

Culture and cultural innovation



RURACTIVE

RURACTIVE Forum
Background document



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This document summarises key challenges and opportunities in rural culture and cultural innovation, drawing on RURACTIVE project activities, rural innovation hubs (Dynamos) and policy research. It presents the project approach to this Rural Development Driver (RDD) and shows how local insights on cultural identity, creative spaces, and community participation inform broader policy discussions.

The RURACTIVE Forum – Third meeting explores early directions for rural cultural policy within a four-stage co-creation process. Outputs will be refined and validated at the Fourth meeting on 30 June 2026.

1. Introduction

Culture and cultural innovation are increasingly recognised as important drivers of social cohesion, territorial identity, and economic diversification in rural areas across the European Union. **Culture encompass tangible and intangible heritage, crafts, storytelling, creative industries, artistic practices, local traditions, cultural landscapes, and community-based artistic initiatives.** These assets contribute not only to cultural preservation but also to rural resilience, sustainable tourism, social inclusion, and place-based innovation.

Within the RURACTIVE framework, culture and cultural innovation are treated as a Rural Development Driver (RDD) with **systemic impacts across social participation, economic diversification, and territorial cohesion.** Evidence and insights emerging from RURACTIVE highlight the role of cultural identity, creative spaces and participation in rural transformation.

2. Strategic EU policy context

Culture in the European Union operates within a shared governance framework where Member States retain primary responsibility for cultural policy while the EU provides supporting and coordinating actions. Several EU policy frameworks shape cultural development:

- **EU Cultural Policy Framework** – Article 167 TFEU - Establishes the EU's role in supporting cultural cooperation, safeguarding cultural diversity, and promoting Europe's shared cultural heritage.
- **New European Agenda for Culture** - promotes three core policy objectives:
 - strengthening culture's social dimension, including social cohesion and well-being
 - supporting culture's economic dimension, including creative industries and innovation
 - reinforcing culture's external dimension, strengthening international cultural relations
- **Creative Europe Programme (2021–2027)** - the EU's main funding instrument supporting cultural and creative sectors, promoting cross-border collaboration, cultural diversity, and cultural innovation.
- **European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage** - this framework strengthens cooperation on heritage protection, digitalisation, research, and resilience of cultural assets.

2.1 Evolving EU policy instruments and opportunities

Recent and emerging EU initiatives are expanding the policy landscape for cultural development:

- **New European Bauhaus** – integrates culture, sustainability, and design to promote inclusive and aesthetically driven territorial transformation.
- **Digital Europe Programme** – supports digital innovation in cultural sectors, including digitisation of cultural heritage and immersive technologies.
- **Cultural Compass** – a proposed strategic framework aiming at aligning cultural policy with education, innovation, and digital transformation agendas.

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- **AI and creative industries initiatives** – emerging EU strategies seek to strengthen technological innovation within cultural production while supporting Europe’s creative economy.

3. RURACTIVE integrated approach to culture and cultural innovation

Within RURACTIVE, this thematic area is addressed by **working with local residents, cultural associations, artists, heritage groups and community organisations** to explore how cultural identity, creative practices and local traditions can strengthen social life in rural areas. The process involves recognising both existing cultural assets and barriers to participation, and then co-developing small-scale, community-driven activities (such as cultural routes, creative workshops, intergenerational exchanges or local storytelling initiatives). The emphasis is on inclusiveness, community empowerment and the revitalisation of cultural practices in ways that reflect each territory’s distinctive character and needs. This supports stronger cultural participation and helps sustain living heritage in rural settings.

3.1 Cross-cutting priority considerations

When RURACTIVE communities identify their main challenges, explore solutions and refine such solutions into practical plans, three cross-cutting priorities are considered:

- **Climate change mitigation and adaptation:** especially relevant when cultural activities involve heritage sites or outdoor spaces affected by climate impacts.
- **Biodiversity:** considered when cultural practices relate to traditional landscape stewardship or take place in culturally significant natural settings.
- **Social justice and inclusion:** central to this thematic area, with a strong focus on widening participation, supporting intergenerational exchange and engaging groups facing barriers to cultural involvement.

4. Structural culture and cultural innovation challenges in rural territories

Evidence from RURACTIVE project activities highlights persistent structural barriers affecting cultural ecosystems across rural regions.

4.1 Loss of cultural knowledge and traditions

Depopulation and ageing populations threaten the continuity of traditional crafts, local knowledge, and intangible cultural heritage.

- Outmigration of younger generations weakens intergenerational knowledge transfer.
- Traditional practices and storytelling traditions risk disappearing without active preservation.

4.2 Limited participation in cultural life

Access to cultural activities remains uneven across rural communities.

- Women, young people, migrants, and elderly residents often face barriers to participation.
- Geographic isolation and limited infrastructure restrict cultural programming.

4.3 Weak visibility of rural cultural assets

Local heritage and cultural initiatives frequently lack visibility within wider tourism and cultural networks.

- Limited promotion reduces economic opportunities linked to cultural tourism.
- Small-scale cultural actors struggle to access wider markets and audiences.

4.4 Governance and coordination gaps

Fragmented governance structures often constrain the development of integrated cultural ecosystems.

- Cultural actors, tourism operators, and local authorities may operate in parallel rather than collaboratively.
- Limited institutional coordination reduces long-term sustainability of cultural initiatives.

The examples presented in Table 1 illustrate some of the challenges collaboratively diagnosed in two different rural innovation hubs (Dynamos) as well as various proposed solutions to address them.

Table 1 Culture and cultural innovation Examples from RURACTIVE Dynamos

Dynamo 6 Zagori, Greece		Dynamo 12 Törbel, Switzerland	
Identified challenges	Solutions developed	Identified challenges	Solutions developed
<p>Loss of traditional cultural knowledge and practices: crafts, agro-pastoral traditions, and oral histories risk disappearing due to ageing and outmigration.</p> <p>Underutilised cultural routes and abandoned historic paths: heritage trails lack maintenance and visibility, limiting cultural and tourism value</p> <p>Limited cultural engagement for youth and vulnerable groups: women, unemployed persons, youth, and minorities often excluded from cultural production.</p>	<p>Pathways of art (Art residency and cultural route revitalisation): reactivation of abandoned paths with installations, QR-coded oral histories, and intergenerational.</p> <p>Living lab for regenerative tourism and culture: community-led creative hub offering workshops, cultural programming, and inclusive participation opportunities.</p>	<p>Endangered local cultural heritage and traditions: declining agriculture and population loss weaken continuity of crafts, customs, and local identity.</p> <p>Village centre is losing cultural vitality: limited activities reduce social cohesion and cultural visibility.</p> <p>Landscape overgrowth obscuring cultural landscape values: reduced farming activity leads to landscape succession covering cultural features.</p>	<p>"Terbil-Päcklini" cultural and local economy packages: packages combining local products, cultural stories, and tourism experiences.</p> <p>Art and cultural volunteer initiative: volunteers support farmers, cultural events, landscape care, and storytelling.</p> <p>Transdisciplinary Living Lab: joint science–community–culture hub cocreating exhibitions and heritage stewardship.</p>

5. Emerging innovation pathways and local responses

Within RURACTIVE project activities, participating rural regions are piloting diverse cultural initiatives aimed at revitalising local cultural ecosystems.

Digital and cultural innovation	Creative placemaking
<p>Regions experiment with digital tools to preserve and promote cultural heritage:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> digital storytelling platforms and heritage archives QR-coded cultural routes and interactive interpretation tools 	<p>Cultural initiatives increasingly link heritage preservation with sustainable tourism development:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> cultural routes, heritage festivals, and artistic installations revitalisation of village centres through cultural programming
Landscape-based cultural revitalisation	Community led cultural governance
<p>Projects focus on reconnecting communities with cultural landscapes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> restoration of historical pathways and cultural landscapes maintenance of heritage sites and local landmarks 	<p>Local initiatives emphasise participatory governance and community engagement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> volunteer cultural networks and local heritage associations youth and women-led cultural initiatives

6. Persistent gaps in EU funding and Performance Framework

The role of culture in territorial development is increasingly recognised in policies, yet structural weaknesses remain within EU funding and monitoring systems. Current frameworks often prioritise measurable outputs, such as the number of cultural events or projects funded, while overlooking broader social and territorial impacts. Shortcomings in current EU monitoring and funding frameworks include:

- overemphasis on quantitative indicators rather than qualitative cultural impacts;
- limited recognition of rural cultural ecosystems beyond heritage preservation and tourism;
- fragmented funding instruments across cultural, regional development, and innovation programmes;
- insufficient indicators capturing social cohesion, cultural participation, and creative innovation;
- limited support mechanisms for small-scale rural cultural actors.

7. Implications for proto-policy development

Evidence from RURACTIVE suggests that strengthening rural cultural ecosystems requires **moving beyond heritage preservation toward integrated cultural innovation strategies**. Rural culture can act as a catalyst for community resilience, creative entrepreneurship, and sustainable tourism. Several strategic considerations emerge for policymaking:

- How can **EU cultural policies better support small-scale, community-led cultural initiatives**, especially in rural areas where local actors face limited visibility, resources and access to funding?

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- What forms of **EU support could strengthen the preservation and transmission of local cultural knowledge**, including crafts, traditions and intergenerational storytelling, which many rural communities identify as at risk?
 - How can **EU programmes promote inclusive cultural participation**, ensuring that women, youth, older adults, migrants and people with disabilities can engage meaningfully in rural cultural life?
 - What **mechanisms could help rural territories develop sustainable cultural and creative opportunities**, linking cultural identity with social innovation, local entrepreneurship or educational pathways?
 - How might **EU initiatives encourage responsible, place-based cultural valorisation**, ensuring that heritage, cultural assets and local identities are sustained without creating pressure on communities or landscapes?

8. ADDITIONAL READING

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