

Fragmentation of Rural Policy Approaches in the Baltic Sea Region

Introduction

Research on policy mobilities examines how policies, ideas, and practices travel over time and space. This is not the copying of an innovative policy initiative, but the transfer of ideas that have emerged in a specific regional context or locality and are then transferred to another regional context or locality with characteristic social and political conditions. These studies move beyond traditional policy transfer research by emphasising the relational and dynamic nature of policymaking, recognising that policies, ideas, and practices are actively transformed as they circulate in space.

Due to diverging progress in the adaptation of innovative (new) policies, the states of the Baltic Sea region are in different phases of spatial transformation processes. However, most research on the spatial mobility of policy initiatives and ideas focuses on urban policies. We, instead, focus on the rural Baltic Sea region. Furthermore, we address diverse aspects of fragmented policy approaches in the Baltic Sea region with a special focus on the financial system from a rural policy perspective.

Countries surrounding the Baltic Sea are significantly shaped by rurality, compared to other European regions. In this chapter, we aim to clarify how rural areas are defined in the countries bordering the Baltic Sea. Furthermore, common themes of rural policies are identified and analysed. In addition, this chapter focuses on fiscal decentralisation and task responsibilities in the Baltic Sea region. The supply of public infrastructure and services of general interest depends on a critical mass of demand within a given region to ensure accessibility for the population. Demand may be insufficient because of low population density in rural areas and long distances to agglomerations. To examine the role of local governments in different countries of the Baltic Sea region, we distinguish public finance systems and decision-making power by their degree of decentralisation.

Mobility of Policies for Rural Areas

Fragmented Conceptualisations of Spaces

The initial situation in the rural Baltic Sea region is complex, as neither the Baltic Sea region nor the rural are uniformly defined.¹ Rather, it is characterised by diverse spatial constructions and a multitude of policies with varying thematic references. In the following, the Baltic Sea region is defined via the immediate neighbouring states, but without Russia due to data availability. Consequently, the Baltic Sea region consists of the eight countries *Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Germany*. The geographical proximity to the Baltic Sea also plays a role and the chapter therefore focuses on the *northern German states* within Germany, especially *Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania*.

Formal definitions of rural or rural areas are communicated via the statistics portals of the respective federal states (Table 1). In Germany, the *Thünen Institute's Landatlas*—which has been developed on behalf of the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Regional Identity (BMLEH)—is the basis for analytical demarcations.² Sparsely populated rural areas on the one hand and urban centres on the other represent the two poles of settlement structure and land use³ An administratively delimited region (at district level, NUTS 3 in Germany) is more rural the more dispersed the residential development is, the lower the settlement density and the number of inhabitants in the surrounding area, the more land is used for agriculture and forestry and the more remote it is from the centre. The result is an index of rurality. In addition, the regions are differentiated according to their socio-economic situation, taking into account the areas of income, employment, health, education, housing and public services. In this way, it is recognised that rurality can be fundamentally associated with socio-economic risks and opportunities.

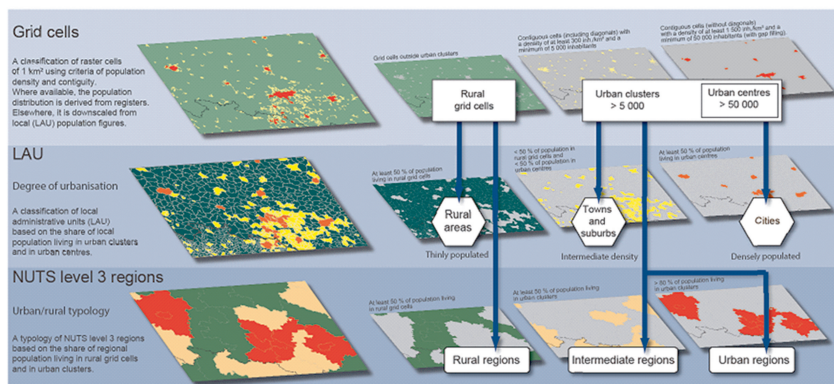
In most countries in the Baltic Sea region, population density and population size are the two most important demarcation criteria for rurality, although the threshold values can vary considerably. The degree of rurality

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- 1 Klemeshev, Andrei P./Korneevets, Valentin S./Palmowski, Tadeusz/Studzieniecki, Tomasz/Fedorov, Gennady M.: Approaches to the definition of the Baltic Sea Region, in: *Baltic Region* 9 (2017), No. 4, pp. 4–20, <https://doi.org/10.5922/2079-8555-2017-4-1>.
 - 2 Bundesministerium für Landwirtschaft, Ernährung und Heimat (BMLEH): *Der Thünen-Landatlas: Karten und Daten zu ländlichen Räumen Deutschlands*, karten.landatlas.de (27.02.2026).
 - 3 Küpper, Patrick: *Abgrenzung und Typisierung ländlicher Räume*, Thünen Working Paper 68, Braunschweig 2016.

in Germany (see Table 1), which is the most complex, has a special position in this respect. In the countries of the Baltic Sea region, spatial references are mostly established via administrative or territorial boundaries and/or geographical information systems are used for small-scale operationalisation. It is significant that there are sometimes complementary definitions of rurality used. In Germany, at a regional level, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania has introduced the concept of ›rural experimentation spaces‹ with special regional needs for action, which were introduced as a new spatial category in the state's 2016 *Spatial Development Programme (Landesraumentwicklungsprogramm)*. At the EU level, LEADER regions have been designed for policy purposes which stands for *Liaison entre actions de développement de l'économie rurale*. Overall, there is no standardised definition of rural or rural areas in the countries of the Baltic Sea region, although similarities between individual countries (e.g., Sweden and Denmark, Finland and Estonia) are shown in Table 1.

Rurality is being standardised in terms of definition at European level despite the heterogeneity of national states. This also forms a possible frame of reference for the Baltic Sea region. EU statistics differentiate between urban and rural regions at NUTS 3 level. Firstly, rural areas are identified on the basis of population patterns, whereby a distinction is made between rural and urban ›clusters‹.⁴ Urban ›clusters‹ are neighbouring 1 km² grid cells with a density of at least 300 inhabitants per km² and at least 5000 inhabitants. Rural areas are defined as residual areas and lie outside urban clusters. The NUTS 3 regions are then differentiated on the basis of the share of rural population: ›predominantly rural‹ with a population share in rural areas of more than 50 %; ›intermediate‹ with a population share in rural areas of between 20 % and 50 %; ›predominantly urban‹ with a population share in rural areas of less than 20 %. Distortions due to extremely small regions are resolved by grouping them into neighbourhoods. Finally, the size of the urban centres is taken into account. For example, a predominantly rural region with an urban centre with more than 200,000 inhabitants, which accounts for at least 25 % of the regional population, is classified as intermediate. An intermediate region with an urban centre with more than 500,000 inhabitants, which accounts for at least 25 % of the regional population, is also classified as predominantly urban (Figure 1).

4 Eurostat: Urban–rural typology, Rural Development. Methodology, ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/rural-development/methodology (25.07.2023).

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Fragmented Conceptualisations of Policies

For Germany, a document analysis based on publications by the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (2014 to 2020) produces meaningful *word clouds*.⁵ Figure 2 shows results in German language as published. Examples are shown for the year 2020 (Figure 2a) and overall (Figure 2b). The enormous variety of topics in the respective year and the enormous dynamics of the content over the years (cross-sectional and longitudinal analysis) become clear. If the multitude of words and topics is reduced to the words that occur in all years, recurring words are noticeable on the one hand (e.g., ›Landwirtschaft [agriculture]‹, ›ländlich [rural]‹, ›Entwicklung [development]‹, ›Er-

Fragmentation of Task Responsibilities: Public Service Provision

Rural areas in the Baltic Sea region are facing challenges in supplying public infrastructure and services of general interest. Providing them efficiently depends on a critical mass of demand within a given region to ensure accessibility for the population. In rural-peripheral regions, demand is often insufficient because of low population density or long distances to agglomerations. These characteristics are commonly found in all countries of the Baltic Sea region, albeit to varying degrees.

In the following, we are using the example of public service provision in rural areas as an example for fragmentation of task responsibilities and financial resources among different government levels (central and local). Infrastructure and services for education, social and health care as well as recreation, sports and cultural entities need to be provided to a certain degree in all regions. It is already stated in the literature that the provision of services of general interest has a positive impact on local welfare.⁶ These services of general interest are offered at the local level and the different models to finance them are analysed with a focus on challenges in rural areas. These challenges arise, in particular, because of an insufficient number of users in each location as a result of low population densities and scattered settlement patterns.

To examine the role of local governments in different countries of the Baltic Sea region, we distinguish public finance systems and decision-making power by their degree of decentralisation. More centralised states seem to be more efficient in supplying infrastructure and services in administrative terms. Nevertheless, decentralisation may lead to a better supply of public goods in all kinds of regions because municipalities know their citizens' preferences best (*fiscal federalism*⁷).

Levels of decentralisation differ among the countries of the Baltic Sea region. As a result, different levels of the government and administrative

6 Zekun Li/Shenjing He/Shiliang Su/Guie Li/Fei Chen: Public Services Equalization in Urbanizing China: Indicators, Spatiotemporal Dynamics and Implications on Regional Economic Disparities, in: Social Indicators Research. An International and Interdisciplinary Journal for Quality-of-Life Measurement 152 (2020), No. 1, pp. 1–65, DOI: 10.1007/s11205–020–02405–9; Li, Ling/Zhang, Xueli /Chen, Yuan/Wu, Guobin/Liu, Bingsheng: Equity analysis of public service delivery among regions from temporal and spatial perspectives, in: Regional Studies 57 (2022), No. 5, pp. 935–945, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2022.2110228>.

7 Oates, Wallace E.: Fiscal Federalism, New York 1972; id.: An Essay on Fiscal Federalism, in: Journal of Economic Literature 37 (1999), No. 3, pp. 1120–1149, DOI: 10.1257/jel.37.3.1120.

branches are responsible for providing services and infrastructure of general interest. We are primarily interested in the fiscal and administrative decentralisation of states. In general, the more influence the local level has over its own budget, the more it is considered decentralised.

Centralised governments combine budget and administrative powers at the state level and can make the same public goods and infrastructure available everywhere. Cost efficiency arises when economies of scale can be utilised.⁸ As a consequence, in terms of public goods, shrinking costs due to one-size-fits-all solutions and high user numbers. Additionally, spill over effects and free riders can be reduced⁹, because subnational administrative borders are less important. In contrast, when a local government provides goods and infrastructure in and for its own jurisdiction, it cannot exclude users from other cities and municipalities. These users (free-riders) are not taxpayers in the municipality's jurisdiction. Therefore, negative effects like cost disadvantages could arise for the municipality which provides the public infrastructure. It is assumed that negative effects are bigger, if municipalities with fewer inhabitants are providing infrastructures for a comparatively higher share of external users¹⁰, which is often the case in rural regions. As already mentioned initially, in rural regions, public infrastructure and services need to be provided for a smaller number of users, and cost efficiency should not be the only criteria for it.

According to the *fiscal federalism* theory, public services should be *decentralised* to the lowest possible level for reasons of efficiency.¹¹ The administration at the local level knows the specific conditions and can take citizens' preferences into account more easily than central governments for the best-tailored solutions. Therefore, decentralisation is expected to result in a better supply of public goods¹², while centralised states face higher transaction and administrative costs.¹³ States in which fiscal decentralisation is practiced are probably more efficient, as they can respond better to local differences. In an

8 Shani, Ron/Reingewertz, Yaniv/ Vigoda-Gadot, Eran: Regional governments in the rural space: the effectiveness of dual-tier regional councils, in: *Regional Studies* 57 (2022), No. 9, pp. 1816–1831, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2022.2153825>.

9 *ibid.*

10 Zimmermann, Horst/Döring, Thomas: *Kommunal Finanzen: Eine Einführung in die finanzwissenschaftliche Analyse der kommunalen Finanzwirtschaft*, Berlin 2019.

11 Oates: *Fiscal Federalism*; *id.*: *An Essay on Fiscal Federalism*.

12 *ibid.*

13 Martinez-Vazquez, Jorge/McNab, Robert M.: Fiscal Decentralization and Economic Growth, in: *World Development* 31 (2003), No. 9, pp. 1597–1616, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X\(03\)00109-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X(03)00109-8).

empirical study on the effects of decentralisation on municipal budgets for Israel, it has been shown that a regional policy with its own financial administration was able to increase its revenues compared to centrally-administered municipalities¹⁴. If administrative decentralisation is accompanied by fiscal decentralisation, municipal decision-making sovereignty is significantly increased. Additionally, regional competition between municipalities is sparked, which can lead to economic welfare benefits.¹⁵

Decentralisation among the Baltic Sea Region States

Germany is the only federal state among the countries of the Baltic Sea region, which means the intermediate level (*Bundesländer*) are autonomous state levels with their own legislative and executive powers.¹⁶ All the other countries are unitary states, organised more or less on a decentralised basis.¹⁷ The smallest units with self-government are the municipalities. In Germany, there are around 10,700 municipalities,¹⁸ whereas the other Baltic Sea States have between 60 (Lithuania) and 2478 (Poland) local units.¹⁹

Figure 3 shows the overall decentralisation score from zero to three, measured by the *European Committee of the Regions*. The score includes the political, administrative, and fiscal (autonomy) dimensions of decentralisation. It considers many data, like share of local expenses and revenues in the total government budget, as well as documents about the administrative structure and political representation of regional and local authorities at the national level. A score of three means that the sub-national levels have a high impact in all dimensions. Due to its federal system, Germany has the highest score. Although Latvia has lower values in terms of fiscal decentralisation (expenditure and revenues), it shares a similarly high score with Germany. The high level of decentralisation in Latvia is owed to high political decentralisation. In Latvia,

14 Tan, Evrim/Avshalom-Uster, Anna: How does asymmetric decentralization affect local fiscal performance?, in: *Regional Studies* 55 (2021), No. 6, pp. 1071–1083, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2020.1861241>.

15 *ibid.*

16 Zimmermann/Döring: *Kommunal финанzen*.

17 European Committee of the Regions: Division of Powers, <portal.cor.europa.eu/division-powers/Pages/default.aspx> (25.07.2023).

18 Statistisches Bundesamt: *Gemeindeverzeichnis-Informationssystem GV-ISys*, www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Laender-Regionen/Regionales/Gemeindeverzeichnis/_inhalt.html (25.07.2023).

19 European Committee of the Regions: Division of Powers.

the ability to influence policy making and representation at the national level is quite high. There is also a good legal basis for self-government at the local level.

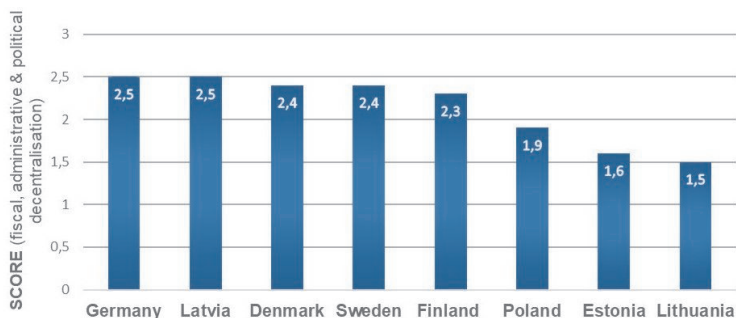


Figure 3: Overall decentralisation scores of countries in the Baltic Sea region. Source: authors' calculation based on European Committee of the Regions: Division of Powers.

Denmark and Sweden have lower political decentralisation values, but in terms of administrative and fiscal decentralisation they perform well. In Denmark, local government expenditures account for 62 % of total government expenditures. Sweden and Finland have quite a high local revenue autonomy. Besides Germany, Finland is the only country with legislative powers on sub-national levels.²⁰ In addition, 51 % of the income of Finnish municipalities are local taxes and 21 % of charges and fees apply to local services.²¹ That means, local welfare is strongly connected to local public infrastructure and services.

Poland and the other two Baltic states possess significantly lower decentralisation scores. Poland started its devolution process in 1990 with the reestablishment of municipalities. In 1999, major reforms in providing public infrastructure (esp. education and health care) and local administration were introduced.²² Especially in rural regions in the Western parts of Poland, municipalities developed well in terms of local economic activities.²³ Since then,

20 *ibid.*

21 *ibid.*

22 Brzezinski, Michal/Myck, Michal/Najsztub, Mateusz: Sharing the gains of transition: Evaluating changes in income inequality and redistribution in Poland using combined survey and tax return data, in: *European Journal of Political Economy* 73 (2022), 102121, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2021.102121>.

23 Freier, Ronny/Myck, Michal/Najsztub, Mateusz: Lights along the frontier: convergence of economic activity in the proximity of the Polish–German border, 1992–

Poland has a solid legal basis for self-government, but less fiscal autonomy. After Poland was on a path towards democratisation and decentralisation for many years, it was found that Poland has experienced a »democratic backsliding« since 2016.²⁴

Among the states of the Baltic Sea region, Estonia and Lithuania have shown the least progress in terms of devolution. The main reason for their low score is the small share of overall subnational expenditures and revenues compared to the total government budget. Nevertheless, they perform well in political (shared rank 2) decentralisation, especially with the »ability of subnational entities to influence policymaking«.²⁵ Additionally, Estonia has high competence in administrative decentralisation (rank 2 among all *EU* states). Estonia (in 2017) and Latvia (in 2009) abolished the regional (intermediate) level of government and empowered the municipalities.²⁶

Task Responsibilities on Local Levels

Local competencies for different tasks show a rather homogenous picture for many tasks. Figure 4 shows the local competencies in providing different public infrastructure and services. The higher the score, the greater the influence of the municipalities and the less intervention from the central level. It is notable that even in Germany, a federal country, only social tasks and public health are fully in the hands of local authorities. The German districts (>*Kreise*<) as the superior municipal level are responsible for health care and social security.

2012, in: *Applied Economics* 53 (2021), No. 36, pp. 4245–4262, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00036846.2021.1898534>.

24 Brzezinski/Myck/Najstut: Sharing the gains of transition.

25 European Committee of the Regions: Division of Powers.

26 *ibid.*

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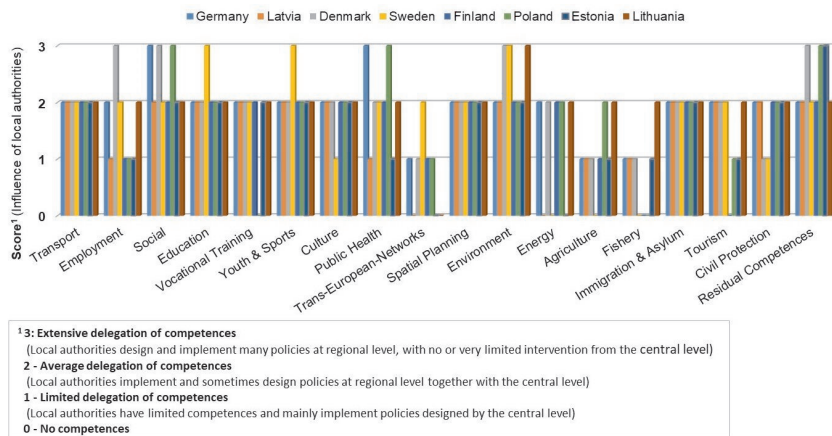


Figure 4: Decentralisation of responsibilities for specific tasks in countries of the Baltic Sea region. Source: authors' calculation based on European Committee of the Regions: Division of Powers.

Also, in Poland, the tasks of public health and social care are delegated extensively to the municipalities. In Denmark, the local level has full responsibility for employment, social, environmental, and residual public tasks. Swedish municipalities, in comparison, focus on education, youth/sports, and the environment. Latvia, which has the same decentralisation score as Germany, has no local competences without any intervention possibilities from the central government. The same is true for Finland.

Transport and spatial planning are tasks on the local level everywhere, but not without intervention from the central government. In contrast to that, trans-European networks, agriculture, and fisheries are quite often not delegated to municipalities. A probable reason for that is that these tasks have nationwide implications and are therefore better placed at the central level.

Summary and Conclusions

To summarise, rurality is not uniformly defined in the countries of the Baltic Sea region resulting in fragmented conceptualisations of rural spaces. Despite the stated national heterogeneity, a standardised definition of rurality exists at the European level as a kind of reference framework for the countries of the Baltic Sea region. There is a fragmentation of policies in the countries of the Baltic Sea region with varying thematic references in the context of 'agriculture and rural areas'. For empirical analyses of rural transformation processes

in the Baltic Sea region, the results suggest multiscale policy network analyses which are place-based and actor-centred.

The degree of decentralisation is strongly connected to the responsibility for providing public infrastructure and services at a local level, i.e., municipalities or intermediate sub-national levels. A literature review revealed the advantages of decentralised states in comparison to more centralised states. Particularly rural regions can benefit from decentralisation because local actors know their citizens' preferences best. However, the allocation of financial resources needs to be ensured in rural regions, which often have a smaller tax base and higher costs for public services and infrastructure because of a lower population density.

Within the Baltic Sea region, Germany is the most decentralised country. However, most of the other countries have quite high decentralisation indices, too. Decentralised structures can have different dimensions: Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania have quite high political decentralisation scores, whereas Denmark has a high fiscal decentralisation score, for example. When different tasks are analysed in more detail, tasks that are exclusively fulfilled by the municipalities differ among the considered states. Most of the tasks are minimum implemented and fulfilled by local and central levels in cooperation. Some countries, like the Baltic states (Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania), are still on a path towards more decentralised structures. Nevertheless, some tasks with nationwide consequences are still better placed at the central level.

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Table 1: Definitions of rural areas in the Baltic Sea region (national level)

Definitions of rural areas in the Baltic Sea region						
Country	Denmark	Sweden	Finland	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania
Reference	Built-Up Areas (Distance between buildings: not more than 200 meters)	Built-up and developed land (land occupied by buildings and associated land)	Grid cells: 250 x 250 m	Grid cells: 500 x 500 m administrative classification	Territorial division and administrative classification	Administrative division
Categories	Regions of the capital, cities and towns, rural areas	Urban areas, localities, small localities	Classification of grid cells	Urban, small urban, rural	Cities, towns, rural areas	Urban and rural residential areas
Differentiation	Urban area	Rural area	Urban area	Urban	Rural areas (sparsely populated areas)	Urban areas
	Towns 200 to 9999 inhabitants	At least 50–199 inhabitants	Agglomerations with more than 15,000 residents	Population of at least 5000, density of more than 1000 people per km ²	At least 500 inhabitants	Rural areas
	Cities from 10000 inhabitants	Less than 200 inhabitants	Agglomerations with more than 15,000 residents	Areas that have not been identified as urban	Cities	Urban areas
					Townships	Villages
					Compactly built-up area	No characteristics of any of the other settlement types
					Population of more than 3000 persons	Number of residents ranging from 500 to 5000
					More than two thirds work in industry, production or social infrastructure	More than half work in industry, production or social infrastructure
					Or historically conditioned status	Or historically conditioned status
						2 Low settlement density
						3 High proportion of agricultural and forestry area
						4 Peripheral location to large centres
						5 Small number of inhabitants in the surrounding area

Source: Own survey based on country-specific information; except for Germany, taken from state statistics portals (as of 2023)

Table 2: Document analysis—Agriculture and Rural Areas Policy (EU level)

Topics by country in the Baltic Sea region											
Categorisation according to specification: rural (word according to rural)		GER	DEN	SWE	FIN	EST	LAT	LTU	POL	Sum	
Development	Development Interventions	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	
	Development Programme	0	1	0	0	0	2	0	1	4	
	Development Budget and Funding	0	0	0	1	1	2	1	0	5	
	Development	6	6	6	5	6	6	6	6	47	
Population and Settlement	Population	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	5	
	Settlements	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	
Geographical	Area	6	8	8	11	6	8	9	11	67	
	Region	2	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	4	
	Businesses and Enterprises	2	0	1	2	2	1	0	0	8	
Economic	Economies	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	5	
	Jobs	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	
	Strategy	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	
Implementation	Conditions	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	
	Actors	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	
		19	18	18	21	18	21	18	18	151	

Source: Own survey based on national strategy papers on the Common Agricultural Policy (as of 2023)

Source: Own survey based on national strategy papers on the Common Agricultural Policy (as of 2023)

