is characterized by a network governance approach in which the rural sector is developed at various levels through cooperation between the public, private and third sectors. Network projects in the field of rural policy give concrete expression to the activities.

### 3. Main Description

The Rural Policy Networks contribute to the implementation of the tasks of Rural Policy Council, MANE, and the measures of the 2014-2020 Rural Development Program. The networks bring together various actors from villages to state administration, with the aim of influencing a better consideration of the rural perspective in decision-making.

The networks are funded from the national rural development funds available to the Rural Policy Council, and may include research institutes, NGOs, interest groups and ministries. The sources of development funds are the State Budget Rural Development Article 30.10.63 and the Agricultural Development Fund, Makera. They also receive funding from the member

Figure 2: Rural Policy in Finland



Source: Luke

organisations of the Rural Policy Council, in the form of labour paid by them. E.g. the Vice-Secretary Generals, who participate in the work of the Theme networks, are not paid at all by the Council. The budget of the Theme networks varies depending on the width of their field.

The current five networks:

The **HAMA network** is the only one in Finland that looks at the sparsely populated rural areas and promotes specific issues in these areas. The goal of the network is to make the sparsely populated rural areas good places for business, living and leisure.

The task of the **INFRA network** is to ensure the conditions for the rural environment. Key themes are roads; data communications; water and waste management; electric power distribution; transport network; land use and planning. In addition, the network addresses everyday security issues in rural areas and issues related to the sustainable use of the nature and natural resources.

The key themes of the **KAHVEE network** are: rural issues linked to the planned health and social services reform and assessment of its rural impacts; the challenges of structural inequality, in particular equal access to services; strengthening civic and rural activity; promotion of representative and direct democracy.

In its work, the **OTE network** focuses on strengthening rural skills and developing the business environment, with the aim of increasing the vitality of rural areas, employment and the competitiveness of businesses. The operation of the OTE network is aimed at ensuring the availability and quality of education; promoting lifelong learning opportunities in rural areas; ensuring the launch of growth services in the planned county government reform in a way that supports rural employment and entrepreneurship; and promoting the emergence of new vitality-enhancing services, approaches and networks. Particular attention is also given to new forms of work and employment and to the labor potential of migrants.

The **IDNET network** operates in Swedish. It cooperates with other rural policy networks and focuses on knowledge and employment, citizenship and well-being, and Nordic and international co-operation. The aim is to develop and secure access to good quality education and lifelong learning opportunities in rural areas. The aim is also to support more active and effective civic engagement in rural areas by developing and piloting a partnership approach.

The Rural Policy Council MANE appointed by the government, the Secretariat and their member organizations together with the Rural Policy Networks, and the national rural research and development projects funded by the Council, form an extensive network of rural policies. The main challenges of the rural policy networks contain relative lack of visibility and influence in bringing the rural dimension to the national policy level and administrative structures. Enhancing factor, however, is the network governance approach.

The Rural Policy Networks are part of the network governance approach in which the rural sector is developed at various levels through cooperation between the public, private and third sectors. The Secretariat coordinates the work nationally. The Theme networks function

as networks: their members come from different parts of the country and represent different actors. E.g. the Theme network for sparsely populated areas works with the municipalities and organisations as well as enterprises active in those areas. As it is a voluntary network, no-one is obliged to participate, but those who do, are very committed to the action, since the network is one of the influential channels available. Due to their structures, the Rural Policy Networks form a good practice worth considering in other contexts.

#### 4. References

European Commission (2010) Europe 2020: A Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2020:FIN:EN:PDF>

Rural Policy (2020). <https://www.ruralpolicy.fi/en>