



**IN  
SITU**

place-based **innovation** of  
**cultural and creative** industries  
in **non-urban** areas

(GA Project 101061747)

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## Cultural policy proposals for CCIs in IN SITU Lab areas

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## Executive Summary

This report sets out a practical, tested evidence-based method for co-creating cultural policy with Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs) in non-urban contexts, and explores how it has been applied across the six IN SITU Lab regions (Western coastal periphery, Ireland; Rauma and Eurajoki, West Coast and Baltic Sea archipelago, Finland; West Region, Iceland; Valmiera County, Latvia; Azores archipelago, mid-Atlantic Ocean, Portugal; and Šibenik-Knin County, Croatia). The purpose is twofold: first, to offer clear, reusable tools that local, regional and national actors can adapt; second, to translate what works on the ground in order to further articulate this into policy at national or regional level as well as European. The document is intended for practitioners and community organisations in non-urban areas, for policymakers at different levels of government, and for researchers interested in cultural policy and territorial cohesion. The section “How to use this document” (p. 10) provides entry points for different reader groups so that they can move directly to the sections that best match their role and needs.

**What this report delivers.** Part 1 provides a replicable method: plain-language definitions, a toolbox of participatory instruments and a ten-step roadmap that employs these instruments, from initial connection with the community to strategic advocacy. Part 2 demonstrates the method in practice: a cross-analysis of six diverse territories, followed by proposals for national or regional authorities and for the European Union, and next steps tailored to each IN SITU Lab.

**Why this matters.** Non-urban CCIs are central to cohesion, identity, learning and well-being. Current frameworks often over-privilege metropolitan models, short-term visibility and tourism metrics. The Labs show that non-urban cultural ecosystems thrive when policy recognises social and cultural value alongside economic outcomes, lowers administrative thresholds, and brings decision-making closer to daily practice. Continuity, inclusion and local agency are the decisive variables.

**Core findings from the Labs.** Across Ireland, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, the Azores/Portugal and Croatia, common patterns recur: dispersed populations and transport constraints, strong but stretched volunteer bases, underused community spaces, and fragmented communication between local actors and higher levels of government. Where modest, reliable support exists for coordinating time, accessing venue spaces, sharing calendars and simple reporting, participation grows and trust deepens. Gender equality, diversity and youth inclusion improve the quality and resilience of cultural life when they are treated as the basis for activity design rather than burdens.

At the same time, the IN SITU Labs differ in important ways. Some regions combine strong tourism with depopulating hinterlands, while others rely more on industry or heritage with modest visitor numbers. Island and archipelago contexts face specific challenges of connectivity and uneven infrastructure between central hubs and smaller communities. Policy frameworks also vary, which shows that similar challenges are addressed through different institutional tools, for example, artist income schemes, cultural development strategies or facility reuse initiatives.

### *Flagship recommendations:*

1. **Recognition of community culture.** Fund and value community-anchored cultural work, not only prestige events, large visitor numbers or short-term economic returns. Treat social cohesion, local identity and well-being as legitimate outcomes in their own right, with proportionate reporting requirements.
2. **Accessible communication.** Adopt a plain-language standard for calls, guidelines and feedback, with short summaries and local translations. Publish who decides, when and on what criteria, and share brief outcomes in public channels.
3. **Low-threshold, multi-year micro-funding.** Where grant or project funding is available, set aside a small, stable share for micro-grants in the range typically managed by small associations and volunteer groups. Allow re-granting via trusted local intermediaries, and keep application and reporting procedures simple.
4. **Proximity governance.** Provide support for coordination and networking among local actors by mandating and resourcing municipal or regional liaisons who work closely with community conveners. Their role is to ease access to infrastructure and services and to unblock small but decisive matters such as room access, minor purchases and calendar coordination, without replacing community leadership.
5. **Third places and spaces.** Enable public buildings and informal venues to serve as cultural hubs through small upgrades, shared equipment and predictable opening hours, with clear, light procedures for community use.
6. **Diversity and sustainability.** Reserve remunerated seats for under-represented groups in advisory or steering roles, recognise coordination as eligible work, and provide basic training on inclusion and accessibility.
7. **Reflexive monitoring.** Replace rigid indicators with short, comparable rubrics plus narrative evidence. Prioritise learning, continuity and repeat participation over one-off numbers.
8. **Portfolio by relatedness.** Help regions identify three to five opportunity areas that build on existing skills and assets, then align funding and partnerships to these portfolios rather than importing metropolitan templates.

**European alignment.** The method and proposals align with EU Cohesion Policy objectives on territorial fairness (2022), the New European Bauhaus emphasis on quality of experience and sustainability (2022), the Common Agricultural Policy's place-based logic (2023) and the Gender Equality Strategy (2020). At the EU level, the report recommends a standard for accessible calls, rural culture funding opportunities with simplified procedures in Creative Europe and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and support for third-space development. Dialogue forums should connect local areas, national ministries and EU services so that learning circulates and programmes intertwine rather than start from scratch.

## How to use this document

This report is intended for a diverse readership: policymakers at European, national and regional scales; local cultural planners and administrators; practitioners and associations in the CCIs; and academic researchers interested in innovation, territorial cohesion and participatory governance. To accommodate these diverse audiences, the document has been structured to serve two complementary functions:

- **Part 1** formulates a replicable methodological framework for the co-creation of cultural policy with Cultural and Creative Industries actors in non-urban contexts. It sets out conceptual foundations, definitions and instruments in a manner that allows regional, national and European actors to adapt and reproduce the process in their own settings.
- **Part 2** demonstrates the application of this framework within the IN SITU project. It presents empirical insights from the Labs and develops policy proposals at national/regional and EU levels. Together, the two parts constitute both a generalisable “how-to” and a concrete demonstration of practice.

The document can be approached selectively according to professional role and time available. At the same time, it is designed to encourage cross-reading: policymakers gain from engaging with practitioner tools; practitioners benefit from seeing how their work fits into policy frameworks; and researchers can link conceptual debates with lived practice. By balancing methodological rigour with accessibility, the report aims to be both academically robust and operationally useful, increasing the likelihood of uptake across diverse non-urban contexts.

To make the document easier to navigate, Table 1 suggests entry points for different types of readers and maps them to relevant chapter sections.



Table 1 - Where to start

If you are	Start with...	Then read...
EU or national policymaker	<a href="#">Executive Summary</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Chapter 2 Definitions</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Section 5.5 Impact measurement</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Chapter 9 Cultural policy proposals — EU level</a></li> </ul>
Regional/municipal official	<a href="#">Executive Summary</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Chapter 8 Cultural policy proposals — local level</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Chapter 5 Methods</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Chapter 6 Roadmap</a> (Steps 1–10)</li> <li>• <a href="#">Chapter 10 Risks</a></li> </ul>
Cultural practitioner/ CCI organisation	<a href="#">Chapter 5 Methods</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Chapter 6 Roadmap</a> (Steps 1–10)</li> </ul>
Funder/foundation	<a href="#">Executive Summary</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Section 5.5 Impact measurement</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Chapter 8 Cultural policy proposals — local level</a></li> </ul>
Researcher/evaluator	<a href="#">Chapter 2 Definitions</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Chapter 4 Context and needs</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Chapter 7 Cross-analysis of IN SITU Labs</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Section 5.5 Impact measurement</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Chapter 10 Risks</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Chapter 11 Country applications</a></li> </ul>

## 1. Introduction

Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs) in non-urban contexts face distinct demographic, infrastructural and socio-economic conditions that shape how culture is produced, shared and sustained in these areas. While these regions cover most of Europe's territory, their cultural realities often remain peripheral to mainstream policy frameworks that have historically been designed for metropolitan centres. Yet, non-urban CCIs generate forms of value that are fundamental to community life, such as social cohesion, identity, learning, and well-being—dimensions that conventional economic metrics tend to overlook.

Over the past decade, research in cultural policy has increasingly recognised these differences and the need for place-sensitive approaches. Nevertheless, existing governance models often remain top-down and urban-centred, overlooking local knowledge and the importance of informal cultural networks. They also struggle to address the everyday constraints of rural and peripheral life, which include dispersed populations, limited infrastructure, heavy reliance on voluntary work, and time economies shaped by seasonal labour and care responsibilities. These conditions can restrict access, weaken continuity and constrain innovation in local cultural ecosystems.

This report responds to those challenges by presenting a comprehensive, evidence-based framework for co-creating cultural policy with non-urban CCIs. It combines analytical reflection with grounded practice developed through the IN SITU project. The framework is not a fixed model but the result of a cumulative process: it has been derived from fieldwork, partner experience and comparative analysis across diverse European regions. It brings together methods that proved effective in practice and translates them into a coherent sequence that can guide policy design and community action.

The report is structured in two interlinked parts:

- **Part 1** consolidates the methodological foundations of this approach. It defines key concepts and terminology, examines the specific needs of non-urban cultural ecosystems and presents practical tools for participatory work, culminating in a ten-step roadmap that synthesises lessons learned throughout the project.
- **Part 2** applies this approach in the six IN SITU Lab regions. It analyses the results of fieldwork, identifies shared patterns and differences, and formulates policy proposals at regional, national and European levels, together with recommendations for further development.

Taken together, the two parts offer both a generalisable method and a grounded presentation of how inclusive cultural policy can be shaped from within non-urban realities. The report aims to support policymakers, practitioners and researchers alike in designing strategies that recognise the social and cultural value of non-urban CCIs, strengthen local agency and ensure that the diversity of Europe's territories is reflected in its cultural policy frameworks.

## 2. Definitions

The IN SITU project operates across diverse territorial, linguistic and disciplinary settings. Moreover, terms such as non-urban, community culture or innovation may carry different meanings for different agents such as policymakers, cultural practitioners and researchers. This variety makes definitional clarity essential. Establishing shared definitions ensures conceptual coherence and increases the likelihood that our methodology can be adapted and reused. At the same time, this report recognises that meanings are not fixed. They are negotiated in practice, shaped by local languages, institutional traditions and sectoral histories.

Accordingly, the definitions presented in Table 2 are not prescriptions but working descriptions that serve three purposes:

- to make the vocabulary of IN SITU transparent to external readers;
- to facilitate translation between different professional registers; and
- to ensure that the policy proposals described in Chapters 8 and 9 can be implemented consistently across settings.

Table 2 - Definitions used in this report, from the IN SITU Concept Guide

Term	Definition
Cohesion (policy)	Cohesion refers to spatial dimensions or place-based effects in relation to policy. The Cohesion Policy of the EU, or Regional Policy, aims to reduce regional and national disparities and improve economic well-being and economic, social, and territorial cohesion in the European Union as mentioned in the Lisbon Treaty, with particular attention paid to rural areas and those affected by the industrial transition and natural or demographic handicap. (European Commission, 2022a)
Community culture (broad culture)	Community Culture can be understood as cultural or artistic expression which, according to a broad concept of culture, refers to activities that derive from the artistic-cultural leisure activities of the general population—in this dimension it could be described as grassroot culture. Community (or grassroot) culture is based on civil society engagement, is mainly local, planned, organised and practised by local or regional communities, for example, choirs, amateur theatre groups, folk dance groups, marching bands and others.
Gender	Gender describes the social construct of a binary gender system assigning specific attributes, roles or skills as being female or male. Gender identity means the personal identification to a role and a gender. Gender is not linked to biological differences and can differ from the biological sex.
Non-urban	Non-urban areas incorporate rural, remote territories and peripheral locations as well as towns, villages and small cities that may serve as regional hubs for broader territories. As ‘extrametropolitan’ areas, these places are defined in opposition to the ‘urban’ of major metropolitan areas and large cities. In research, two approaches to characterising the non-urban are evident: statistical/administrative and conceptual/fluid.
Rurality	Approaches to conceptualising and investigating rurality are varied and diverse. Subjective perceptions and socio-cultural definitions of rurality tend to sit alongside more quantitative approaches. Within this diversity, Keith Halfacree’s (2006) three-fold, entwined structure for analysing rurality provides a useful framework, involving: (1) rural localities as material spaces, (2) symbolic representations of the rural, and (3) the rural as lived experience.
Trademarks	A trademark is “any sign that individualises the goods of a given enterprise and distinguishes them from the goods of its competitors” (WIPO, 2004, p. 54).

Source: Pinto et al. (2024)

### 3. Methodology

This report combines analytical and practice-based research. Rather than testing a pre-defined method, it builds the methodological framework directly from the empirical experiences and findings of the IN SITU project. The process was iterative: practices developed and tested within the Labs informed the conceptualisation of the report and this, in turn, was refined through repeated reflection and cross-analysis. The resulting roadmap is therefore a structured synthesis drawn from what proved effective across diverse non-urban contexts.

The document draws on several strands of material: desk research and policy analysis, including earlier IN SITU outputs, in particular, the report *State of Cultural Policies for CCLs in Non-urban Areas* (Heinicke, Kegler, & Walther, 2024) alongside *Toolkit for a Lab-based Approach in Non-urban Areas* (Rainey, 2025b) and *Methodological Guidance on Capacity Building for Innovation and Entrepreneurship in Non-urban Areas* (Varbanova, Dobрева, & Dzharova-Karakoleva, 2025). Other IN SITU activities that provided valuable insights for this report were the mapping and mentoring activities and qualitative fieldwork carried out in the Labs through interviews, focus groups and participant observation. These sources were continuously cross-checked to build robust layers of insights. Table 3 details the field research and interview activities informing this report.

All planned interviews followed the project's Ethical Guidelines, ensuring informed consent, voluntary participation and anonymisation. Participants were briefed in advance using information sheets and consent forms. During live events and other spontaneous exchanges, only verbal information could be provided; in these cases, the IN SITU context was made explicit, no personal data was collected and participants were given contact details for later clarifications.

The qualitative design produces recommendations grounded in lived experience and local practice. These outcomes are informed propositions that must be interpreted and applied to broader policy frameworks by experts familiar with their own national and regional settings. In addition to the policy proposals, the report formulates recommendations for further development and refinement of the approach.

Table 3 - Field research and interview activities carried out by Universität Hildesheim (SUH)

Date	Type	Description
June 2022	On-site field research, Azores, Portugal	Beate Kegler and Julius Heinicke conducted three days of field research in Ponta Delgada, talking with local residents and CCI actors. This activity was described in the IN SITU report <i>State of Cultural Policies for CCIs in Non-Urban Areas</i> (Heinicke et al., 2024).
May 2023	On-site field research, Rauma and Eurajoki region, Finland	Beate Kegler and Helena Walther conducted five days of field research in Rauma, Eurajoki, Pori and other locations in the Lab area. Part of this activity included several spontaneous interviews with local residents and CCI actors. This activity was described in the IN SITU report <i>State of Cultural Policies for CCIs in Non-Urban Areas</i> (Heinicke et al., 2024).
May 2023	Workshop with Lab partners	As part of an internal IN SITU meeting in Rauma, we conducted a workshop with our partners from the research areas. The aim was to get an overview image of important players in each region, to prepare interviews for each region with more specificity.
May – Sept. 2023	Online Interviews	A total of six Interviews with one or two participants each, for every Lab. The interviewees had been selected by Lab partners and were representatives for the local CCIs. The topic was the Gender Dimension in their region. The Interviews and findings were described in the IN SITU report, <i>Gender Dimension of CCIs in Non-Urban Areas</i> (Walther et al., 2023).
July 2023 – May 2024	Online Interviews	A total of eight online Interviews were conducted with several participants each for every Lab. The interviewees had been selected by Lab partners and were cultural policy experts such as local or regional policy stakeholders, researchers, cultural funders and members of the IN SITU International Advisory Board. The topic was Cultural Policy in the Lab regions. These interviews were described in the IN SITU report <i>State of Cultural Policies for CCIs in Non-Urban Areas</i> (Heinicke et al., 2024).

Date	Type	Description
February 2024	On-site field research, Galway County, Ireland	Beate Kegler and Helena Walther conducted five days of field research in Galway County. Part of the activity were several spontaneous interviews with local residents and CCI actors, in particular, a community radio station, local craftsmen in Roundstone and musicians, bar owners and audiences in different local pubs. This activity was described in the IN SITU report <i>State of Cultural Policies for CCIs in Non-Urban Areas</i> (Heinicke et al., 2024).
February 2024	Workshop with Lab partners	As part of an internal IN SITU meeting in Galway, we conducted a workshop with our partners from the research areas. The aim was to reflect on the findings from the interview series we did on Cultural Policy. This activity was described in the IN SITU report <i>State of Cultural Policies for CCIs in Non-Urban Areas</i> (Heinicke et al., 2024).
June 2024	On-site field research, Valmiera County, Latvia	Beate Kegler and Helena Walther conducted five days of field research in Valmiera County. Part of the activity were several spontaneous interviews with local residents and CCI actors, and participation in a community event at a local ceramic studio in Vaidava and a theatre performance and dance night in the context of <i>Green Nights</i> . This activity was described in the IN SITU report <i>State of Cultural Policies for CCIs in Non-Urban Areas</i> (Heinicke et al., 2024).
August 2024	On-site field research Azores, Portugal	Helena Walther conducted five days of field research on three different islands of the Azores. Part of the activity were several spontaneous interviews with local residents and CCI actors, as well as participation in local concerts and festival activities like a bull run.
September 2024	On-site field research, Šibenik-Knin County, Croatia	Helena Walther conducted five days of field research in Šibenik, Knin and other locations of the County. Part of the activity where several spontaneous interviews with locals and CCI actors, as well as participation in local concerts and festival activities like a Klapa concert.

Date	Type	Description
May – August 2025	Online Interviews	A second series of interviews with local CCI actors of each Lab region was organised with the support of IN SITU Lab colleagues. The purpose was to get feedback on the drafted version of the policy proposals suggested in this report. For each region, an interview with two to four participants was arranged.
June 2025	On-site field research, West Iceland, Iceland	Helena Walther conducted five days of field research in West Iceland, partly together with students from the University of Hildesheim, participating in research activities, conducting interviews and visiting relevant Third Places like libraries, community centers and museums. Part of the activity were several spontaneous interviews with local residents and CCI actors and participating in local events like a traditional folk choir concert and a knitting night.
15.September 2025	Online focus group	Together with our colleagues from INRAE, we held a policy-related Focus Group to reflect our interim findings and policy proposals with local and regional policy stakeholders from each Lab region. Our Lab colleagues selected the interviewees and provided contacts. Each Focus Group was a 1.5-hour Zoom meeting where both INRAE and University of Hildesheim presented the interim findings and the draft version of the proposals that are written in their final form in this report. Afterwards, we engaged in an exchange with the participants to obtain their feedback, thoughts, doubts and questions.
07.Oktober 2025	Online focus group	As a collective work between ENCC, INRAE and SUH, a second Focus Group with representatives at the EU level was organised and conducted. The concept and content were similar to the first Focus Group with a focus on EU level policies.



## Part 1: How to (replicable method)

Part 1 draws together the insights generated throughout the IN SITU project into a coherent approach for working with Cultural and Creative Industries in non-urban contexts. Rather than prescribing a fixed model, it offers a flexible structure that can be adapted to local circumstances, providing a foundation for co-creating cultural policy and initiatives in ways that reflect the lived realities of communities.

The starting point for this part is the recognition that non-urban cultural and creative ecosystems operate under conditions that differ fundamentally from those of metropolitan areas. Sparse populations, limited mobility, overlapping social networks and a strong reliance on voluntary engagement shape the rhythms of everyday cultural life. These realities call for policy and planning tools that are proportionate, participatory and sensitive to context. The framework presented here responds to these needs by combining conceptual clarity with practical methods that have proven effective across diverse rural and peripheral regions.

Part 1 is structured into three chapters. Chapter 4 establishes shared definitions and clarifies how language and translation affect participation and understanding across policy, administrative and artistic fields. The chapter also analyses the specific context and needs of non-urban CCIs, outlining their recurring challenges. Chapter 5 presents a set of participatory methods that can be used to co-design cultural policy interventions. These elements culminate in a 10-step *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, presented in Chapter 6, which synthesises the experience of the project and translates it into an actionable sequence that local actors and policymakers can adapt to their own settings.

Throughout, Part 1 emphasises proportionate methods, plain language and proximity governance. It treats policy design as a collaborative process that values local knowledge and everyday practice alongside institutional expertise. The chapter sections provide both conceptual grounding and practical guidance for anyone seeking to strengthen sociocultural development in non-urban territories through inclusive and sustainable cultural policy.

### 4. Context and needs for a cultural policy for non-urban CCIs

This chapter explains the unique context and conditions that shape cultural and creative activities in non-urban regions, summarising their specificities, needs and dynamics. These are drawn directly from research insights and practical experiences documented during the IN SITU project, as described in Chapter 3.

Here, we address key dimensions that frame and influence sociocultural work in rural and peripheral communities:

- How language and terminology influence community participation and policy communication;
- Structural challenges and practical considerations around accessibility, agency and inclusive participation;
- Local community dynamics, the role of trusted third places and volunteerism in sustaining cultural ecosystems;
- The critical importance of continuity, sustainability and visibility of cultural activities in regions where resources are limited;
- How broader sociocultural themes, such as gender equality, diversity and social innovation, are experienced differently and play unique roles in non-urban contexts;
- The importance of clear and practical governance frameworks that are close to daily community practices, providing local cultural initiatives with sustainable conditions and predictable support.

As the research carried on within IN SITU has already shown, Cultural and Creative Industries contribute decisively to social cohesion, identity formation, learning, and well-being in territories beyond metropolitan centres (Heinicke, Kegler & Walther, 2024). Rural regions, small towns, and peripheral areas are shaped by dispersed populations, limited transport and venue infrastructures, and specific time and care economies. These characteristics create participation barriers and distinctive opportunities for community-anchored cultural practice and innovation (Krüger et al., 2023; Schneider, Kegler & Koß, 2017; Wingert, 2024). In such contexts, policy frameworks are most effective when they are participatory by design, attentive to language, agency and accessibility, and calibrated to continuity rather than one-off visibility (Berasategi et al., 2025; Duxbury & Sílvia, 2024; Ismaili-Rohleder et al., 2015). The sections below consolidate needs identified across the IN SITU Labs and in recent literature, and they prepare the ground for the practical instruments presented in Chapter 5.

As analysed in the IN SITU report, *State of cultural policies for CCI in non-urban areas* (Heinicke et al., 2024), non-urban regions constitute 90% of EU territory and more than 60% of its population and are strongly affected by transformation, inequality and political disenchantment. The potential of Cultural and Creative Industries to foster social cohesion, innovation and strengthen local democracy is often “unseen” by the very same CCIs and their surrounding policy framework. Current policies rarely recognise or involve CCIs as drivers of innovation and focus remains on tourism and heritage. In addition, large differences and specific local challenges are often overlooked by centralised, top-down policy approaches. Moreover, there is a field of tension in EU cultural policies on rural areas between universal concepts and values (diversity, gender equality, economy, innovation, heritage) and the variety of specific contextualisation and interpretations in non-urban areas. This report also highlighted how a lack of adequate funding structures, networks and data on CCIs in non-urban areas limits participation and impact.

In additional interviews and focus group discussions conducted in the project, further challenges and barriers were identified:

1. Application and reporting procedures are written for specialists;
2. Projectification, which rewards one-time visibility over reliable rhythms;
3. Decision-making located far from everyday practice, slowing down small but important matters (room access, minor purchases, calendar alignment);
4. Narrow success metrics that overvalue tourism and short-term numbers;
5. Information gaps between EU/national programmes and local actors (Berasategi et al., 2025; Duxbury & Sílvia, 2024; Ismaili-Rohleder et al., 2015).

However, these barriers can be effectively overcome with proportionate adjustments, guided by a set of core principles. In the following sections, we will present and briefly discuss these principles. They were developed in the context of our research work over the past year and the findings from the project deliverables. We believe it is important for the successful implementation of recommendations to take them to heart before drafting policy proposals.

#### **4.1 Accessibility and agency: Access to funding, structures, participation**

Accessibility is crucial for enabling active participation in cultural activities and decision-making, yet in non-urban areas numerous barriers prevent this from happening in practice. Accessibility extends beyond physical buildings and venues; it encompasses financial, linguistic, administrative, social, cultural and practical aspects of participation. Findings from previous IN SITU research (Heinicke et al., 2024; Rainey, 2025b) shows that these dimensions of accessibility are frequently overlooked, creating significant disparities in cultural engagement across different regions and communities.

First, the administrative complexity of funding and participation processes often becomes an insurmountable barrier for local community groups and individuals. Forms written in specialist language, long and complex applications, and opaque selection criteria frequently exclude smaller, community-led initiatives from accessing essential funding and support. This exclusion occurs not because of a lack of relevance or quality in their cultural initiatives, but because the administrative burden is disproportionately high relative to their capacity and available resources. Reducing this administrative complexity is therefore a critical first step toward enabling meaningful access and engagement (Berasategi et al., 2025; Ismaili-Rohleder et al., 2015).

Second, practical barriers such as timing and location of events further exacerbate issues of accessibility. Many cultural initiatives, funding calls or participatory processes are scheduled during traditional working or care hours. This systematically excludes those who cannot easily leave their daily responsibilities. Caregivers, working residents and individuals who rely on public transportation that is limited or unavailable at certain times are particularly affected. Addressing these barriers requires intentionally planning events, consultations and funding processes at accessible times and in

accessible locations, supported by provisions such as childcare, transportation reimbursements and hybrid or remote participation options (Schneider et al., 2017; Wingert, 2024).

Moreover, accessibility is closely linked to transparency and clarity in decision-making. Many communities feel disconnected from cultural policy processes because decision-making occurs behind closed doors or is communicated in opaque ways. Transparent communication includes clearly stating who makes decisions, what criteria are used, how community inputs are integrated, and documenting outcomes in plain and accessible language. This is not a bureaucratic detail but an essential part of building community trust and engagement, as demonstrated consistently in the IN SITU Labs (Duxbury & Sílvia, 2024).

Cross community collaboration in non-urban cultural ecosystems often stalls on language rather than substance. Local actors, artists, administrators and policymakers operate with different institutional logics and terminologies. Multilingual environments add further complexity. Policy processes should build in translation practices that allow actors to move between registers without losing meaning (Shore & Wright, 1997; Wingert, 2024).

The issue of language itself deserves specific attention. The language used in policy communications, calls for funding and participatory processes is often complex, technical or jargon heavy, which unintentionally excludes broader participation. Language barriers multiply in multilingual non-urban communities. Providing communication in accessible and non-specialist language, together with translations into local languages, has been shown to increase participation and strengthen trust in cultural policy and related activities (Deutscher Kulturrat, 2024; Duxbury & Sílvia, 2024).

Based on these insights from the IN SITU Labs, we propose four practical strategies for increasing accessibility and agency in non-urban cultural ecosystems:

- 1. Simplified and transparent procedures.** Cultural policy processes and funding calls should be simplified, shortened, and explicitly designed to be understandable without specialist knowledge. Applications should welcome narrative evidence (such as short descriptions and photographs) alongside simplified budget forms. Clearly communicated and rapid feedback to all applicants, regardless of success, should become standard practice to build trust and encourage future engagement.
- 2. Inclusive participation support measures.** Provisions such as childcare, travel reimbursements, and scheduling cultural activities outside typical working and caregiving hours should be explicitly built into policy design. Evidence from rural cultural participation research shows that these adjustments directly reduce exclusion for caregivers, working residents, and those dependent on limited public transport (Schneider et al., 2017; Wingert, 2024). Additionally, rotating event locations or using hybrid and remote options significantly reduces practical barriers to participation. These approaches align with findings that dispersed

populations and irregular mobility patterns require flexible and decentralised formats to ensure equitable access (Eurofound, 2014; OECD, 2020).

3. **Accessible community infrastructure.** Recognising and investing in local community spaces, for example libraries, community halls, museums, clubs, and cafés, to serve as accessible cultural venues can substantially increase participation. Research on rural cultural infrastructure consistently shows that proximity to familiar and trusted places is one of the strongest predictors of engagement in non-urban settings (ENRD, 2018; Eurofound, 2014; Richards & Duif, 2018). Modest and practical improvements, including basic accessibility upgrades, simple equipment provisions and publicly shared event calendars, are supported by evidence from rural development and community planning studies which demonstrate that low-cost physical and organisational enhancements significantly increase the usability of local venues (Carnegie UK Trust, 2016; OECD, 2020).

Clear provisions for modest paid coordination roles ensure sustained local management and effective use of these spaces. Research on rural governance dynamics shows that, without dedicated coordination, responsibility falls disproportionately on volunteers, which often leads to burnout and reduced continuity over time. Small paid roles stabilise programming, maintain communication and strengthen the long-term reliability of local cultural infrastructure.

These recommendations aim to increase accessibility and agency and to enable meaningful cultural participation that is inclusive and sustainable. By addressing administrative complexity, practical barriers, transparency in communication and linguistic accessibility, cultural policy can support broader and deeper community engagement across non-urban regions. This aligns with findings from EU and OECD analyses of rural participation, which emphasise that accessible spaces and well supported local coordination are essential for equitable participation in cultural life (ENRD, 2018; European Commission, 2017; OECD, 2020).

4. **Accessible and inclusive language and communication platforms.** Language used in policy communication, funding calls and participatory processes should be clear, concrete and free of unnecessary technical or bureaucratic terms. Research on public administration and participatory governance shows that complex or highly specialised language reduces comprehension and discourages participation, particularly in rural and under-resourced settings (European Commission, 2017; OECD, 2020). Providing short, plain language summaries and local language versions of key documents increase understanding and signals inclusion, as further supported by studies on linguistic accessibility and inclusive policy design (Eurofound, 2014). Information should also be shared through channels that people already use in their daily lives, for example municipal websites, local newspapers and radio, social media groups, schools, libraries and cultural venues. Clearly signposted contact points, such

as information corners in community spaces or simple online portals, help residents find opportunities without needing specialist knowledge or insider contacts.

Translation boxes or short glossaries that align policy, community and artistic registers can make materials easier to navigate and can foster shared comprehension. Evidence from participatory planning and community engagement practice shows that small interpretive tools of this type reduce confusion, improve legitimacy and strengthen the perceived fairness of decision-making (Fung, 2015; Shore & Wright, 1997). Where possible, oral and visual forms of communication, including community briefings, posters and infographics, should complement written text in order to reach audiences with different levels of literacy or language proficiency. This aligns with research demonstrating that multimodal communication increases both reach and comprehension in diverse or multilingual rural communities (Carnegie UK Trust, 2016; OECD, 2020).

By treating language as a core element of accessibility, cultural policy can broaden participation, strengthen trust and make decision-making more transparent. Evidence from EU studies on civic engagement confirms that clarity, linguistic inclusiveness and accessible communication practices improve participation rates and reduce perceptions of procedural exclusion (Eurofound, 2014; European Commission, 2020).

These recommendations aim to increase accessibility and agency, and to enable meaningful cultural participation that is inclusive and sustainable. By addressing administrative complexity, practical barriers, transparency in communication and linguistic accessibility, cultural policy can support broader and deeper community engagement across non-urban regions. This approach is consistent with findings from rural governance research, which emphasise the importance of clear communication and low administrative barriers for equitable participation (ENRD, 2018; OECD, 2020).

## 4.2 Understanding *community* in non-urban contexts

In non-urban areas, the concept of *community* carries particular significance that differs from conventional definitions based on demography or geography. Research in rural sociology consistently shows that communities in dispersed territories are shaped by lived experience, relationships and informal interactions rather than static population categories (Neal & Walters, 2008). Understanding what defines and maintains these communities requires sustained attention to how people gather, interact and identify themselves within their local environment.

Our research highlights that community boundaries in rural contexts are fluid and often defined by day-to-day routines, shared spaces and informal yet vital social interactions. This is strongly supported by rural community studies showing that repeated encounters in familiar settings form the backbone of local cohesion (Putnam, 2000; Skerratt, 2013; Wenger, 1998). Cafés, local clubs, choirs, amateur theatre groups, small museums, parish halls, libraries, fire stations and informal public spaces—often

described as “third places”—play a central role in sustaining these interactions (Oldenburg, 1999). Such places act as hubs for everyday socialising and cultural activity, and they contribute significantly to local identity and belonging (Richards & Duif, 2018).

Community therefore needs to be continually redefined and revisited by local stakeholders to understand evolving patterns of participation and interaction. Evidence from rural sociology demonstrates that rural communities function as dynamic and negotiated entities rather than fixed or homogenous ones (Woods, 2007). Essential questions to explore include: Who feels included or excluded from existing community activities? Which groups participate regularly, and who remains absent or underrepresented? Which spaces function as genuine community anchors, and why? Studies on participation and rural resilience show the importance of examining both presence and absence in community life (Skerratt, 2013). In Heinicke et al. (2024), our research also found that general policy concepts such as *gender equality*, *social cohesion* or *transculturality* often take on different meanings in local contexts compared to their definitions at national or EU levels. This divergence is well documented in policy anthropology and rural governance research, which shows that high level concepts tend to be adapted or interpreted differently once they reach local settings (Bock, 2016; Shore & Wright, 1997). For example, gender equality may be understood locally as simply having similar numbers of women and men involved in activities, while questions of pay, decision-making power or care responsibilities remain unaddressed. Without this contextual understanding, even well-intended policy initiatives risk losing relevance or generating misunderstanding at the community level, a problem also noted in EU audits of gender mainstreaming (European Court of Auditors, 2021).

Recognising these factors draws attention to the critical role played by local community hosts. These individuals and associations maintain social connections, facilitate interaction and often mediate between different groups. These hosts are frequently non-remunerated, contributing significant personal time and energy to maintaining community life, yet their roles often remain invisible in policy and administrative frameworks.

From a contextual perspective, it is therefore important to acknowledge and make visible these local strengths, including existing community anchors, trusted hosts and longstanding routines that support ongoing participation. Evidence from rural development and community empowerment research stresses that effective policy is more successful when it builds on these endogenous assets rather than treating them as deficits (Carnegie UK Trust, 2016). Understanding the barriers that prevent participation, such as limited transport, administrative complexity and rigid scheduling, is equally important. These barriers are widely identified in EU and OECD studies as major determinants of exclusion in rural areas (ENRD, 2018; Eurofound, 2014; OECD, 2020). These insights form a core component of the contextual knowledge required for effective cultural policy development and the design of sociocultural activity in non-urban areas.



### 4.3 Gender and diversity as drivers of innovation

Diversity refers to including people with different backgrounds and realities. We understand gender as one of many factors that can create exclusion in different ways and on different levels, may it be a certain way of communication that appeals more to a specific gender, the selection of a specific location that feels more welcoming to some or that holds physical barriers to others, or the topic of an event that is more relevant to a specific group of people. While it is impossible to create events that suit everyone's wishes and needs, we want to underline the importance of reflecting on which target groups are addressed and who can really feel invited by a certain event. Especially in non-urban areas, where audiences are *per se* smaller groups, events as well as locations should ensure to appeal to a broader audience. This leads to more people having a wider offer of cultural participation from which they can choose as well as a more diverse audience and cultural events that can foster a climate of dialogue, understanding and democratic values.

The role of women and TINs (trans, inter and non-binary people) in general is shaped by discrimination and inequality in almost every aspect of life including labour, family and medical aspects, maintained by stereotypes and patriarchal structures. For rural societies, a tendency of heterosexual relations serving as a key organising principle can be observed (Bryant & Pini, 2011). This means that the imagination for different roles for women is narrow and limited, as it is assumed that there are only two genders and that men and women would feel a "natural" mutual desire for each other. This can cause harm to anyone whose lifestyle does not fall exactly within a canonised traditional cis-heteronormativity. In addition, many rural occupations are traditionally carried out by men, while "women in rural areas highly participate in the informal and unpaid sector" (Walther, Heinicke, & Kegler, 2023, p. 26).

The interviews and workshops conducted during the IN SITU project showed that people challenging the gender binary system with their appearance will be more tolerated if they appear as part of an artistic project or event. While the cultural and creative sector itself has a lot to learn and unpack to become a safer space for women and members of the queer community, it became evident that it also can serve as a driver for more acceptance and understanding of gender being a construct (Walther et al., 2023). While the research areas have different gendered dynamics, none is completely free from gender inequality and discrimination. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that the transition to a gender-equal society involves different, sometimes specific discourses in different regions, which naturally progress at different speeds. While the EU can and should ensure that gender equality is tackled on national and local level as well, local actors should never feel burdened or having the discourse imposed on them. Instead, diversity (not only on the topic of gender) should be highly encouraged. In the end, diversity can be a driver for innovation by giving the opportunity to link together different perspectives that remain invisible if marginalised people are excluded. Diversity can depict the society in its entirety, can uncover underlying issues and design transformation in an inclusive, place-based and future-oriented way.



#### 4.4 Continuity, sustainability and visibility

In European non-urban territories, continuity is not only the extension and evolution of a project over time but also the capacity of a place to sustain a cultural life that residents can count on. When people know there will be another rehearsal, another library open evening or another community screening, they begin to invest their time, invite others and share responsibility. Research from IN SITU and rural cultural studies shows that predictable cultural rhythms strongly influence participation patterns in dispersed regions (Heinicke et al., 2024; Schneider et al., 2017). For policy, continuity becomes a matter of design, arranging funding, roles, spaces and communication so that participation is predictable, inclusive and administratively manageable for small organisations and local authorities alike (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Duxbury & Sílvia, 2024; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015; Ismaili-Rohleder et al., 2015).

Four interlinked dimensions define this kind of continuity:

1. **Programme continuity** refers to recurring formats such as monthly circles, seasonal workshops, or small festivals that follow familiar rhythms. These are planned with local time economies in mind, including care duties, transport availability and seasonal work patterns (Wingert, 2024; OECD, 2020).
2. **Relational continuity** means having stable points of contact between cultural actors and public authorities, with clearly defined responsibilities for following up on decisions and publishing brief and accessible summaries. Evidence from collaborative governance research confirms that stable, named contacts and predictable follow up procedures strengthen trust and reduce administrative friction (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015).
3. **Infrastructure continuity** relies on accessible and multipurpose venues such as libraries, local cultural centres, museums, parish centres, fire stations or cafés that can host both cultural activity and public discussion. These venues benefit from a shared calendar and a modest amount of coordination time. Research on rural community assets and third places supports their role as cultural anchors in small communities (Oldenburg, 1999; Carnegie UK Trust, 2016; Richards & Duif, 2018).
4. **Knowledge continuity** involves cultivating the habit of documentation through concise public notes that capture what was tried, what was learned and what comes next. This ensures that local cultural efforts persist beyond staff turnover and electoral cycles and aligns with findings on rural institutional memory and community resilience (Skerratt, 2013; OECD, 2020).

This framework (see also Table 4) responds to structural realities that shape cultural life outside metropolitan centres. Long distances, limited public transport, dispersed populations and care responsibilities all make one-off participation costly (Eurofound, 2014; OECD, 2020). People rarely abstain from cultural activity out of indifference. More often, the cost of a single event is simply too high. Continuity lowers that cost by making participation repeatable and legible. It also builds trust.

Work towards visibility is part of continuity, but it should not dominate it. Public recognition matters for residents, funders, and partners, and rural cultural life is frequently overlooked. Visibility is most effective when it reinforces existing rhythms instead of disrupting them. Communication requirements should be proportionate to local capacity and focused on meaningful outcomes, including breadth of participation, repeat engagement, community benefit and shared learning (Duxbury & Sílvia, 2024). Tracking media coverage while ignoring whether people returned the following month undermines the stability that policy seeks to support.

Finally, continuity depends on proximity governance. Decisions that determine whether activities can proceed, such as access to rooms, small expenditures and calendar coordination, are most effective when they are taken close to practice. Evidence from rural governance shows that decentralised and locally situated decision-making accelerates implementation and strengthens legitimacy (Bock, 2016; ENRD, 2018; European Committee of the Regions, 2020). This requires a named contact in the municipality or region, a recognised community convener and a clear and simple procedure for publishing agendas and outcomes. Seats for under-represented voices should be paid positions, not symbolic ones. These arrangements do not require large new structures. They require clarity about who decides what, within which thresholds and timelines, and how others can take part in the process.

*Table 4 - Interlinked dimensions of continuity*

Dimension	Definition	Design Consideration
Programme continuity	Recurring formats that align with local rhythms	Monthly meetings, seasonal festivals, timing around care/work duties, transport, seasonal work
Relational continuity	Stable contact points and clear follow-up mechanisms	Mandated liaisons, accessible, transparent decisions
Infrastructure continuity	Multipurpose, accessible spaces with minimal coordination needs	Shared calendars, support for socio-cultural centres, libraries, cafés
Knowledge continuity	Clear, public memory of what was done and learned	Short notes, agreed next steps, archives that survive staff changes

#### 4.5 Governance and decision-making: Proximity, clarity, inclusion

Continuity depends on who is able to decide, when, and together with whom. In many non-urban settings, the decisive matters are small but consequential: access to rooms at the right time, permission to spend a few hundred euros on equipment, aligned calendars so activities do not collide, and acknowledgement of the time of those who coordinate. Research on rural governance and

collaborative planning shows that when these decisions sit far from practice or move between offices without a clear owner, enthusiasm fades and projects end when the grant ends (Ansell & Gash, 2008; ENRD, 2018; European Committee of the Regions, 2020). A governance arrangement that is close to practice, clear in responsibilities, and open to participation is therefore a precondition for sustainable cultural life (Bock, 2016; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015).

**Proximity.** Decisions that affect day to day cultural activity should be taken as near as possible to the people doing the work, with a named contact in the municipality or region and a locally recognised convener on the cultural side. Proximity does not have to mean informality; it means delegated authority with explicit limits. A small cultural association should not have to navigate several departments to book a municipal hall or to ask for support to co-fund a modest upgrade that improves venue accessibility. Evidence from rural development and Smart Villages initiatives shows that when a community host (library, museum, civic centre or NGO) and a municipal or regional liaison can resolve matters within agreed thresholds and timelines, continuity becomes administratively manageable for all parties (ENRD, 2018; Carnegie UK Trust, 2016).

**Clarity and transparency.** Cultural policy should use strategies and visions that are clearly formulated and either set goals through a transparent coordination process or demonstrate their relevance convincingly. One challenge is the use of discourses and terms that have different definitions and meanings in different regions and therefore need to be contextualised within local circumstances (Duxbury & Sílvia, 2024; Shore & Wright, 1997). A transparent approach also involves describing the current situation, the goal and the next steps in a comprehensible and accessible manner.

Since decisions often involve regional, national and European levels that rarely communicate effectively with each other, it is important that these levels have clearly communicated locations and contact persons in the regions. Advisory boards, local media and public meeting places can play this role if they are well known and actively maintained (European Committee of the Regions, 2020). Strategies and visions should therefore be clear, understandable and linked to the regional context, while indicating the perspective in which they were developed, including authorship and institutional origin.

**Inclusion.** Inclusive governance begins with recognising who is present in decision-making spaces and whose time is valued. It requires remunerated roles for underrepresented voices, including youth, migrants, queer and disability-led groups, and individuals with care responsibilities. Research on participation inequalities confirms that time, travel and care responsibilities disproportionately shape who is able to participate in non-urban settings (Eurofound, 2014; OECD, 2020). Meetings should therefore align with local time economies, offer support for travel and care costs when needed, and provide interpretation or translation where relevant. Clear and accessible summaries of decisions should outline next steps and provide contact points. These are modest interventions with significant effects: they increase transparency, broaden participation and make governance processes more accessible to those beyond existing networks (Duxbury & Sílvia, 2024).

#### 4.6 Volunteerism

Volunteerism plays an essential role in sustaining cultural activities in non-urban areas. Previous IN SITU research has consistently demonstrated how heavily cultural practices in rural and peripheral communities depend upon voluntary effort (Heinicke et al., 2024). Volunteers often handle core functions including coordinating events, managing venues, communicating between community groups and local authorities, and maintaining networks of informal support. Studies on rural community anchors and voluntary cultural work confirm this central role, showing that volunteers often carry responsibilities that in urban contexts are handled by paid staff. While this reliance brings substantial benefits, it also places considerable demands on those who volunteer their time and resources (Rainey, 2025b).

The effectiveness and continuity of volunteering can become limited by the strain placed on a small number of dedicated individuals. Volunteers typically undertake responsibilities after working hours, balancing them with care duties or other personal commitments. Evidence from rural governance and time economy studies shows that these pressures make sustained volunteer activity difficult and increase vulnerability to fatigue and burnout (OECD, 2020; Wingert, 2024). Additionally, project-based cultural initiatives frequently generate administrative pressures that are difficult for volunteers to manage sustainably. This can lead to discontinuity in local cultural activity when key individuals are unable to maintain their engagement (Ismaili-Rohleder et al., 2015).

Furthermore, volunteer roles often follow distinct gender and age patterns, with women and older-residents disproportionately providing essential coordination and logistical support. Findings from our previous IN SITU cultural policy research (Heinicke et al., 2024) and rural social innovation research (Bock, 2016) indicate that these patterns shape both equity and the innovative capacity of cultural ecosystems, since unequal workload distribution limits participation and reinforces existing social roles. Without appropriate support and recognition, this situation risks reinforcing inequalities and constraining broader engagement within non-urban cultural life. The IN SITU approach emphasises practical solutions that directly address these challenges, ensuring that volunteer energy is recognised and supported as a critical public resource. At the same time, volunteer engagement should complement rather than replace properly remunerated positions in CCI, so that stronger participation does not come at the expense of decent employment opportunities.

Three priority areas for policy support emerge clearly from the project's work:

1. **Policy must explicitly recognise and support coordination as legitimate work.** Even modest allocations of paid hours for essential tasks such as scheduling, communication, and venue management can significantly reduce volunteer workload and improve sustainability, since volunteers cannot reasonably be expected to manage these responsibilities alone. Research on community anchors shows that paid coordination stabilises programming and strengthens continuity (Carnegie UK Trust, 2016). Practical recommendations include allocating consistent

funding to recognised community hosts to cover these coordinating roles, enabling continuity without placing undue burdens on individuals (Rainey, 2025b).

2. **Administrative procedures should be simplified to align better with the realities of voluntary cultural engagement.** Shorter and simpler application processes, clear criteria, rapid feedback and modest reporting requirements reduce administrative stress on volunteers. At the same time, a basic written procedure with transparent eligibility and selection criteria is important, so that decisions are clear and do not appear arbitrary or based on favouritism. Evidence from IN SITU and rural development initiatives demonstrates that tools such as micro grants, administered locally with streamlined processes, efficiently support community-driven initiatives without imposing unnecessary burdens (ENRD, 2018; Heinicke et al., 2024).
3. **Targeted capacity building measures can strengthen volunteer efforts.** Accessible training focused on inclusion, accessibility and effective communication can improve the quality of voluntary activities and help attract broader community participation. Establishing centralised resources, such as shared equipment or templates at a county or regional level, can reduce duplication of effort and ease volunteer workloads (Rainey, 2025b). Research on collaborative governance also shows that shared resources and clear support structures increase the confidence and capacity of volunteer-led initiatives (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015).

#### 4.7 Positioning in times of political tension

Rural cultural policy must remain a space for pluralism, dialogue, and democratic resilience. Clarity of language, fairness of access and continuity of support help defuse polarisation and keep communities at the centre. From a cultural policy perspective, it seems essential for the support of CCIs and innovation to recognise the structure of rural areas and their traditions while at the same time designing spaces for coming together in an open manner that allows different groups equal access. Linking different existing groups (fire brigade, culture, sport) can support this exchange. Clearly naming and communicating these places as third spaces can help to incorporate and reflect on traditions and established structures (e.g., gender or social hierarchies) and recognise the creative potential of different groups and individuals based on their respective expertise.

Non-urban areas have the potential to resist growing social polarisation, as they have long been spaces of slower rhythms and sustained coexistence. People often live together over long periods, which creates the conditions for shaping shared ways of living through time. The key challenge is to approach this process with openness, without prejudice, and with a willingness to compromise, so that the diverse knowledge and skills of residents can be used in innovative and collaborative ways. Jointly developing a vision for a rural area, including through tools such as cultural mapping, can connect social, economic and cultural dimensions while highlighting their plurality and openness. Cultural and Creative Industries and innovation are especially strengthened when future-oriented thinking is combined with respect for individual experience.

## 5. Methods for co-creating policy intervention

The methods in this chapter offer practical ways for municipalities, regions and local actors to work together on concrete policy interventions that are grounded in local realities rather than abstract assumptions. Each method corresponds to a specific phase in the policy cycle: understanding what already exists, opening up dialogue about priorities, creating shared spaces for experimentation and agreeing on next steps. These approaches grew out of our work in the IN SITU Labs, where we applied and refined them in real settings, and they are presented here so they can be adapted and reused in other contexts. They are intended to help public authorities, cultural organisations and community groups co-create interventions that are realistic, shared and open to learning, so that cultural action and cultural policy become a continuous process rather than a one-off intervention.

### 5.1 Mapping

The mapping exercise builds a shared and practical picture of the local cultural ecosystem so that policy choices respond to what actually exists in the territory. It combines desk data with lived knowledge to identify assets (such as spaces, groups and events), connectors (such as people and organisations that convene), and gaps (such as barriers, missing links and unmet needs). It also serves as a networking moment in which local actors discover one another, recognise overlapping interests and begin forming the relationships that support long-term cultural participation (Duxbury, 2015).

As Duxbury (2015) explains, “Cultural mapping is a systematic tool to involve communities in the identification and recording of local cultural assets, with the implication that this knowledge will then be used to inform collective strategies, planning processes, or other initiatives” (p. 1). Mapping combines documentary sources with lived knowledge and covers three interconnected layers:

- **Structures and places:** Libraries, parish halls, museums, school halls, fire stations, cafés, club rooms, outdoor spaces and other third spaces that residents already trust (Oldenburg, 1999; Richards & Duif, 2018).
- **People and groups:** Formal organisations and informal circles such as choirs, craft groups, youth makers, film nights and rehearsal practices.
- **Connectors and flows:** The people and associations who hold keys, translate between communities and make things happen. These are often volunteers and frequently under-recognised, yet they are essential for local cultural resilience (Skerratt, 2013).

The emphasis within this mapping approach is on continuity. This means recognising recurring formats, dependable times, and spaces that consistently host both cultural activity and public dialogue. Such continuity is central to participation in non-urban regions, where distance, transport and care/work responsibilities make cultural engagement highly sensitive to predictability (Eurofound, 2014; OECD, 2020).

In addition to these layers, UNESCO uses cultural mapping to integrate different aspects of heritage. As Duxbury (2015) notes, “UNESCO views cultural mapping as a means to transform intangible and invisible knowledge into a medium that can support heritage management, education, and intercultural dialogue” (p. 1). This reinforces the value of mapping as a way to make local knowledge visible and actionable.

Because cultural participation follows practical routines rather than administrative boundaries, it is important to use a functional territory. This refers to the area people actually cross for work, school, shopping, health appointments or worship. Administrative lines matter, but the practical delineation, including a nearby town or island, is often more relevant for understanding cultural life and participation patterns (ENRD, 2018). If a single village is the focus, the mapping should include the nearest transport hubs and the spaces that residents routinely use.

## 5.2 Roundtables

Roundtable sessions can significantly support the mapping process. Bringing together different groups and stakeholders, either online or in person, helps ensure that the full range of local voices is heard. Even in small territories where people believe they know one another, important perspectives are often missing and organisations may not be aware of each other’s work (Duxbury, 2015; Skerratt, 2013). Recurring and open meetings with rotating hosts, for example different artist spaces, libraries or community centres, allow new participants to join and gradually build wider knowledge of the local cultural ecosystem.

To make these meetings accessible and manageable, it is helpful to publish simple agendas and concise notes. These should keep language plain, summarise decisions and next steps, and provide clear points of contact. Evidence from collaborative governance research shows that such clarity strengthens trust, lowers the administrative burden and enables more consistent participation across different groups (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015).

Roundtables can also combine mapping activities with practical support. They can include helpdesk-style updates on national or European funding, sharing templates or guidance, and serving as an ongoing reference point for local actors. Regularly inviting municipal or regional representatives keeps public authorities connected with artists, cultural activists and other groups in the Cultural and Creative Industries and supports proximity governance in practice (ENRD, 2018; European Committee of the Regions, 2020).

Beyond offering a flexible and accessible structure, it is useful to develop a simple document or strategy in which the roundtable highlights the importance of art and culture for developing innovative visions and concepts for the future. The advantage of the roundtable format is that work on such a plan can continue on an ongoing basis, allowing different groups to participate as their availability permits. Research on rural cultural ecosystems shows that continuity of meetings and



shared planning processes strengthens communication, cohesion and the formation of a sustainable CCI scene (Carnegie UK Trust, 2016; Skerratt, 2013).

It is crucial to define a clear output and shared priorities in advance. These may include:

- content and shared priorities;
- milestones and goals;
- a shortlist of proposals;
- a contact network;
- supporting documents (for example funding information); and
- a living FAQ that can be updated as new questions arise.

Such clarity aligns the group, keeps expectations realistic and ensures that the roundtable becomes a dependable structure that supports both mapping and longer-term cultural development.

### 5.3 Creating third places and spaces

According to sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1999), *third places* are spaces where people go and come together, apart from work and home. They are spaces of well-being, leisure and gathering, such as cafés, recreation rooms, cultural institutions, public squares, parks and playgrounds. Third places are also important for community life in rural areas, but they are often few and far between. Fire departments, restaurants and community centres take on this function, but they are increasingly affected by closures because they are not profitable or there is a lack of human resources to organise and coordinate them. Research on rural third places confirms that these closures threaten local social infrastructure and reduce opportunities for cultural participation (Carnegie UK Trust, 2016; Richards & Duif, 2018).

Third places of this kind are of great value for cultural exchange and artistic practice, and therefore for supporting CCIs. Cultural policy should support the establishment and preservation of these places by taking the following steps:

- Identify multiuse places, for example, churches, saunas and libraries, for culture and dialogue.
- Pilot small upgrades, including accessibility improvements, equipment and shared calendars.
- Co-govern with local groups to keep thresholds low and welcome diverse publics.

Somewhat different in nature but equally important for strengthening CCIs in rural areas is the concept of *third spaces*, primarily coined by Homi K. Bhabha (see Rutherford & Bhabha, 1990). Although Bhabha (1990) uses the metaphor of the stairwell, this is not a concrete and real space but a sphere of exchange and communication on different levels. The third space enables the negotiation and display of diversity and multi-perspectivity and is therefore particularly relevant for CCIs, since it allows the potential of a diverse society to come to the fore, which in turn can be realised at different



levels. This perspective aligns with broader research on cultural diversity and social innovation in rural settings, which emphasises that spaces for negotiation across differences strengthen both cultural life and local democracy (Bock, 2016).

To enable third spaces, policies should take the following into account:

- Identify cultural techniques, practices and beliefs that are present in the area, including those of marginalised groups.
- Discuss how these different perspectives could act together and whether there are existing spaces or spheres where this is already practiced, for example in music, theatre or design.
- Identify sites and practices of heritage that represent cultural diversity and multi-perspectivity and consider how they are connected to the region, groups and communities.

#### 5.4 Visioning workshops

Visioning workshops help communities define a shared cultural horizon for the next three to five years and translate it into immediate steps that match local capacity. It takes place after mapping and at least one roundtable session, once priorities are clearer but require a practical sequence of actions. Workshops use existing accessible community spaces such as libraries, cultural centres or municipal halls and work best when they build on established networks and trusted places (Duxbury & Silva, 2024).

Workshops are effective in dispersed regions because they offer a format that is participatory, easy to repeat and administratively manageable. The aim is to agree on realistic next steps rather than compile idealistic lists. This method draws on participatory and future oriented approaches and adapts them to cultural development in non-urban settings (Jungk & Müllert, 1987).

The group should reflect the diversity of the local cultural landscape: cultural practitioners, people active in sociocultural spaces, public officials and under-represented voices, including youth and migrants. To reach these groups, organisers should combine open calls with targeted outreach through schools, youth clubs, migrant and disability organisations, local associations and informal networks so that people who are less connected to formal institutions also hear about these opportunities. Diversity here does not require strict quotas, but organisers should avoid having any single constituency dominate and reserve some places for under-represented groups. Toolkits like the EU Women's *Intersectionality Resource Guide and Toolkit* (2021) can support a reflection on diversity. Two facilitators and a note-taker are recommended. Travel and care costs should be reimbursed to ensure equitable participation (European Commission, 2023b; Laaksonen, 2020).

Participants should receive a short briefing in advance, along with an updated map of local assets and a summary of roundtable discussions. Organisers then confirm accessibility arrangements, language needs and any support required, such as childcare or transport reimbursement. Materials are simple: paper notes, pens, physical or even digital boards, if needed. The workshop centres on three steps:

1. Participants review the mapping and roundtable outcomes to identify elements that are immediately workable.
2. They describe what cultural life could look like in three to five years, using short written statements, drawings or mock headlines. Shared themes are clustered, often touching on informal spaces, intergenerational formats, inclusion, mobility, skills or visibility.
3. The group identifies milestones for the next three years and the minimum resources needed for each. Responsibilities are assigned, leading to two or three visioning sessions that outline specific actions, roles, timing and simple indicators.

Within one week, each participant receives a concise Vision Map and short sheets for each Step. A follow-up date is agreed during the workshop and added to a shared calendar. If a cooperation agreement or convener is already in place, they support access to rooms, small purchases and scheduling. A public summary uses clear language and is shared through channels that reach local residents.

Sessions should be scheduled with care responsibilities in mind. Travel and care-related costs should be covered where needed. Interpretation or translation should be available. If the budget is limited, priority for cost reimbursement should be given to youth and other under-represented participants, so that lack of resources does not prevent them from taking part. The documentation should note when volunteer effort is replaced with paid coordination. Quarterly summaries should capture what will continue, what will change and what will stop, feeding directly into the policy recommendations without extra reporting (Paaskoskis et al., 2025).

Moreover, consent should be requested for quotes or photos. Personal names should only be included with explicit permission whereas, by default, contributions are attributed to the group. A shorter 90-minute version can be used to produce one Session and it should be considered that hybrid variants work well in remote or island settings.

## 5.5 Rural context-sensitive impact measurement

Standard innovation metrics rarely show what matters in villages, islands and small towns. What is needed is simple but credible evidence that can indicate whether people are able to take part regularly, whether trust grows between stakeholders and whether local culture keeps a steady rhythm through the seasons. This aligns with broader shifts in international practice that promote place-sensitive and multidimensional understandings of culture and well-being, rather than relying only on outputs or turnover. UNESCO's *Culture 2030 Indicators* (UNESCO, 2019) and the OECD Rural Well-being Framework (OECD, 2020) both take this direction, while recent Eurostat figures on participation underline that access and regular engagement remain uneven across Europe (Eurostat, 2023).

Assessment should begin from work already completed. Mapping provides a baseline of people, places and connectors. Roundtables and visioning workshops establish shared aims. Proximity governance

clarifies who can decide and how quickly small matters move. Impact then becomes the thread running across these steps: what was tried, what changed, what continued and what should stop. This keeps evidence close to practice and avoids duplicate reporting.

Numbers cannot capture everything important, so it is helpful to gather short and clearly documented stories as well. In each assessment cycle, participants and organisers can share a few examples of changes they found most meaningful. Using simple outcome harvesting methods, specific actions or relationships behind these changes can be identified. Once a year, the cultural map is updated to record ongoing activities, new developments and places that have become reliable community spaces. Practical tools such as photos or notes on a shared community calendar help capture these developments, provided that consent is given. These techniques are well suited to contexts where limited human resources play a central role, since they provide useful insights without demanding extensive effort (Duxbury & Sílvia, 2024; Laaksonen, 2020).

Change in non-urban cultural life often appears as many small related steps rather than a single leap. Evidence should reflect how links develop between schools, libraries, festivals, farms and maker groups, what skills people gain, and where culture intersects with environment, health, youth or tourism. Before and after snapshots of a venue and short timelines of decisions can make progress understandable for residents and funders. Recent EU work on evaluating participation and the New European Bauhaus provides further guidance on judging quality, inclusion and public value in such processes (European Commission, 2022b).

Assessment needs to remain accessible and ethical. This means using clear language and, where necessary, providing local translations. Participation costs are reimbursed and personal data collection kept to a minimum, so people can contribute without financial or privacy related barriers. Findings are shared through familiar local channels, which keeps the process transparent and accountable to participants. A straightforward shared rubric that covers inclusion, continuity, local decision-making, volunteer sustainability, community identity, cross-sector collaboration and environmental practices allows for meaningful comparison without imposing rigid standards. Taken together, these practices help ensure that assessment processes are genuinely inclusive and trusted by local actors while remaining robust enough to inform regional, national and EU-level policy discussions.

## 5.6 Developing trademarks

The IN SITU report, *Socioeconomic Contributions and Spillovers of CCI in Non-urban Regions* (Tessarini et al., 2023), analysed whether a higher proportion of cultural and creative professions is associated with an increase in innovation in the region. The role of cultural and creative professions in innovation, expressed in terms of patents and trademarks, in urban, intermediate and rural regions was examined, leading to the following relevant results for policy:

- Results ... showed a stronger association of creative occupations to trademarks for rural regions, suggesting that in those regions, the type of innovation activities leaves more space for the contribution of creativity.
- In non-urban regions, a high share of female creative occupations appears to in present be more strongly associated with trademarks, suggesting that using these innovation metrics might also help mitigate the gender bias of patents.
- Collective trademarks appear related to activities that leverage territorial assets associated with heritage, culture and community. In this sense, we see a stronger link with the cultural element rather than the creative one.
- Collective trademarks seem particularly interesting for non-urban regions and suit rural contexts better. This might be related to the type of goods and services they protect (particularly in the case of food and heritage promotion), but we see a range of different products related to other economic activities too. (Tessarini et al., 2023, p. 4)

The results indicate the potential of collective and regional trademarks, highlight the central role of women in their creation, who are still often perceived as marginalised in innovation, and show their connection to cultural heritage, which itself has many regionally specific dimensions. It seems sensible for regional cultural policy to seek out possible collective trademarks, taking into account both cultural heritage and opposing aspects. What forms of creativity are closely linked to cultural practices and create innovative references to the present (e.g., communal embroidery and weaving and community building, traditional forms of horticulture and sustainability)? Links can be sought at national and European level: is the collective trademark linked to a national history? Are there references to European values or strategies?

The region should also use UNESCO views on cultural mapping as a means to transform intangible and invisible knowledge into a medium that can support heritage management and intercultural self-image as well as collective trademarks based on (in)tangible heritage (sites and practices). This medium can also be linked to national and European strategies and innovation networks.

A challenge mentioned in Tessarini et al. (2023) should also be emphasised. Individuals and their artistic knowledge play a major role in the creation of trademarks, while at the same time collective knowledge is also utilised. Cultural policy must ensure and find ways to guarantee that individual creative artists have the rights and patents of their creative outputs, that the community benefits from the use of collective trademarks and that these, in turn, are not exploited by commercial enterprises or international corporations. Departing points can be:

- Clarify why a (collective) trademark helps (recognition, clustering, partnerships). Are there links to (in)tangible cultural heritage?
- Reflect the role of gender-connoted knowledge, networks and practices in this context.

- Avoid overshadowing artistic autonomy and separate identity work from content decisions. Discuss how identity work and collective strategies can work together.
- Develop structures for collective trademarks that support the individual artists and the communities and protect them from exploitation by non-regional corporations and commercial enterprises that do not promote the common good of the region.
- Test with communities and SMEs and monitor unintended effects.

## 5.7 Capacity-building

Capacity-building is a foundational methodological approach within the IN SITU project, designed to enhance and strengthen the skills, knowledge, abilities and resources of Cultural and Creative Industries practitioners and organisations within non-urban contexts. Recognised as a strategic process that fosters long-term transformation, capacity-building within this initiative goes beyond traditional training to empower local actors in addressing complex challenges through locally resonant and context-sensitive interventions (OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2018).

In alignment with the IN SITU report, *Methodological Guidance on Capacity Building* (Varbanova, Dobрева, & Dzhарова-Karakoleva, 2025), this approach is underpinned by five guiding principles: contextualisation, participation, empowerment, sustainability and cultural sensitivity. *Contextualisation* ensures that capacity-building activities respond directly to local socioeconomic, cultural and infrastructural realities. *Participation* emphasises co creation and inclusivity, actively involving local stakeholders in every phase (Duxbury, 2015). *Empowerment* highlights capacity-building as an enabler for local autonomy, equipping participants to sustain innovation independently. *Sustainability* ensures that interventions result in enduring outcomes beyond the project lifespan. *Cultural sensitivity* respects and leverages local traditions, heritage and values as core assets in the innovation process (UNESCO, 2018). This can translate into the following actions:

- 1. Needs assessment and stakeholder engagement:** Identifying local skills gaps, opportunities and stakeholder priorities through participatory diagnostics, surveys and consultations.
- 2. Identifying key capacity-building areas:** Clarifying priority areas, such as entrepreneurial competencies, digital skills, coalition-building strategies and audience engagement techniques, based on identified local needs.
- 3. Session design and content development:** Crafting tailored training and mentoring content, ensuring relevance and practical applicability for participants.
- 4. Session delivery and facilitation:** Implementing interactive workshops, training modules, mentorship sessions and collaborative learning formats adapted to local contexts.
- 5. Post-session support and follow-up:** Providing continuous mentorship, peer-learning opportunities and resources to reinforce knowledge application and innovation practice.

6. **Monitoring and evaluation:** Employing systematic methods to assess the impact of capacity-building activities, refine methodologies and ensure ongoing alignment with project objectives.

Capacity-building within IN SITU employs a suite of practical and interactive tools to enhance effectiveness. These include structured training modules, one-to-one and peer-group mentoring, collaborative task forces and coalition-building mechanisms. Training sessions are designed to be highly interactive, integrating tools such as World Café discussions, storytelling, role-playing exercises, case analyses and simulation-based activities, ensuring a dynamic and engaging learning environment.

Mentoring, a cornerstone of capacity-building within IN SITU, provides personalised support tailored to the professional and developmental needs of individual cultural operators and entrepreneurs. Mentors are drawn from a pool of experienced cultural practitioners, creative entrepreneurs, researchers and local intermediaries. Whenever possible, at least one mentor is rooted in the local or regional context in order to bring knowledge of language, institutions and informal networks. External mentors are invited when specific expertise is needed, for example in digitalisation, cooperative business models or impact assessment, and they are briefed in advance about the socio-economic and cultural context of the area.

Mentoring relationships are set up through a light matching process in which participants indicate their needs and goals and coordinators identify suitable mentors. Formats range from one-to-one coaching to small peer groups that combine local and external perspectives. Sessions can take place on-site during Lab activities, online between visits or through hybrid arrangements, depending on local infrastructural conditions. In this way, mentoring supports context-specific capacity-building that strengthens existing local competences while opening channels to wider European networks.

## 6. Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy

In this chapter, we translate the contextual insights from Chapter 4 and methodological tools from Chapter 5 into a practical, structured roadmap for co-creating cultural policy and activities in non-urban areas. The roadmap draws directly from practice-based evidence generated in the IN SITU Labs and is informed by established approaches in cultural mapping, participatory planning, and rural cultural development (Duxbury, Garrett-Petts, & MacLennan, 2015; Jungk & Müllert, 1987). While scope and focus differ, the roadmap found in the IN SITU report, *Roadmap for Competitiveness of the Most Innovative CCI Subsectors* (Berasategi et al., 2025), was a valuable inspiration for this approach of structuring the information. These sources guided the design of the mapping, dialogue and visioning steps, while international frameworks on cultural participation and place sensitive policy contributed to the monitoring and inclusion components (European Commission, 2023b; OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2019). The resulting sequence of ten steps is a synthesis of what proved effective across diverse non-urban contexts and is intended to be adaptable to local conditions and community priorities.

This roadmap provides clear, actionable guidance for policymakers, cultural organisers and community practitioners, enabling them to apply theoretical understandings directly to their own contexts.

Each step serves as a practical guide for planning, implementing and evaluating cultural policy and sociocultural initiatives in rural settings. Within each step, you will find:

- **Actions:** Clearly defined practical tasks.
- **Recommended methods:** Evident and straight-forward reference to specific methods, detailing when and how these methods can be practically applied.
- **Guiding principles:** Principles tailored to the specific context and characteristics of working in non-urban areas, ensuring alignment with values of inclusivity, sustainability and community empowerment.
- **Reflective questions:** Practical questions that you and your team should regularly ask yourselves. These questions support critical thinking, self-assessment and informed decision-making throughout the implementation process.
- **Expected outcomes:** Explicitly defined, achievable results associated with each step.
- **Monitoring indicators:** Clearly articulated measures to track progress and impact.

The reflective questions provided at each step are particularly important. They encourage ongoing critical reflection and continuous improvement, ensuring the process remains responsive to local conditions, community dynamics and practical challenges. The advice sections offer clear, actionable insights drawn directly from lessons learned during the IN SITU project.

This chapter serves as a practical guide, designed to help operationalise the context and methods detailed in earlier chapters. By following these steps and asking the critical reflective questions at each stage, readers can implement culturally sensitive, inclusive and sustainable policies and activities in non-urban settings. Depending on local needs and capacities, the approaches outlined here can be combined as a staged process in the order presented or applied individually as standalone initiatives.



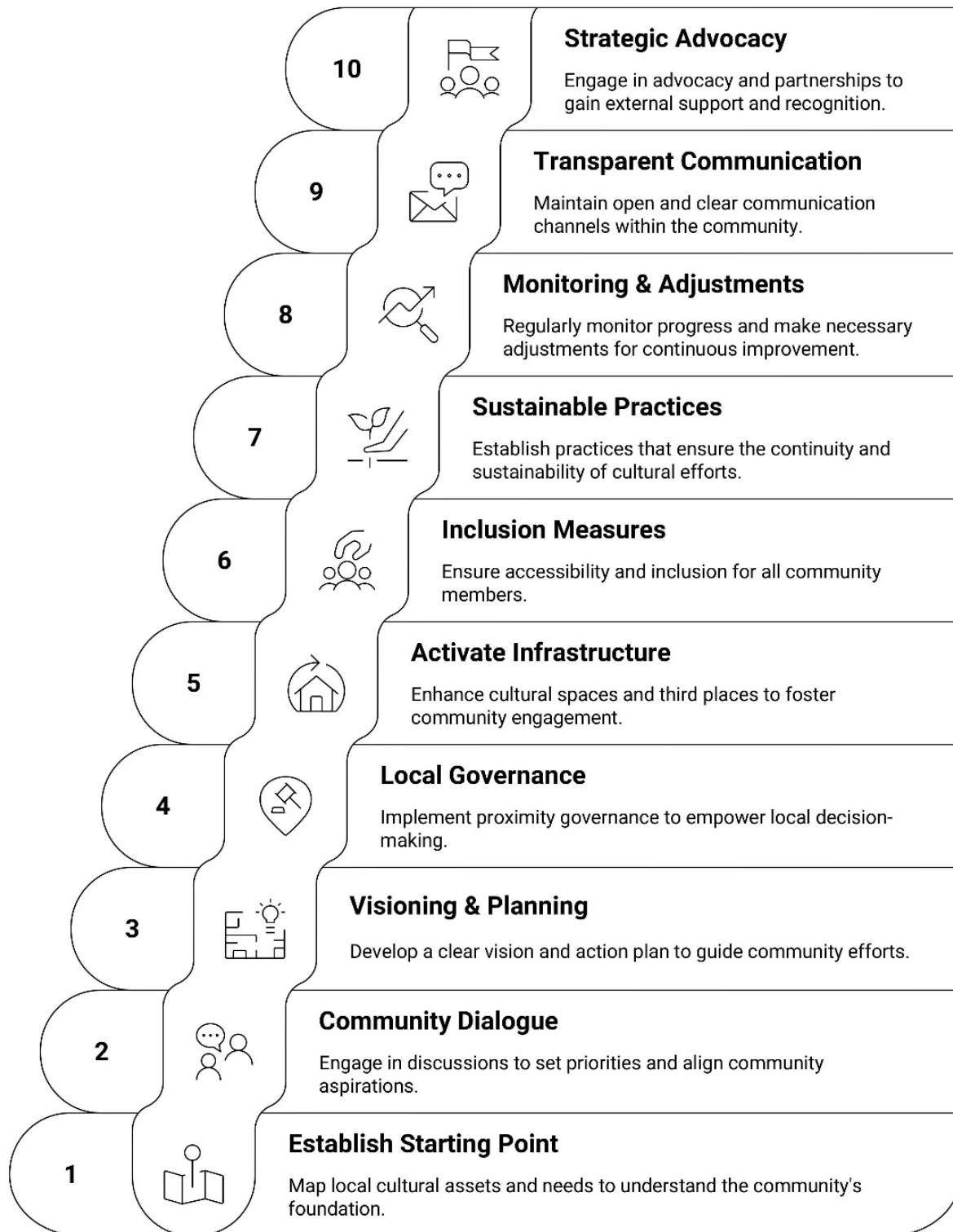


Figure 1 - Visualisation of the Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy



## 6.1 Step 1: Establish your starting point (mapping local cultural assets and needs)

The first essential step in co-creating cultural policies in non-urban areas is to accurately understand and document the existing cultural landscape. This involves comprehensive, participatory mapping of local cultural assets, community actors, and available resources. Such mapping sets a solid foundation for all subsequent actions, ensuring they are deeply informed by local realities and community needs.

### Actions:

- Conduct thorough participatory mapping exercises, engaging diverse stakeholders to gather accurate information on existing cultural infrastructure (community halls, libraries, informal meeting spaces), active local groups and organisations (associations, clubs, informal collectives) and key community connectors (volunteers, local leaders).
- Clearly document cultural assets, available venues, human resources and existing community dynamics.
- Host inclusive workshops and roundtable discussions to ensure the perspectives of diverse community members are captured and understood.

### Recommended methods:

- **Participatory cultural mapping:** Use interactive, community-driven workshops, surveys and discussions to ensure broad stakeholder engagement.
- **Roundtables:** Employ structured community dialogues to identify and prioritise cultural needs and validate mapping results.
- **Creating third places and spaces:** Identify existing informal and formal spaces that facilitate community cultural interaction.

### Guiding principles:

- **Design policies and activities within functional territories.** Recognise that administrative boundaries often do not match how people actually live and move. Policies and activities should be based on functional territories such as everyday commuting areas, school and service areas, and existing cultural or economic networks so that residents can realistically participate in programmes and decision making.
- **Communicate clearly and transparently, using accessible language.** Ensure all communications around mapping activities and outputs are clear, understandable and available in multiple local languages where relevant.
- **Keep decision-making close to local practice (proximity governance).** Mapping activities should involve local decision-makers and clearly establish processes for ongoing local involvement and rapid decision-making.

**Reflective questions:***For designing policy:*

- Are the mapped territories reflecting genuine community mobility patterns rather than purely administrative divisions?
- Does the mapping process facilitate transparent and ongoing communication between local communities and policymakers?

*For designing activity:*

- Are identified cultural assets and community resources effectively accessible and relevant to diverse local stakeholders?
- How effectively do our mapping and consultation methods capture diverse voices, including typically underrepresented community members?

**Expected outcomes:**

- A comprehensive, community validated cultural map that clearly outlines local assets, networks and identified gaps.
- Increased awareness and appreciation among community members regarding their own cultural resources, strengthening local identity and ownership.
- Clearly documented community priorities that can inform strategies for local and regional development and guide the engagement of actors in designing these strategies.
- Uptake and use of the cultural map by policymakers, planners and other stakeholders as a reference for policy design, funding decisions and cross sector collaboration.

**Monitoring indicators:**

- Number and diversity of participants engaged in the mapping process.
- Quality and completeness of the produced cultural asset map.
- Evidence of increased community awareness, appreciation and sense of ownership of local cultural assets, for example through pre- and post-survey questions, interviews or participatory evaluation tools that capture changes in perceptions and sense of belonging.
- Community satisfaction with the inclusivity and representativeness of the mapping outcomes.
- Extent and effectiveness of communication and transparency measures used throughout the mapping process.

By establishing your starting point through comprehensive cultural mapping, subsequent steps in your cultural policy roadmap will be deeply rooted in local contexts and realities, ensuring higher relevance, participation and sustainability.

## 6.2 Step 2: Community dialogue and setting priorities

Following the comprehensive mapping in Step 1, this next step involves deepening community dialogue to set clear, actionable priorities based on local cultural needs and aspirations. By engaging communities in structured, inclusive dialogues, this step ensures the development of policy and activities that genuinely reflect local concerns and visions for cultural development.

### Actions:

- Organise structured and inclusive community dialogues such as roundtable discussions, workshops, and public forums to engage diverse community members actively.
- Clearly articulate and document community priorities and cultural aspirations, ensuring that these priorities are transparently shared and collectively validated.
- Provide opportunities for participants to validate dialogue outcomes and ensure these results genuinely reflect broad community consensus.

### Recommended methods:

- **Roundtables:** Facilitate discussions enabling community members to openly discuss, debate and collectively agree upon cultural priorities. This method supports inclusive dialogue, encourages diverse perspectives and promotes democratic decision-making.
- **World Café discussions:** Uses interactive, participatory dialogue formats that allow participants to contribute ideas, connect themes and collectively prioritise actions in a relaxed, informal environment, enhancing community engagement and ownership.

### Guiding principles:

- **Prioritise inclusive participation from the beginning.** Inclusion must be deliberately and embedded into the process from its outset. Ensure dialogues actively involve typically underrepresented or marginalised groups, such as youth, elderly populations, ethnic minorities and those with limited mobility or accessibility. Clear communication about the inclusive nature of the dialogue, provision of accessible meeting spaces, interpretation services and reimbursement for participation costs (such as transport and childcare) are practical steps towards genuine inclusivity.
- **Recognise, support and sustain volunteer involvement.** Volunteers play a vital role in facilitating and sustaining cultural initiatives, especially in rural and non-urban settings. It is essential to acknowledge volunteer contributions by providing manageable workloads, clear roles and appropriate recognition and support. Offering training, small incentives or compensation for their essential activities can help sustain volunteer engagement and prevent burnout. At the same time, volunteer roles should complement rather than replace properly remunerated employment positions, which are essential for the social and economic sustainability of cultural initiatives.

- **Ensure public and transparent learning (reflection).** Transparent documentation and public sharing of dialogue outcomes are critical. This principle requires planning for clear, accessible communication strategies from the outset, ensuring outcomes are shared in plain, understandable language through multiple local channels. Ongoing feedback loops should be clearly established to maintain community engagement, facilitate continuous reflection and foster collective learning and improvement over time.

#### **Reflective questions:**

##### *For designing policy:*

- Do the identified priorities authentically represent the diversity and consensus of community perspectives and experiences?
- Are the communication strategies planned to ensure transparency and ongoing dialogue with the community regarding policy outcomes and next steps?

##### *For designing activity:*

- Have the selected dialogue methods been effective in genuinely engaging diverse community voices, especially traditionally marginalised or underrepresented groups?
- Is the documentation of dialogue outcomes clear, concise and designed to be accessible and actionable for all community members?
- How inclusive are our community dialogue processes, particularly towards traditionally marginalised groups such as queer individuals, migrants, persons with disabilities and intergenerational participants?

#### **Expected outcomes:**

- Clearly articulated, community-driven cultural priorities validated by a diverse and representative group of stakeholders.
- Enhanced community trust and ownership through genuinely inclusive participation processes and transparent decision-making.
- Publicly accessible and easily understandable documentation of community dialogues and identified priorities, supporting ongoing community engagement and accountability.

#### **Monitoring indicators:**

- Number and diversity of participants actively engaged in the dialogue processes.
- Consensus reached on identified cultural priorities.
- Levels of community satisfaction and perceived inclusivity and transparency of the priority-setting process.

By engaging diverse stakeholders in clearly structured, transparent dialogues, Step 2 ensures cultural policy initiatives genuinely reflect local contexts and community aspirations, fostering deeper community engagement, trust and sustained cultural development.

### 6.3 Step 3: Visioning and action planning

The next critical step involves developing a collective community vision and translating it into practical, actionable plans. This stage ensures that the community's aspirations are clearly articulated and aligned with practical initiatives, creating a shared roadmap that guides cultural development coherently and sustainably.

#### Actions:

- Organise visioning workshops and interactive planning sessions where community stakeholders articulate a shared vision of their desired cultural future. Use clear, accessible language and inclusive practices to ensure full participation.
- Facilitate the development of practical action plans, clearly outlining specific steps, resources, timelines and responsible stakeholders needed to realise the identified community vision.
- Validate the developed vision and action plans through broader community consultations, ensuring wide-ranging support and engagement.
- Ensure governance structures represent diverse community voices, including queer, migrant, disability-led and intergenerational perspectives, providing realistic and meaningful participation pathways.

#### Recommended methods:

- **Visioning workshops:** Engage participants in structured exercises that encourage collective imagining of the desired future. Techniques such as storytelling, scenario building and group discussions should be employed to build a consensus-based, inclusive vision.
- **Backcasting and planning exercises:** Translate collective visions into actionable plans by defining clear, achievable steps and responsibilities. This method includes setting measurable milestones, identifying necessary resources and assigning clear responsibilities to participants.

#### Guiding principles:

- **Design policies and activities within functional territories.** Visioning and planning must account for the realities of community movement and interaction. Actions and plans should consider local travel patterns, geographic accessibility and the practical day-to-day dynamics of community members to ensure feasibility and meaningful engagement.

- **Foster openness, experimentation and acceptance of creative risk.** Encourage participants to openly explore innovative and creative approaches in the visioning process. Create a supportive environment where participants feel safe to propose bold ideas and experiment without fear of failure, recognising that creativity and risk-taking are essential components of cultural innovation.
- **Ensure continuity through predictable and recurring activities.** Develop vision and action plans that prioritise continuity. Clearly defined recurring activities, consistent meeting schedules and sustained community engagement practices will foster trust, deepen relationships and provide stability for cultural initiatives over the long term. At the same time, organisers should communicate clearly what is realistically feasible in the short term and what depends on future resources, so that expectations remain realistic and trust is not undermined if some ideas cannot be implemented.

### **Reflective questions:**

#### *For designing policy:*

- Does the articulated vision align clearly with community aspirations and broader strategic policy goals?
- How effectively do the developed action plans reflect community priorities, clearly allocating resources and responsibilities to ensure long-term sustainability and impact?
- Are we intentionally including diverse perspectives in our decision-making bodies to ensure equitable representation and genuine community governance?
- Have expectations been discussed openly with participants, including what can be implemented in the near term and what may require additional resources or longer time frames, so that unfulfilled visions do not damage trust in the process?

#### *For designing activity:*

- Are the planned activities practically achievable within local capacities, clearly reflecting realistic assessments of available resources and the specific skills, time, spaces and networks available in this community?
- Do the vision and action plans include ongoing feedback mechanisms to continuously monitor progress, learn from experiences and adapt to changing community needs?

### **Expected outcomes:**

- A clearly articulated, community-driven cultural vision that enjoys widespread support and engagement across diverse stakeholder groups.
- Comprehensive action plans with explicitly defined roles, resources, and timelines, providing clear guidance for sustainable cultural initiatives.

- Enhanced community cohesion and ownership resulting from inclusive and participatory visioning and planning processes.

#### **Monitoring indicators:**

- Level of community agreement and satisfaction with the developed cultural vision and action plans.
- Extent of participant diversity and representativeness within visioning and planning sessions.
- Practicality and clarity of action plans, measured by clear resource allocation, timeline adherence and role assignments.
- Frequency and effectiveness of feedback mechanisms incorporated into action plans to ensure continuous improvement and adaptability.

By developing a clear and inclusive community vision, and translating it into actionable plans, Step 3 ensures that cultural initiatives are not only aspirational but also practical and sustainable, reflecting genuine local contexts and fostering lasting community empowerment and cultural vitality.

### **6.4 Step 4: Setting up practical local decision-making structures (proximity governance)**

Step 4 explicitly focuses on creating practical, transparent and accessible local decision-making structures within cultural initiatives. The objective is to ensure that everyday decisions are managed efficiently, reflect community needs and foster strong local ownership. It is about clearly defining and empowering local representatives who can transparently and without a delay handle day-to-day cultural activities.

#### **Actions:**

- Clearly define roles for community-based decision-making bodies (such as local advisory or steering groups), identifying responsibilities for tasks like scheduling, venue management and bookings, budgeting and community communication and outreach.
- Select community representatives transparently through open processes, ensuring wide community participation and approval.
- Establish and maintain structured, consistent communication between these local decision-makers and broader municipal or regional authorities, clearly documenting and sharing all decisions made.

#### **Recommended methods:**

- **Local advisory or steering groups:** Form these groups through transparent, community-driven selection processes. These groups should include respected individuals from diverse backgrounds, such as cultural practitioners, educators, volunteers and informal community leaders. Methods for selection can include open nominations, elections or community

consensus processes, clearly communicated to all community members to maintain transparency and trust.

- **Regular community check-ins:** Schedule brief, frequent meetings where community members can easily engage, provide feedback and receive updates about ongoing cultural activities. Clearly structured and advertised in accessible language and locations, these meetings ensure continuous community engagement and oversight.

#### **Guiding principles:**

- **Keep decision-making close to local practice.** Explicitly position decision-making authority within the local community context. Select representatives who are directly involved in or are knowledgeable about local cultural activities and clearly articulate their responsibilities and limits of decision-making power.
- **Communicate clearly and transparently.** Consistently document and openly share decisions and their rationale through accessible channels, ensuring community members are well-informed and trust the decision-making process.
- **Prioritise inclusive participation.** Actively ensure diversity and equitable representation in local decision-making groups. Explicitly address and mitigate barriers to participation such as language, accessibility or scheduling conflicts, so that typically marginalised or underrepresented voices are included.

#### **Reflective questions:**

##### *For designing policy:*

- Have we established explicit, clear and transparent criteria and processes for selecting community representatives, ensuring wide acceptance and trust?
- Are the decision-making roles and processes clearly aligned with local practices, needs and capacities, and are they effectively communicated to the community?
- Are we intentionally including diverse perspectives in our decision-making bodies to ensure equitable representation and genuine community governance?

##### *For designing activity:*

- Do the community representatives together cover the main perspectives and experiences in the local community, including those of traditionally marginalised or under-represented groups?
- Are mechanisms clearly established to allow community members ongoing access, input and oversight regarding local decision-making processes?



**Expected outcomes:**

- Clearly defined, community-approved local governance structures that efficiently and transparently handle day-to-day cultural decisions.
- Increased community trust and participation in cultural activities due to clear representation, transparent processes and responsive decision-making.
- Improved alignment of cultural initiatives with actual community needs and expectations, fostered by continuous local oversight and transparent communication.

**Monitoring indicators:**

- Transparency and clarity of selection criteria and processes for local decision-making representatives.
- Frequency, diversity, and level of community participation in decision-making meetings and check-ins.
- Community satisfaction levels concerning the representativeness, responsiveness and transparency of local governance structures.
- Effectiveness and consistency of communication methods used to share decisions and rationales with the broader community.

Clearly defining and transparently selecting local decision-making structures ensures practical governance processes that are responsive, inclusive and trustworthy, significantly enhancing community participation, ownership and sustainable cultural engagement.

## **6.5 Step 5: Activate local cultural infrastructure (third places and spaces)**

Step 5 guides us through activating and enhancing local cultural infrastructure, often referred to as “third places” or “third spaces,” which serve as crucial hubs for community interaction, cultural engagement and social cohesion. This step focuses on making better use of existing physical and social infrastructures, upgrading them as necessary to ensure accessibility, practicality and suitability for diverse cultural activities.

**Actions:**

- Identify and catalogue existing local cultural infrastructures, such as community halls, libraries, schools, cafés, informal meeting spots and multipurpose venues.
- Plan and implement practical upgrades to these spaces, making them accessible, welcoming and adaptable for multiple community uses and cultural activities.
- Facilitate coordination among local stakeholders to manage scheduling, maintenance and utilisation of these spaces, ensuring efficient, equitable and ongoing use.

### Recommended methods:

- **Community infrastructure mapping:** Engage the community to identify and document existing cultural and social spaces, assessing their current use, accessibility and potential for upgrade and expanded cultural activity.
- **Co-design workshops:** Organise community-driven workshops specifically aimed at planning practical and meaningful changes to existing infrastructure. These workshops should explicitly include diverse participants and focus on inclusive, realistic improvements.

### Guiding principles:

- **Strengthen cultural life through third places and spaces.** Recognise and utilise informal community spaces (such as cafés, libraries, community halls and public venues) explicitly as key cultural and social infrastructure. Clearly identify ways to enhance their role as inclusive and engaging hubs for cultural activity and interaction.
- **Build upon existing community strengths and practices.** Identify and clearly leverage existing local assets, routines and traditions in activating cultural infrastructure. Explicitly align upgrades and activities with community-identified needs and preferences to foster strong local ownership and engagement.
- **Ensure continuity through predictable and recurring activities.** Plan explicitly for ongoing and regular activities within these spaces, fostering a dependable rhythm that encourages sustained community participation and engagement.

### Reflective questions:

#### *For designing policy:*

- Have we assessed existing local spaces for their practical suitability and identified explicit, manageable upgrade requirements that align with community aspirations?
- Are there clearly defined roles, responsibilities and resources allocated to ensure sustainable management and ongoing coordination of these spaces?

#### *For designing activity:*

- Do planned infrastructure changes reflect community input, prioritising accessibility, inclusivity and adaptability for diverse cultural uses?
- Are scheduled cultural activities explicitly designed to create predictable and recurring engagement opportunities, fostering community ownership and consistent participation?

### Expected outcomes:

- Clearly documented and practically upgraded local cultural infrastructure, enhancing accessibility and inclusivity.

- Increased utilisation and community engagement with upgraded cultural spaces, fostering stronger local identity and social cohesion.
- Sustainable and practical management arrangements ensuring long-term maintenance, coordination and effective use of local cultural infrastructure.

**Monitoring indicators:**

- Number and quality of infrastructure changes completed, clearly linked to community-identified priorities.
- Frequency and diversity of cultural activities hosted in those spaces, reflecting practical use and ongoing community engagement.
- Community satisfaction with the accessibility, inclusivity and practical suitability of upgraded cultural spaces.
- Effectiveness of management and coordination structures established for long-term use and maintenance of cultural infrastructure.

By clearly activating and enhancing local cultural infrastructure, we make sure that practical, accessible and inclusive spaces serve as vibrant community hubs, enriching local cultural engagement and fostering sustained community cohesion.

## **6.6 Step 6: Implement inclusion and accessibility**

Step 6 is dedicated to ensuring that cultural policies and activities are genuinely inclusive and accessible, reaching a broad spectrum of community members. Rather than using overly technical language, this step involves practical, community-driven efforts to identify barriers to participation and implement straightforward, effective measures to remove these barriers. This step ensures that cultural engagement is open to all individuals, regardless of their background, abilities or circumstances.

**Actions:**

- Conduct practical assessments, such as community walkthroughs or informal surveys, to identify barriers to accessibility and participation.
- Implement realistic and practical changes to remove identified barriers, such as adjustments to event timings, transportation assistance, childcare provision, language translation and simplification, or physical accessibility upgrades.
- Provide ongoing training and awareness programs for community organisers focused explicitly on inclusion, equity and accessibility practices.

### Recommended methods:

- **Community accessibility audits:** Engage community members, particularly those with accessibility needs, to identify practical barriers at local venues and events. These audits should directly inform straightforward, practical improvements.
- **Inclusive planning sessions:** Organise planning sessions that specifically include representatives from diverse community groups to ensure that planned cultural activities are accessible, comfortable and inviting for everyone.

### Guiding principles:

- **Prioritise inclusive participation from the beginning.** Actively and intentionally include diverse community perspectives in all stages of cultural planning and implementation. This ensures that barriers to participation are proactively identified and addressed from the start.
- **Communicate clearly and transparently.** Use clear, simple language when discussing accessibility measures, explicitly stating what actions are being taken, why and how they benefit the community.
- **Build upon existing community strengths and practices.** Recognise and leverage existing local expertise, traditions and resources that already effectively foster inclusivity and accessibility. This ensures realistic and sustainable implementation of inclusion measures.
- **Challenge and transform outdated gender roles,** particularly around care work, by highlighting and promoting these activities as community-wide responsibilities.

### Reflective questions:

#### *For designing policy:*

- Are the implemented inclusion measures clearly aligned with practical community realities and needs?
- Have we established ongoing processes to continually identify and address emerging accessibility barriers?

#### *For designing activity:*

- Do our cultural activities reflect diverse community needs, clearly addressing practical barriers such as timing, location, language and physical access?
- How effectively do community members perceive and experience inclusivity and accessibility measures in practice?

### Expected outcomes:

- Tangible improvements in the accessibility of cultural venues and events, clearly visible and appreciated by community members.

- Increased participation and engagement from traditionally underrepresented or excluded community members.
- Stronger community awareness, understanding and appreciation of inclusivity and accessibility as central to cultural activities.

**Monitoring indicators:**

- Number of practical accessibility barriers identified and effectively addressed.
- Level of community satisfaction with the inclusivity and accessibility of cultural events and spaces.
- Increased participation rates from diverse community groups in cultural events and activities.
- Regularity and effectiveness of community training and awareness initiatives related to inclusion and accessibility.

Implementing these targeted and realistic inclusion and accessibility measures will ensure broader, sustained community participation and foster deeper community connections, enriching the local cultural environment.

## **6.7 Step 7: Ensure continuity through sustainable practices**

Step 7 emphasises the establishment of sustainable and ongoing cultural activities that community members can reliably anticipate and participate in. This step centres on embedding cultural initiatives within the regular rhythms of community life, ensuring that these activities become stable, familiar and integral parts of the local social fabric. Sustainable practices here mean maintaining consistent resources, manageable workloads and clear responsibilities to prevent burnout and ensure long-term cultural vitality.

**Actions:**

- Work collaboratively with community members to create and publish realistic schedules for regular cultural activities, ensuring alignment with community availability and seasonal calendars.
- Identify practical and sustainable resource solutions, including reliable funding sources, sponsorship opportunities, volunteer support mechanisms and local partnerships.
- Clearly define and distribute roles and responsibilities among community members and volunteers, maintaining manageable expectations and ensuring workloads remain sustainable.

### Recommended methods:

- **Community planning workshops:** Hold practical, interactive workshops involving diverse community stakeholders to design realistic schedules and recurring cultural events, integrating community preferences and routines into planning.
- **Resource allocation meetings:** Organise structured discussions focused on transparently identifying available resources and allocating them fairly and sustainably across various community activities.

### Guiding principles:

- **Predictability in cultural activities.** Schedule cultural activities in a manner that makes them predictable and dependable. Regularity helps community members plan their participation, enhancing ongoing engagement and trust.
- **Volunteer recognition and support.** Recognise the crucial role volunteers play by creating clear, manageable roles that do not overburden them. Provide practical support, clear guidelines and consistent recognition to keep volunteer engagement sustainable.
- **Align with community practices.** Ensure cultural programming is directly relevant and accessible by aligning it closely with local habits, traditions and daily routines, enhancing relevance and ease of participation.

### Reflective questions:

#### *For designing policy:*

- Are policies designed in a way that realistically supports the continuity of cultural activities, including ongoing resource commitments and predictable support mechanisms?
- Have we established clear and manageable expectations for volunteers and cultural organisers, ensuring roles are clearly communicated and realistically achievable over the long term?
- How are local partnerships being leveraged to sustain these cultural initiatives?

#### *For designing activity:*

- Are scheduled cultural events practically aligned with community availability and seasonal activities, making participation easy and consistent?
- Do volunteers feel supported, recognised and comfortable with the responsibilities assigned to them?
- How effectively are resources being allocated and managed, and are community members involved in these allocation decisions?

**Expected outcomes:**

- Reliable and consistent cultural activities integrated seamlessly into community life, becoming expected and valued parts of local routines.
- Increased community trust and sustained volunteer engagement due to clear roles, manageable workloads and consistent recognition and support.
- Improved resource management and sustainability, enabling long-term continuity and resilience of cultural initiatives.

**Monitoring indicators:**

- Frequency, predictability and consistency of cultural events and activities.
- Volunteer retention rates, volunteer satisfaction surveys and community feedback on volunteer workloads and recognition.
- Community perceptions and feedback regarding the ease of participation, relevance and reliability of cultural programming.
- Effectiveness of resource allocation practices and ongoing sustainability as reflected in community feedback and ongoing participation levels.

By thoughtfully embedding sustainable practices, clear expectations and practical resource management, we make sure that cultural activities become dependable, integral components of community life, strengthening local culture, cohesion and long-term community engagement.

## **6.8 Step 8: Regular monitoring, learning and adjustments (reflexive monitoring)**

Step 8 focuses on developing ongoing practices for monitoring cultural initiatives, openly reflecting on their outcomes, and making informed adjustments based on feedback and evolving community needs. This step ensures that cultural activities remain relevant, responsive and aligned with the community's changing context and expectations, fostering adaptability and continuous improvement.

**Actions:**

- Establish simple, practical methods to regularly collect community feedback regarding cultural activities, such as brief surveys, informal discussions or regular community meetings.
- Schedule periodic reflection sessions involving community members, cultural organisers and stakeholders to review progress, identify successes and challenges, and discuss necessary adjustments.
- Implement meaningful changes to activities based on feedback and reflective discussions, clearly communicating these changes back to the community to demonstrate responsiveness and accountability.

### Recommended methods:

- **Community feedback forums:** Hold regular, open gatherings where participants comfortably discuss recent events and experiences. These forums should focus on constructive, honest dialogue and encourage suggestions for practical improvements.
- **Reflective workshops:** Facilitate sessions where key stakeholders and community members collaboratively assess cultural initiatives, openly share experiences and propose specific, actionable improvements.

### Guiding principles:

- **Transparency and open learning.** Actively share monitoring results and reflections with the community in clear and accessible ways, for example, through short summaries on municipal or project websites and social media, and through posters, noticeboards or brief presentations in libraries, schools, community centres and other third spaces and places. Transparency fosters trust and collective understanding, creating an environment conducive to continuous learning and improvement.
- **Encourage experimentation and flexibility.** Create an environment where stakeholders feel comfortable trying new ideas and openly discussing what has succeeded or failed. Emphasise that adjustments are natural and positive aspects of growth and responsiveness.
- **Local context alignment.** Ensure monitoring, reflection and adjustments directly relate to the community's specific circumstances, interests and resources. Decisions should reflect local insights and practical experiences, keeping cultural initiatives deeply rooted in the community context.

### Reflective questions:

#### *For designing policy:*

- Are our monitoring processes straightforward and effective in capturing meaningful community insights and feedback?
- How effectively are feedback and reflection sessions influencing policy adjustments, and are these adjustments clearly communicated and understandable to the community?

#### *For designing activity:*

- Do our cultural activities include opportunities to gather and respond to community feedback regularly?
- Are changes based on feedback clearly implemented and communicated, ensuring participants see their input reflected in future activities?



**Expected outcomes:**

- Established, regular practices for community feedback and reflection that clearly demonstrate responsiveness and accountability.
- Ongoing improvement in cultural activities driven by community insights, fostering deeper engagement and sustained participation.
- Strengthened trust and engagement resulting from visible adjustments and a responsive approach to cultural programming.

**Monitoring indicators:**

- Frequency and quality of feedback sessions and reflective discussions.
- The number of practical changes implemented based on community input.
- Community satisfaction levels concerning responsiveness, adaptability and transparency of cultural activities.
- Clear documentation reflecting continuous learning and tangible improvements within cultural initiatives.

Through active and ongoing monitoring, open reflection, and practical adjustments, we make sure that cultural activities evolve naturally with the community, remain meaningful and continuously adapt to meet emerging local needs and aspirations.

## **6.9 Step 9: Transparent and continuous communication**

Step 9 centres on establishing clear, ongoing and accessible communication strategies to ensure that all community members remain informed, involved and engaged with local cultural activities and decision-making processes. Effective communication is essential for building trust, maintaining transparency and encouraging active participation across the community.

**Actions:**

- Develop straightforward, inclusive and practical communication strategies tailored to the community's specific needs and preferences. Consider multiple communication channels such as community bulletin boards, local newspapers, social media, newsletters, parish announcements and face-to-face meetings.
- Regularly update the community with clear and concise information about upcoming events, outcomes of meetings, decisions taken and how community input has influenced cultural programming.
- Create accessible feedback channels to encourage ongoing dialogue between cultural organisers and the wider community, ensuring continuous improvement and responsiveness.

### Recommended methods:

- **Roundtable method with code of conduct:** Use facilitated roundtable discussions to communicate updates, collect feedback and address misunderstandings. A simple code of conduct ensures respectful participation and helps community members feel safe expressing concerns or ideas.
- **Community-based communication methods:** Use facilitated roundtable discussions to communicate updates, collect feedback and address misunderstandings. A simple code of conduct ensures respectful participation and helps community members feel safe expressing concerns or ideas.
- **Participatory storytelling:** Invite community members and organisers to share short accounts of events, collaborations or problems solved. Storytelling helps make decisions understandable, illustrates how community input is used and strengthens local ownership.
- **Grassroots brainstorming workshops:** Organise open, informal sessions where people can contribute ideas without needing specialist knowledge. These sessions can be integrated into existing community gatherings. They help surface concerns early, encourage collective problem-solving and ensure communication flows in both directions.
- **Transparent process design and management:** Create simple visual diagrams showing how decisions are made, who is responsible for what, and how residents can give input. Publishing clear, brief summaries of meetings or actions taken (e.g., on noticeboards, in community newsletters or on social media) builds trust and ensures that communication is not dependent on personal networks.

### Guiding principles:

- **Transparency:** Clearly communicate the rationale behind decisions, resource allocations and changes to cultural programming. Openly sharing this information builds trust and community confidence.
- **Accessibility and clarity:** Ensure communications are easy to understand, free from jargon and accessible across multiple formats and platforms. Include translations or simplified explanations as needed to reach diverse community audiences.
- **Regular and predictable updates:** Maintain consistent communication schedules so community members know when and where they can reliably access information about cultural initiatives.

### Reflective questions:

#### *For designing policy:*

- How well does our communication approach ensure transparency in policy decisions, resource allocations and cultural planning processes?

- Are our communications designed effectively to reach diverse groups within our community, including traditionally underrepresented populations?
- What specific steps are we taking to ensure that community feedback is actively collected and visibly integrated into future policy decisions?

*For designing activity:*

- Do community members feel consistently informed about upcoming cultural events and activities? What methods of communication have proven most effective?
- How accessible are our communication methods to various community demographics, including those with limited digital access, different language needs or accessibility concerns?
- Are we regularly reviewing and adapting our communication strategies based on community feedback and engagement levels?

#### **Expected outcomes:**

- Enhanced community trust, built upon clear, frequent and open communication about cultural events, decisions and changes.
- Increased community engagement and participation due to reliable and accessible communication.
- Improved responsiveness and adaptability of cultural initiatives based on continuous community dialogue and feedback.

#### **Monitoring indicators:**

- Frequency and consistency of community updates across multiple communication channels.
- Community feedback on the clarity, usefulness and accessibility of communications.
- Responsiveness and timeliness of follow-up to community feedback.
- Community perception of transparency and trustworthiness.
- Level of community awareness and understanding of cultural decisions, events and activities.
- Community engagement metrics, such as attendance at events, participation in meetings and active use of feedback channels.

By establishing clear, continuous, and inclusive communication practices, we ensure that community members remain consistently informed, feel heard and remain actively engaged in shaping their local cultural landscape.

### **6.10 Step 10: Strategic advocacy and external partnerships**

Step 10 shifts the focus toward building strategic partnerships and advocating effectively for sustained support at regional, national and EU policy levels. This step emphasises ensuring the long-term viability and recognition of local cultural initiatives by establishing meaningful external relationships,

securing continuous funding and elevating the profile of community cultural activities beyond local boundaries.

#### **Actions:**

- Identify and engage potential external partners, such as regional governmental institutions, educational organisations, cultural funding bodies and private sector entities, to develop lasting partnerships supporting local cultural initiatives.
- Develop clear advocacy strategies and materials that effectively communicate the value, impact and needs of local cultural initiatives to external stakeholders and policymakers.
- Regularly participate in regional, national or EU-level forums and discussions to ensure local cultural interests are represented and understood.

#### **Recommended methods:**

- **Strategic partnership workshops:** Facilitate targeted sessions aimed at identifying, initiating, and formalising partnerships with external entities that can provide long-term support and resources.
- **Advocacy and communication training:** Provide community organisers and representatives with practical training in effective advocacy techniques and external communication strategies, enabling them to effectively engage policymakers and external stakeholders.

#### **Guiding principles:**

- **Clear and compelling external communication.** Explicitly focus on crafting clear, persuasive narratives that highlight the importance, unique qualities and broader benefits of local cultural activities to attract external interest and support.
- **Long-term strategic partnerships.** Aim to develop stable and mutually beneficial partnerships with external institutions and organisations, explicitly ensuring alignment of interests and clear commitments to sustained collaboration.
- **Active policy advocacy.** Proactively represent local cultural interests and needs in broader policy discussions at regional, national, and EU levels, ensuring ongoing recognition, support and integration of community cultural priorities into larger policy frameworks.

#### **Reflective questions:**

##### *For designing policy:*

- Are our advocacy strategies aligned with the priorities and language of external policymakers and funding bodies?
- Have we effectively engaged with key external stakeholders and established sustainable partnerships that reflect shared interests and commitments?

- What steps are we taking to ensure our local cultural needs are consistently and effectively represented in broader policy discussions?

*For designing activity:*

- Do we have clear and effective communication materials and advocacy plans that community representatives can use easily in external forums and discussions?
- How effectively are our partnerships supporting long-term sustainability, increased resources and broader recognition for local cultural initiatives?
- Are we regularly reviewing and updating our external advocacy and partnership strategies based on their effectiveness and community feedback?

**Expected outcomes:**

- Established, sustainable external partnerships providing consistent support, resources and increased recognition for local cultural initiatives.
- Enhanced capacity within the community for effective advocacy and external communication, leading to sustained policy support and increased resource allocation.
- Broader recognition and integration of local cultural activities within regional, national and EU policy frameworks, ensuring ongoing relevance and support.

**Monitoring indicators:**

- Number and strength of external partnerships established and maintained over time.
- Effectiveness and reach of advocacy and communication strategies as evidenced by policy support, funding allocations and external recognition.
- Frequency and quality of participation in regional, national or EU-level policy forums and discussions.
- Community satisfaction regarding the external recognition, support and sustainability of local cultural initiatives.

By strategically advocating for external partnerships and effectively communicating the community's cultural initiatives to broader policy audiences, we can secure sustained, long-term support, visibility and viability for local cultural activities.

## Part 2: Analysis results and policy recommendations

Part 2 of this report presents the results of the policy analyses. Based on research conducted for the reports *State of Cultural Policies for CCIs in Non-urban Areas* (Heinicke et al., 2024) and *CCI Ecosystem Changes in IN SITU Lab Areas* (Rainey, 2025a), we conducted interviews, workshops, document analyses and field research in these locations. The results, which vary greatly due to the different structures of the regions, are not final results, but part of a process that we have started and that should be continued. The results also reflect our perspective, which may differ from that of people from the respective Labs. They are intended to serve as an impetus for these regions to continue working on the policy proposals.

We shared and reflected on our analyses in online focus group discussions with representatives from the Lab areas. In September 2025, we discussed the findings and initial recommendations with national cultural policymakers, and in October 2025 with stakeholders at the EU level. During these discussions, we were able to supplement our information and material. However, it became clear that there are major differences in knowledge between the regional, national and EU levels. Programmes mentioned by the EU are not necessarily familiar to actors at the local and national levels. The challenges faced by local Labs appear to be known at the EU level, but they are so diverse that general recommendations are too vague.

For these reasons, we have decided to make recommendations at several levels. First, as presented in Chapter 7, at the level of the local Labs. In addition to attending to national and regional characteristics and contexts, we are trying to actively support the integration of EU programs, as we see challenges almost everywhere in terms of coordination and communication between the EU and the regions. In Chapter 8, we then present a series of cultural policy proposals for the local level.

The second major level does not address regional and national actors, but rather those at the EU level, presented in Chapter 9. This step is challenging, as the regions have very different aspects and approaches that cannot be easily generalised, or only in a way that is too unspecific. It is striking that the diverse knowledge and varied practices of the regions cannot be summarised by universal concepts, but there are visible trends that affect everyone. We have focused on these trends and are trying to formulate them as concretely as possible in order to generate recommendations for action. Moreover, it is remarkable that many programmes are being developed at the EU level and that the status quo is constantly changing due to the large amount of research and funding. This makes it virtually impossible to include all the programmes that may be relevant to CCIs in rural areas and the issue of innovation.

Keeping these challenges in mind, the following chapters present portraits of each of the six research regions, summarise similarities and local specifics, presents policy proposals on both the local and EU levels, and provide an outlook on how the implementation of these proposals could impact the different realities in the six IN SITU Labs.

## 7. Cross-analysis of IN SITU Labs

IN SITU comprises six research regions (Western coastal periphery, Ireland; Rauma and Eurajoki, West Coast and Baltic Sea archipelago, Finland; West Region, Iceland; Valmiera County, Latvia; Azores archipelago, mid-Atlantic Ocean, Portugal; and Šibenik-Knin County, Croatia), each uniquely characterised by their own specific socio-economic, cultural, and geographic contexts—a reflection of the diversity of rural areas more broadly. Despite this individuality, several commonalities and overlapping features can be identified across the regions. Notably, many of the Labs are located along the coast, and recurrent differences emerge between those areas with strong tourism sectors and those without significant tourism activity. Furthermore, issues related to infrastructure consistently play a critical role in shaping local conditions. This chapter presents a concise overview of the six regions and summarises the main findings emerging from the methodologies outlined in Chapter 5, which have been carried out by the IN SITU Lab partners<sup>1</sup>. The structure to present these findings is linked to the steps visualised in Figure 1. By providing these regional portraits and synthesised findings, this chapter aims to offer readers a clear perspective on the diverse situations and realities shaping rural innovation and policy development across Europe.

### 7.1 Galway County, Ireland

The Lab area in Ireland, the County Galway, is located in the Western Region of Ireland—a predominantly coastal, non-urban and rural area. With the coastline and Connemara, it is notable for its beautiful nature, while also having the University of Galway and Atlantic Technical University as higher education hubs. The CCI sector is very active and the Irish language is strongly present (Rainey & Collins, 2023).

Especially Galway City has an international reputation, year-round tourism and a great variety of festivals covering film, literature, theatre and music (Rainey & Collins, 2023). The region's creative ecosystem is tight-knit; many practitioners are active across multiple fields and in different collaborations, supporting a grassroots, peer-encouraging environment. While there is a lot of tourism in the coastal region, there are also regions that are less frequented by tourists. Still, as evident through the field research that we carried out in the region in 2024, there are numerous pubs that regularly offer live music and provide locals with a place to meet up and play cards together.

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<sup>1</sup> The IN SITU partners in the Lab areas are: University of Galway for Galway County, Ireland; University of Turku, for Rauma and Eurajoki, Finland; Bifröst University for West Iceland; Iceland; Latvian Academy of Culture, for Valmiera County, Latvia; Universidade dos Açores, for Azores, Portugal; and Kultura Nova Foundation for Šibenik-Knin County, Croatia.

### 7.1.1 Mapping and roundtable results

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 1: Establish your starting point (mapping local cultural assets and needs)
- Step 2: Community dialogue and setting priorities

The mapping process and participation clearly shows that the effectiveness of local strategic plans depend on collaboration between government and creative actors and therefore vary. While the cultural infrastructure is clustered in the historic centre of Galway, creative working spaces are often peripheral and the actors reported an overall lack of infrastructure as well as poor internal and regional connectivity (Rainey & Collins, 2023). For their future, local artists envisioned a car-free Galway city, highly accessible through trams, greenways, walkable hubs and artist-driven infrastructure including new studios and communal galleries (Rainey & Collins, 2023). A future-oriented approach that seems to be driven by the under-connectedness of some places (mainly eastern Galway and very rural places). Ireland's cultural policy provides comparatively strong funding mechanisms, such as the Arts Council, Creative Ireland, and specific support for Irish-speaking regions (e.g., Údarás na Gaeltachta grants). Most notably, the Basic Income for the Arts pilot (started 2022, permanent from 2026) has improved financial security for selected artists, with 2,000 artists selected at random supported with 325€ per week (Citizens Information Board, 2025). Nonetheless, this national support exists alongside a local context where the cost of living and working space continually threatens creative careers

### 7.1.2 Infrastructure, places and spaces

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 5: Activate local cultural infrastructure (third places and spaces)

In the interviews we conducted in 2025, local actors stated that due to increased rental costs artists start moving from the city to the County. This dynamic is seen as repeating patterns of boom-bust cycles, where economic recovery is not matched by investment in sustainable cultural infrastructure (Rainey, 2025a). While existing venues can't always afford to keep up to today's needs when it comes to accessibility, the situation is aggravated by closures of key spaces like Pálás Cinema and others. With beloved restaurants and pubs, independent retail shops and other small, local businesses closing, the financial pressure raises the question of how to preserve this "backbone of Galway's economy," how the local business landscape often is considered (Sobral, 2025). This underlines the importance of recent initiatives like the THRIVE heritage funding that promises improved, youth-friendly and non-alcoholic creative space. Outside of Galway city, local pubs with live music on a regular basis are popular community places. While churches used to be community places over decades for many people, those buildings often are left empty, possibly serving as locations for third spaces.



### 7.1.3 Access and agency

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 6: Implement inclusion and accessibility
- Step 7: Ensure continuity through sustainable practices
- Step 9: Transparent and continuous communication

As the engagement in Galway’s participatory mapping process and current political participation demonstrated, there is a vivid local engagement. A community that demonstrates against the closure of the Pálás Cinema, even interrupting a Galway City Council meeting (Sobral, 2025), or raising funds to re-open the cultural centre The Black Gate. However, field research showed that this is hardly translated to Galway County in general (Rainey & Collins, 2023). Not every artist from rural places feels invited to events taking place in the city of Galway and spatial concentration of cultural infrastructure remains centred in Galway City, despite the trend of creative work moving to rural areas due to rental costs.

Most cultural and arts organisations in Galway—including leadership and top management roles—are led by women, reflecting a shift in sectoral gender balance. Nevertheless, role allocation sometimes still follows traditional gendered lines (e.g., in production vs. artistic work), and some fields, like experimental music and dance, remain underprovided.

While some artists in interviews express concerns and an increasing difficulty in appealing to men as an audience, overall worries remain over access, inclusion and work-life balance, especially for women. Financial precarity and high living costs make it difficult for artists to combine artistic careers with family life, highlighting ongoing challenges in gender equity. Additionally, structural conversations about accessibility are taking root, but some policies are critiqued as merely symbolic if not implemented as ongoing, “bodily” practice co-created by the community.

### 7.1.4 Collective trademark

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 7: Ensure continuity through sustainable practices
- Step 10: Strategic advocacy and external partnerships

Galway’s creative community shows a high resilience and adaptability, continuing to improvise new forms of space and practice under challenging structural conditions. Galway’s innovation lies in blending traditional cultural heritage with contemporary creative industries (film, digital, performance) in its grassroots networks, and in collective practices such as public music sessions, knitwear design and collaborative festivals, which serve as spatial and symbolic trademarks of the city and county. Despite the vivid community, this has to be preserved and protected against the increasing financial pressure.

The next important step could be to link the city's creative music and literary scene more closely to rural areas and to think of it as a collective trademark that extends beyond Galway city. In the many pubs that can be found throughout the county, live music is already taking place and the potential of preserving this tradition and fostering exchange throughout the county by supporting collaboration on a regional level is immense.

## 7.2 Rauma and Eurajoki, Finland

The West Coast Lab region of Rauma and Eurajoki, together with its surrounding Baltic Archipelago, is characterised by a distinctive maritime and natural landscape, combining forests, fields, and an island coastline. Rauma is particularly renowned for its UNESCO World Heritage Site "Old Rauma," a preserved and inhabited Nordic wooden town. The regional economy is rooted in services, agriculture, and fisheries, but increasingly benefits from tourism and cultural heritage valorisation. As outlined in Rainey & Collins (2023) and further supported by field research we conducted in 2023, Rauma (population 40,000) and Eurajoki (population 9,300) form the primary cultural and economic centres, although creative industries extend into rural villages and archipelago communities.

### 7.2.1 Mapping and roundtable results

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 1: Establish your starting point (mapping local cultural assets and needs)
- Step 2: Community dialogue and setting priorities

Despite a relatively small number of CCI actors compared to other Finnish regions, the area boasts several respected artistic institutions—such as RaumArs Art House, Ylen Art House and the Rauma Art Museum—and events like Rauma Lace Week and the international Rauma Triennale. Notably, artists from the renowned Kankaanpää School of Fine Arts (in the wider Satakunta region) are increasingly attracted to Rauma after graduation, indicating a shift in the region's cultural gravitational pull. While the Cultural and Creative Industries cluster mainly in Rauma and, to a lesser extent, Eurajoki, CCI activities and local village associations exist beyond the two city centres. With a tradition of cultural events and festivals, both contemporary and traditional practices can be found. While heritage sites, cultural festivals and contemporary art co-exist, there are pronounced disparities in accessibility and funding. Many rural venues are only seasonally active due to resource constraints and face structural and financial hurdles. While local development plans in Rauma and Eurajoki exist, they do not directly address the needs of CCIs.

There are two tangible heritage sights as well as intangible heritage like lace-making that are presented for tourism; however, some cultural and natural sites have limited accessibility, as the mapping showed (Rainey & Collins, 2023) The participants envisioned a future with increased digital presence for remote artists, better financial support together with a wider recognition of CCIs' social value. Cooperations should be enhanced and local agency activated. As major gaps besides

information deficits, insufficient participation in place making and limited long-term funds could be identified by the actors (Rainey & Collins, 2023).

### 7.2.2 Infrastructure, places and spaces

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 5: Activate local cultural infrastructure (third places and spaces)

Producers and artists repeatedly raised concerns that the region, while culturally rich, offers insufficient long-term funding and limited access to permanent, all-year workspaces and performance/rehearsal rooms. As portrayed in Rainey & Collins (2023) and further corroborated by the workshop we carried out in 2025 with local representatives, securing financial and infrastructural stability for “third spaces” was identified as a key requirement, since some existing spaces like restored boats or historic boarding houses struggle financially.

### 7.2.3 Access and agency

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 6: Implement inclusion and accessibility
- Step 7: Ensure continuity through sustainable practices
- Step 9: Transparent and continuous communication

While networks of village associations, both on regional and local level, as well as local artists and festival organisers, foster community-led cultural vitality, individuals referred to a lack of accessibility to culture throughout the winter. The mapping reported a wish for annual forums and networking events to bridge gaps between CCI actors and local stakeholders. Recent years have seen significant changes driven primarily by national-level austerity and accompanying arts budget cuts, echoing a broader Nordic trend. Previously stable state funding is being replaced by precarious, short-term project grants. Interviewees pointed out that competitive funding processes now dominate everyday work routines: to sustain practice, applications are frequent and success rates low, with even the best opportunities offering only limited part-time or temporary support. Interviews carried out with local stakeholders in 2025 show that this funding landscape threatens the viability of CCIs, with several practitioners considering leaving the sector.

While women are heavily represented among project managers, curators and organisers, financial and infrastructural instability risks turning the sector into one where only already established ones can persist.

#### 7.2.4 Collective trademark

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 7: Ensure continuity through sustainable practices
- Step 10: Strategic advocacy and external partnerships

The Rauma–Eurajoki region exemplifies the strengths and vulnerabilities of small Nordic CCI ecosystems: rich cultural heritage, a tight-knit and gender-diverse practitioner base, and strong international networks, but structural challenges regarding funding, accessibility and youth engagement. There is certainly innovative cultural policy potential in combining historic, cosy locations with their small festivals and cultural events with slow-paced art projects in the countryside, which reflect on the relationship with nature and resources and thus provide innovative impetus for sustainable development. A key vision for the future, as found through workshops carried out by our partners in the Labs (Rainey, 2025a), is to enhance the digital and international presence of regional CCIs, broaden financial models (including entrepreneurial and collaborative approaches), and further value the social contributions of arts and culture for regional sustainability. Besides the wish for a corporate digital event calendar, some artists also reported the feeling of being tired of digital media and longing for real connectedness, analogue community and networks. While digitalisation seems to be a topic of interest and potential, it already shows the importance of ongoing dialogue to monitor the consequences of innovation and align it to the needs of the sector.

### 7.3 West Region, Iceland

The region Vesturland, situated on the Western coast of Iceland, is defined by its unique landscape, including glaciers, geothermal sites as well as cultural heritage tied to Viking sagas. It has 10 municipalities and 16,700 inhabitants with Akranes (7,400) and Borgarnes (3,800) as its largest towns. Economically, primary sectors such as agriculture and fishing have gradually ceded ground to tourism—a shift accelerated following the 2008 financial crisis, as Iceland’s natural and cultural assets attracted international visitors. The area is also noted for its vibrant folklore, especially as a setting for the iconic Icelandic Sagas, linking landscape, history and cultural identity.

#### 7.3.1 Mapping and roundtable results

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 1: Establish your starting point (mapping local cultural assets and needs)
- Step 2: Community dialogue and setting priorities

Vesturland has rich natural and cultural assets, a lot of them connected to the Viking saga heritage, and vibrant grassroots energy, community initiatives and cultural festivals like Frostbiter Film Festival and Icelandic Sagas Festival. However, the region's CCIs suffer from chronic underfunding and are dependent on volunteer work to a big extent. Some festivals could not be continued due to a lack of

support. While the participants of the mapping process highlighted strong local initiatives, they identified a lack of centralised creative hubs and cultural infrastructure as well as policy support and engagement as despair throughout the region. Key issues include inadequate communication with a lack of transparency, and uneven policy implementation.

### 7.3.2 Infrastructure, places and spaces

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 5: Activate local cultural infrastructure (third places and spaces)

Temporary multipurpose spaces and public art add to local identity, but “third spaces” (e.g., community rooms, or restaurants like Bara Bistro in Borgarnes) remain precarious due to uncertain finances and lack of coordinated infrastructure policy. Public festivals act as accessible points of entry and help reinforce regional identity; however, seasonal gaps and a lack of centralised creative hubs limit broader access. The region’s rurality, marked by close ties to nature and fluctuating rhythms of daily life, further affects participation as physical distances and weather can isolate communities (interviews, 2025). While new policies (e.g., Regional Plans of Action) and innovation hubs (e.g., Breið) offer promise in regards to cultural policy, ongoing housing shortages and limited physical space constrain activity.

### 7.3.3 Access and agency

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 6: Implement inclusion and accessibility
- Step 7: Ensure continuity through sustainable practices
- Step 9: Transparent and continuous communication

Mapping and roundtable processes underscore strong local agency, especially in small-scale and grassroots activities. There are local communities that actively organise events or creative community projects like the Dalabyggð's development program (Rainey & Collins, 2023) or knitting groups like the one in Borgarnes showed. The individuals participating in the group are very open to welcome new participants and even if such groups, grown together over years, could discourage new ones, individuals reported knitting groups to be a great opportunity also for people migrating to Iceland, connecting to local communities over the craft. Still the integration of new, often non-Icelandic residents was reported a challenge. From a policy perspective, the introduction of Regional Plans of Action (RPA) in 2015 marked a shift towards including culture in regional development, decentralising decision-making, and recognising arts’ socio-economic relevance. Even so, findings emphasise inconsistent implementation and insufficient communication channels between stakeholders, which perpetuate information gaps and limit strategic interventions. In a more public setting, the many festivals play a key role in strengthening local cultural identity and community cohesion.

While there are creative venues that operate in multipurpose buildings and public spaces and that have become cultural landmarks through murals or other creative programs to further foster local identity, those third spaces remain vulnerable due to funding.

When it comes to the gender dimension, fields like administration or politics are more gender-diverse than the European average and statistics on gender pay gap look promising. However, interviews showed the fear of a backwards trend and especially uprising hatred towards queers in the context of social media, that has been observed by interviewees.

#### **7.3.4 Collective trademark**

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 7: Ensure continuity through sustainable practices
- Step 10: Strategic advocacy and external partnerships

Vesturland's transformation since the late twentieth century reflects both individual initiative and collective adaptation. Landmarks such as the Snorrastofa Centre (1988), Eiríksstaðir Living History Museum (2000) and, especially, the Settlement Centre in Borgarnes (2006) have served as catalysts for cultural tourism and have redefined the town as a cultural destination. Newer ventures such as the Freezer hostel in Rif and the Breið Innovation Centre (opened 2020 in Akranes) highlight growing entrepreneurial and cross-sector collaboration, as does the use of regional folklore and storytelling for creative place-making and tourism. The tradition of knitting shows how economy and traditional crafts are linked, always transforming this heritage to be a contemporary method of community building that strengthens the sense for a national and local identity. With the use of local resources and the knowledge about those products and the ones producing the raw materials like wool and colour, knitting becomes a tradition that perfectly links local identity and materials with traditional crafting skills.

The region could better adopt the strategy of linking Viking legends with unique nature experiences and highlighting specific features of the region. The Saga Museum in Borgarnes is well suited for this and could be linked even more closely to the landscape (where can the stories of the sagas, the air, the sea, the wind and the rocks be experienced?). Community-building cultural activities, such as joint knitting evenings, could be promoted more strongly as a third space in which creativity and exchange are encouraged, emphasising a craft that in its connection to Iceland's history has the chance to be gender-neutral, possibly connecting people of every gender in the future.

### **7.4 Valmiera County, Latvia**

Valmiera County, situated in the historical inland region of Latvia bordering Estonia, presents a unique blend of rural and urban character. While largely rural, Valmiera County is anchored by Valmiera city with 23,000 inhabitants, which acts as the urban and industrial hub within a broader rural landscape

with a total population of 55,000. The local economy is characterised by a mix of chemical industry, retail, agriculture and forestry. While Valmiera city has lost much of its architectural heritage due to World War II, it remains recognised as an industrial and increasingly cultural centre, with the nationally renowned Valmiera Drama Theatre along with castles and manors in the county. However, the audiences are predominantly local and national with modest tourism. Festivals for performing arts and music highlight both classical and folk traditions and grassroots initiatives as well as recent cultural ambitions have earned more and more local political backing. Valmiera is emerging as a cultural hotspot—spurred, in part, by its bid for the title of European Capital of Culture (ECoC) in 2027. This bid—though ultimately unsuccessful—has marked a significant shift in the narrative and ambitions of the city. One direct consequence has been the approval of the region’s first Cultural Development Strategy in 2024, formalising a structured framework for cultural support.

#### **7.4.1 Mapping and roundtable results**

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 1: Establish your starting point (mapping local cultural assets and needs)
- Step 2: Community dialogue and setting priorities

Although Valmiera's CCIs remain less visible than dominant sectors such as industry and sport—traditionally prioritised in regional strategy—they are now receiving greater official attention. Summer brings numerous classical and folk music festivals, alongside innovative events like the Summer Theatre Festival and the International Balloon Fiesta. These combine deep-rooted traditions with contemporary artistic expression, thus creating unique regional trademarks. Vidzeme University offers a well-developed educational infrastructure for the region and the festival and cultural event landscape is very diverse with growing collaboration and engagement among local cultural stakeholders. This process also seems to be supported by the recent bid for European Capital of Culture. However, the declining and aging population threatens long-term sustainability, while some venues and infrastructures require further development and increased accessibility. Due to insufficient national-level cultural funding, the CCIs are dependent on local initiatives which could be supported by further development of collaborative and co-creation spaces. As depicted in our field research in 2024, around the county there are several open-air stages in different sizes that are being used for different events, including theatre or community gatherings with fire, live music and dance. The participants envisioned a unified strategic approach to culture with international visibility and strong cooperation among CCI actors. Priority actions include renovating cultural venues to improve their accessibility, expanding co-creation workspaces and collaborations on national and international level, boosting knowledge transfer and reducing administrative barriers to funds.

### 7.4.2 Infrastructure, places and spaces

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 5: Activate local cultural infrastructure (third places and spaces)

Besides various open-air stages spread across the County, a new form of community space emerged. Cultural actors spoke about multi-generational playgrounds, where people of different ages would find play, sport and creative tools. Offering different people a place to meet, these venues create a community space. There are efforts to establish digital infrastructure as well. Several cross-sectoral, interdisciplinary platforms have been launched, including an annual Cultural Forum, aiming to bridge traditionally siloed policy areas such as tourism, business, culture, and education. This digital infrastructure aims for connecting people, but carries the risk of widening the existing digital divide between younger, tech-savvy creative professionals and older, less digitally inclined practitioners.

Analog infrastructure also requires development. While some Soviet-era cultural centres are oversized and energy-inefficient—posing questions of sustainability—locals often view these as crucial community spaces. Thus, policy must balance resource efficiency with communal identity and agency. Besides cultural centres, artisan workshops, farms and parks partially serve as cultural third spaces as well.

### 7.4.3 Access and agency

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 6: Implement inclusion and accessibility
- Step 7: Ensure continuity through sustainable practices
- Step 9: Transparent and continuous communication

Most audiences are local, but there is a growing potential to attract both national and international participants for cultural events. Since 2018, marking the centenary of the Latvian Republic, Valmiera has seen an upsurge in cultural activity and strategic alignment with national narratives. Public funding, incentivised by the centennial, encouraged cultural practitioners to situate their initiatives within broader frameworks and narratives. Regional interviews indicate an increasing willingness among residents to undertake self-organised cultural initiatives in addition to more traditional, municipality-driven programming. The influx of remote workers and their engagement in local issues, from sustainability to local heritage preservation, reflects a broader shift towards participatory governance in cultural affairs. Municipal support should continue to facilitate, rather than lead, such bottom-up initiatives.

While the creative and cultural workforce of Latvia is predominantly female, the gender dimension does not seem to be specifically addressed in policies. Still infrastructure upgrades to ensure universal



accessibility are steps towards greater gender and social equity. However, young people especially discuss this topic according to our interviews.

#### 7.4.4 Collective trademark

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 7: Ensure continuity through sustainable practices
- Step 10: Strategic advocacy and external partnerships

Valmiera's distinguishing innovative potential lies in the dynamic interplay between its deep-rooted cultural traditions and the increasing adoption of contemporary formats and cross-sectoral collaborations. The revival and reinvention of community spaces—such as the transformation of publicly accessible playgrounds into intergenerational creative hubs—demonstrate a capacity to adapt inherited social infrastructure for new, inclusive uses. Furthermore, initiatives like the Valmiera Multimedia Festival and the establishment of the Kurtuve contemporary art space in a former industrial building stand as flagship examples of “hybridisation,” blending heritage with contemporary art and digital culture.

### 7.5 Azores archipelago, Portugal

The Azores, a volcanic archipelago of nine islands located 1,500 km west of the European mainland, is home to 230,000 people and distinguished by rich cultural heritage and exceptional biodiversity. The region has autonomous governance and is economically shaped by agriculture and fishing. Historically, emigration has shaped Azorean society, but the past decade has seen a tourism boom driven by the region's distinctive natural settings and cultural identity. The University of the Azores further strengthens the regional educational infrastructure and serves as an anchor point for cultural and academic networks across three islands. Despite an unsuccessful bid for the European Capital of Culture in 2027, Ponta Delgada will serve as the Portuguese Capital of Culture in 2026, signalling greater national recognition for the region's creative potential.

#### 7.5.1 Mapping and roundtable results

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 1: Establish your starting point (mapping local cultural assets and needs)
- Step 2: Community dialogue and setting priorities

The creative sector is split between private actors and publicly supported institutions like museums and heritage sites with events and festivals filling up the calendar alongside religious and historical traditions. However, the archipelago's dispersed geography and administrative focus on São Miguel and Ponta Delgada result in disproportional resource allocation, making it difficult for practitioners from smaller or more remote islands to gain visibility and access to funding. This lack of local support often forces actors to seek support via mainland or national networks. Participants of the roundtable

envisioned a more diversified, robust and interconnected CCI ecosystem for the future—one that could bridge public and private actors through improved communication and cooperation between the regional government and CCIs to tackle issues of funding. Policies should in the future streamline financial access for smaller or volunteer-led initiatives and focus on upgrading third spaces. In addition, there is a wish for more professionalisation and training for topics like cultural management and programming.

### 7.5.2 Infrastructure, places and spaces

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 5: Activate local cultural infrastructure (third places and spaces)

Cultural infrastructure spans both formal institutions and informal, community-based venues. In each island, choirs, associations, football teams, carnival troupes and religious brotherhoods anchor active social networks. Over the past two decades, significant investment in infrastructure—such as the Teatro Micaelense, Coliseu Micaelense and the Arquipélago Arts Centre—has provided major cultural venues and increased the region’s capacity to host world-class events. At the same time, grassroots initiatives like Walk&Talk and Tremor have redefined the cultural landscape by transforming public space and amplifying local voices. Despite ongoing investment, many smaller islands face technical limitations—outdated venues, insufficient equipment and limited staff—which restrict their ability to support sustained artistic and cultural production.

### 7.5.3 Access and agency

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 6: Implement inclusion and accessibility
- Step 7: Ensure continuity through sustainable practices
- Step 9: Transparent and continuous communication

Many events rely on community participation and volunteer organisation and on every island there is a strong associational life with choirs, soccer teams, carnival associations and others. However, access can be complicated due to the geographic fragmentation and clear gendered patterns in volunteer work drawn from longstanding catholic traditions. Initiatives like the Arquipélago Arts Centre provide important third spaces, especially for younger and more contemporary audiences. Cafés, clubs and local festivals serve as additional cultural infrastructure, bringing together diaspora returnees, locals and diverse age groups. While the role of women is significant in organising key festivities, there is overall limited targeted gender policy. Presently, much of the sector’s resilience relies on volunteerism and strong associational life, yet geographic fragmentation, infrastructural disparity and deeply rooted gender norms—with women often taking leading but under-recognised roles in organisation—remain salient challenges.

#### 7.5.4 Collective trademark

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 7: Ensure continuity through sustainable practices
- Step 10: Strategic advocacy and external partnerships

The Azores' trademark lies in blending deep-rooted religious and communal traditions with growing contemporary and international artistic practice. Flagship festivals—such as Azores Fringe Festival, Tremor and Sea Week—serve as regional and international reference points for innovation. UNESCO World Heritage sites and unique wine festivals further differentiate the islands' cultural offer. The region can strengthen this connection between religious tradition, art and crafts, and impressive natural surroundings (flowers, hills, sea) and expand the infrastructure between cultural sites, also in conjunction with tourist attractions and natural sights.

Cultural initiatives are increasingly experimenting with interlinking environmental sustainability, cultural tourism and the distinctive natural setting—combining flowers, volcanic landscapes and the sea—with artistic expression. However, participants pointed out the need to ensure that the growing focus on tourism and mass events does not displace local artistic practice or side-line voluntary and amateur activities.

### 7.6 Šibenik-Knin County, Croatia

Šibenik-Knin is a coastal-county on Croatia's southern periphery, split into the more touristic and dynamic coastal and less vivid continental areas, with 109,000 inhabitants and Šibenik as its main city with 42,599 inhabitants (Gradska uprava Grada Šibenika, 2025). The region features an extensive coastline with 285 islands, renowned UNESCO sites such as Šibenik Cathedral, and significant fortress heritage. While the coastal zone thrives seasonally on tourism, the continental hinterland faces depopulation, aging population and underdevelopment. The region's economy is dominated by transport, food processing, trade and tourism in the coastal parts, where despite its importance a lack of strategic planning is current.

#### 7.6.1 Mapping and roundtable results

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 1: Establish your starting point (mapping local cultural assets and needs)
- Step 2: Community dialogue and setting priorities

The region's cultural life pulses mostly along the coast, with Šibenik at the epicentre—home to the International Children's Festival, contemporary dance, alternative music and jazz events hosted in historic fortresses. Yet, most cultural institutions and events are heavily concentrated in the urban area, leaving the continental and rural parts disconnected. The Trtar Hill acts as both a physical and symbolic boundary between the flourishing coast and the disadvantaged continental region. Notably,

Knin and other inland communities are showing initiatives to revive local cultural institutions and foster new collaborations with CCIs, but persistent gaps in infrastructure and connections hinder broader participation.

Participants of the roundtable consistently highlighted the coastal–continental divide and called for integrated regional development. Key aspirations for the next 10–15 years include revitalised islands and continental areas, improved transport and infrastructure, the renewal of traditional crafts and creative industries, population retention through inward migration and solid, long-term public support for the CCI sector. Suggested mechanisms include sustainable housing and tourism policies, infrastructure investment and robust networking for local creative actors. They emphasised the necessity of participatory strategy development and the establishment of a rural culture centre network to combat marginalisation.

### **7.6.2 Infrastructure, places and spaces**

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 5: Activate local cultural infrastructure (third places and spaces)

Mapping and interview-based research in Šibenik-Knin identified three distinct pillars supporting the county's Cultural and Creative Industries ecosystem: traditional institutions (such as the Šibenik City Museum, the Croatian National Theatre and city libraries), innovative institutions (notably the Fortress of Culture), and independent grassroots collectives (including venues like Azimut club and Kolektiv 4B). The revitalisation of the historic fortresses of St. Michael, St. John and Barone, under the umbrella of Fortress of Culture (established in 2014), has transformed them into multifunctional spaces for contemporary performance, festivals and exchange, encouraging collaboration with small associations and independent creators.

### **7.6.3 Access and agency**

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 6: Implement inclusion and accessibility
- Step 7: Ensure continuity through sustainable practices
- Step 9: Transparent and continuous communication

There are major disparities in access to cultural infrastructure and opportunities. Public and private actors co-exist and even co-create in Šibenik, but resources and institutional focus are heavily concentrated on the coast. Rural and continental residents struggle with limited transport, closed libraries and a lack of sustained cultural provision. Volunteerism and local engagement exist—especially in local festivals—but are hampered by low funding, fragmented policy support and lack of continuity. Existing cultural venues (like the House of Arts Arsen) and revived rural museums (e.g., Knin) act as critical third spaces and connectors, though the network of rural cultural centres needs

development, especially to reach remote island and inland populations. The International Children's Festival, a fixture since 1958, anchors the region's legacy as a creative incubator, while more recent ventures—like the Fortresses of Culture (organisation includes House of Arts Arsen and other venues) and alternative spaces such as the Azimut bar—reflect the area's thriving DIY and collaborative ethos. Despite some gender parity in festival organisation, structured inclusion strategies (be they gender, youth or minority-focused) are largely absent.

#### 7.6.4 Collective trademark

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 7: Ensure continuity through sustainable practices
- Step 10: Strategic advocacy and external partnerships

Šibenik-Knin's most innovative practices lie in the adaptive reuse of historic fortresses as contemporary cultural venues, embedding the arts in iconic heritage sites and linking science, tourism, food and other creative sectors with tradition and heritage sites. This aspect of linking heritage with arts should be translated to rural regions and connect specific crafts, music and art with heritage. Flagship events—such as the International Children's Festival and OFF Jazz—have achieved international visibility, demonstrating the power of leveraging unique local identity in global cultural markets. The revitalised club and dance scenes of the early 2000s, and the surge of grassroots initiatives (like Terraneo Festival or Azimut bar), signal a sustained pattern of bottom-up innovation that is distinctive in the Croatian context.

### 7.7 Summary of commonalities and divergences across the IN SITU Labs

The comparative analysis of the six IN SITU Lab regions offers insights of both the shared realities and the specific challenges faced in rural, coastal, and peripheral cultural-creative ecosystems in Europe. Together, they make structural similarities visible—such as the persistent importance of place for cultural practice and innovation—while also highlighting the need for context-sensitive policy approaches. This summary synthesises the main findings along key analytical dimensions from Chapter 4.

#### 7.7.1 Infrastructure, spaces and places

A In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 5: Activate local cultural infrastructure (third places and spaces)

A common thread running through all regions is the vital role of infrastructure—not only as a physical enabler but as a socio-economic boundary. Rising rents and property costs in cities like Galway and Rauma illustrate how economic prosperity can undermine the sustainability of local creative practice. As artists and creatives are increasingly pushed into rural or peripheral areas, patterns emerge of both

revitalisation and marginalisation. In Galway, the pressure on rents forces a migration of artists from the city to the county, risking a hollowing out of urban creative ecosystems and revealing how prosperity in capitalist terms often runs counter to cultural sustainability. Similarly, in Iceland, the lack of affordable, permanent spaces means that creative venues are often temporary, limiting both continuity and community-building. The mountainous landscape in Croatia functions as both an infrastructural and symbolic boundary, reinforcing existing regional divisions.

Investment in cultural infrastructure, such as fortress redevelopments in Šibenik or the establishment of multipurpose arts centres in the Azores, demonstrates local agency and capacity for adaptive reuse. However, true accessibility remains uneven: the concentration of cultural assets in urban or touristic hubs often leaves rural or archipelagic regions underprovided. The digital divide—emergent between digitally fluent creative youth and older, less-connected practitioners, as observed in Latvia and Iceland—further complicates access and may inadvertently increase social exclusion if not actively addressed.

### **7.7.2 Access and agency**

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 6: Implement inclusion and accessibility
- Step 7: Ensure continuity through sustainable practices
- Step 9: Transparent and continuous communication

Agency and accessibility are not only shaped by physical infrastructure but also by governance models and funding structures. Strong participatory traditions persist in most regions, with local associations, volunteer networks and grassroots initiatives playing a central role. Yet the capacity for sustained agency is often hampered by structural factors: gaps in funding (Finland, Iceland) and policy fragmentation (Azores).

While digitalisation expands opportunities for remote participation and new forms of networking, some participants—particularly in Iceland and Croatia—note that digital access can reduce the impetus for local volunteerism and face-to-face community action, building a “virtual community” at the expense of the tangible local. This dynamic underscores the importance of a continuous, reflexive dialogue in policymaking to avoid unintended exclusion and to adapt to rapidly changing conditions. Strategic support for physical and digital infrastructure must be regularly reassessed in collaboration with local actors.

### 7.7.3 Community

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 2: Community dialogue and setting priorities
- Step 3: Visioning and action planning
- Step 9: Transparent and continuous communication

The relationship between tourism and cultural vibrancy is multifaceted. In places like Šibenik or Galway, tourism provides visibility and resources for the local CCI sectors, but may also drive up costs, threaten authenticity and lead to seasonal or festival-based “boom and bust” cycles. A more community-embedded approach, such as in the Azores or parts of Ireland, seeks to harness micro-funding or grassroots initiatives that reinforce local benefit and resilience, rather than mere attraction of outside visitors. Community-driven networks—be it through arts councils, microfunds or associational structures—are instrumental in creating continuity and shared agency, especially where formal policy support is lacking or inconsistent.

### 7.7.4 Gender and diversity

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 6: Implement inclusion and accessibility

Across all regions, the role of gender and wider diversity is increasingly visible, but progress is often uneven and dependent on individual actors or local leadership. While many CCIs are women-led or display strong female representation (Ireland, Finland, Latvia), certain domains—such as production, stage tech or experimental genres—remain less balanced.

Although discourses around queerness and inclusion become more public in all research areas, the amount of acceptance is different and unconditional tolerance has not yet been achieved. As actors state, it is “not 100% safe to be different,” and while creative spaces can offer some refuge for exploration and self-expression, social constraints and implicit “boxes” remain present, indicating that continuous, open dialogue is essential for deepening inclusion and diversity.

### 7.7.5 Continuity, sustainability and visibility

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 3: Visioning and action planning
- Step 4: Setting up practical local decision-making structures (proximity governance)
- Step 6: Implement inclusion and accessibility
- Step 7: Ensure continuity through sustainable practices
- Step 8: Regular monitoring, learning and adjustments (reflexive monitoring)
- Step 10: Strategic advocacy and external partnerships

Sustainable development and visible impact are dual goals, yet the sustainability of local cultural ecosystems remains precarious. In several regions, continuity depends heavily on a handful of dedicated individuals or institutional leaders; once these individuals move, or take a break, the structure risks dissolving. Institutionalisation and strategic capacity-building are identified as priorities to break this dependency (e.g., through stronger rural cultural networks in Croatia, multi-year public funding in Ireland, or targeted professionalisation initiatives in the Azores).

Visibility is often intertwined with tourism, but there are divergent logics: Šibenik exemplifies how intensive cultural tourism can invigorate a town's infrastructure and profile, while in other cases visibility for its own sake may threaten authenticity and overburden fragile ecosystems. Sustainability—in the sense of balancing innovation, economic viability and social benefit—requires a deliberate policy approach, integrating support for voluntary, community-based cultural production with opportunities for professionalization and cross-sectoral collaboration.

#### **7.7.6 Volunteerism**

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 2: Community dialogue and setting priorities
- Step 7: Ensure continuity through sustainable practices

Volunteerism remains both a backbone and a vulnerability: despite its centrality to most regions' CCI ecosystems, reliance on unpaid labour signals fragility in long-term maintenance and necessitates the recognition of volunteers as essential stakeholders in future policy measures.

#### **7.7.7 Collective trademark**

In the *Roadmap for Non-urban Cultural Policy*, this relates to:

- Step 7: Ensure continuity through sustainable practices
- Step 10: Strategic advocacy and external partnerships

It is striking that virtually all Lab regions have the potential to develop trademarks based on their specific CCIs, particularly in connection with practices and sites related to cultural heritage and specific cultural traditions. In these areas, there are links between special nature experiences (sea, coast), scenic and cultural tourist attractions (nature conservation, impressive flora and fauna) and special cultural traditions, which are particularly cultivated in rural life (music, storytelling, crafts, etc.).

In order to bring these different strands together in an innovative overall concept for defining a trademark, the various levels (art, culture, tourism, economy, etc.) must cooperate closely with one another. There are also differing opinions as to whether cultural traditions should be exploited as a 'trademark'. One example where this interaction works quite well is Iceland's strategy of interlinking art, tourism, nature and cultural history in an Icelandic national trademark. For the West Iceland/Borganes region, it is possible to develop a regional trademark based on a wider national



trademark that focuses on specific legends and links to cultural sites and specific natural monuments, artists and farms.

## 7.8 Conclusion

In summary, the cross-regional analysis illustrates that while resilience marks rural and small-town creative communities, their future depends on context-sensitive policies that safeguard accessibility, embed participatory agency and attend to the complex dynamics of gender, diversity and sustainability. Ongoing dialogue, bottom-up policy-making and the careful calibration of physical and digital infrastructure—attuned to local needs—are vital for translating cultural vibrancy into genuinely inclusive regional development.

## 8. Cultural policy proposals – local level

Based on interviews and focus group discussions in the Labs and field research carried out between 2022 and 2025, we have outlined a set of proposals. However, they inevitably reflect our research perspective and may not always coincide with the current priorities of each region and its representatives. The project has taken the first steps and offers these proposals as a starting point. The next steps need to be shaped and owned by the regions themselves. We therefore encourage stakeholders in each region to adapt and further develop these proposals. The roadmap in Chapter 6 provides a framework for this work.

Despite the diversity of contexts, the fieldwork also revealed several recurring challenges across the areas, which are summarised in Chapter 7. To respond to these shared challenges, we recommend the following set of proposals. They are intended as practical tools and starting points that should be refined in close collaboration with local actors.

### 8.1 Proposal 1 – Support sociocultural initiatives

Locally rooted sociocultural initiatives are essential for community participation, collective creativity, and social resilience. National and regional policies should:

- Prioritise inclusive, process-oriented projects that activate diverse groups and promote ongoing cultural engagement, rather than focusing solely on prestige events, impact-less initiatives, tourism products or other culture-washing activities that focus on profit-making or diplomacy.
- Facilitate networking between initiatives and provide accessible information and advisory services, supporting peer learning and mutual capacity building.
- Proactively reach out to underrepresented communities (e.g., minorities, young people, people in remote areas) to increase participation without imposing rigid programme criteria.

- Match artists and cultural initiatives to existing structures like schools.
- Encourage regional identity and pride by supporting initiatives that draw on local traditions, skills and shared concerns.
- Enable, encourage and support cooperation between different sectors and disciplines to amplify the effect of endeavours of different areas of operations.

## 8.2 Proposal 2 – Create simplified, community-oriented funding streams with multi-year continuity

Complex procedures often deter small organisations and volunteers. National and regional governments should:

- Streamline grant applications and reporting, especially for small-scale or pilot projects; introduce standardised, plain-language forms.
- Introduce multi-annual, stable micro grants (e.g., 1000 to 5000 euros), accessible to local grassroots groups and municipalities, to enable experimentation and continuity.
- Allow co-applications to funding to partnered EU towns or cooperating initiatives to share responsibility and workload.
- Permit re-granting: empower trusted local intermediaries (e.g., cultural centres, associations, municipalities) to redistribute small funds in their communities, thus making funding more responsive at ground level.
- Provide micro funding from local budgets, wherever possible, or reallocate existing resources to support self-organised projects.

## 8.3 Proposal 3 – Inclusive use of public spaces

Access to space is a key barrier for cultural participation, especially in rural and marginalised areas. Policy actions include:

- Open up existing public infrastructure (libraries, schools, community halls, municipal buildings, sports facilities) for regular cultural and artistic use outside core hours, with minimal bureaucratic requirements.
- Enable low-threshold use of vacant or underused buildings by community groups through temporary permissions, pop-up projects or shared management agreements.
- Foster “third spaces” by investing in small, flexible upgrades (e.g., meeting corners, exhibition walls, shared equipment) that make venues more welcoming and multifunctional.
- Update local and regional guidelines to prioritise inclusive access for cultural initiatives, especially those targeting vulnerable groups.
- Where possible, consideration should be given to purchasing or acquiring previously privately owned buildings. Many abandoned, partly dilapidated buildings could be used by artists instead of remaining empty.

#### 8.4 Proposal 4 – Regular artist-policy dialogue

To ensure policy responds to actual needs, dialogue must become systematic. Possible steps:

- Establish regular, low-barrier forums for exchange between artists, creative practitioners, officials and other stakeholders, not only in capitals but across regions.
- Link these meetings to ongoing policy developments (e.g., review of funding guidelines, local development plans) and invite project presentations or open workshops.
- Encourage joint working groups or advisory panels at the municipal/regional level, including representatives from diverse communities and artistic disciplines. Also, ensure that young people and their needs can be included by forming a “students’ council.”
- Use digital tools to increase accessibility and allow hybrid participation, reducing travel barriers.

#### 8.5 Proposal 5 – Reflexive monitoring as policy instrument

To free up time and resources for creativity and innovation, evaluation must be made meaningful:

- Replace or supplement rigid, KPI-centred reporting with flexible narrative reflections and community feedback (e.g., short stories, focus group notes, qualitative summaries).
- Offer simple templates and optional oral reporting, especially for small organisations or projects led by volunteers.
- Share good practice on learning-oriented monitoring at the regional/national level (e.g., annual review meetings, learning exchanges between projects).
- Embed monitoring as a capacity-building exercise, focusing on collective learning rather than compliance.

#### 8.6 Proposal 6 – Portfolio by relatedness

Rather than copying large-city models, regions and municipalities should build on their unique strengths. National/regional frameworks should:

- Support local actors to identify and define three to five priority areas for cultural and creative activity, based on skills, traditions and potential partners.
- Encourage tailored strategies and cross-sector partnerships (e.g., linkages between culture, environment, education and digital innovation).
- Provide advisory tools (e.g., portfolio templates, mentoring, local language materials) to help communities articulate their vision without external jargon.
- Embed place-based cultural priorities in broader regional development or smart specialisation strategies.

## 9. Cultural policy proposals – EU level

In Heinicke et al. (2024), we presented a wide range of EU funding programmes for urban areas, each with different priorities and objectives, including the European Green Deal, the New European Bauhaus, Creative Europe, European Social Fund, CERV, INTERREG and others (for an overview, see Heinicke et al., 2024, p. 43).

The analyses, discussions and interviews conducted over recent months highlight several challenges that EU policy should address:

- Programmes are often short lived or relaunched in a different form, creating additional bureaucratic hurdles and insecure funding situations. In addition to providing long term perspectives, EU programmes should be better interconnected, with clearer options for combining instruments and for collective learning across programmes.
- Many regional actors are not connected to EU level networks and are not informed about available programmes, which limits knowledge of funding opportunities and reduces the likelihood that actors feel addressed by them. In many places, people do not know who has expertise in EU applications.
- The administrative effort required to apply is often very high, demanding time and skills that are difficult to mobilise, especially in volunteer-based contexts.
- EU application language does not correspond well to local languages and everyday vocabulary.
- Applications frequently refer to general needs rather than to the specific issues of particular regions, or cover EU-level topics with an EU-scope level of prioritisation, leaving gaps for local realities that are not always reflected by funding priorities.
- Knowledge about programmes is often tied to individuals and is therefore unstable and difficult to sustain over time.

**To meet these challenges, we recommend the following steps:**

- EU-wide standard for accessible cultural policy communication, including plain language briefs and local translations.
- Dedicated rural culture funding streams across programmes such as Creative Europe and the ERDF, with streamlined applications.
- EU networks and dialogue forums at local and regional level to share models such as micro-funding, sociocultural participation and third spaces.
- Criteria that move beyond tourism, valuing cohesion and community outcomes in EU calls.
- Light monitoring of social and cultural value, using simple EU templates to capture well-being, identity and resilience without excessive form-filling.
- Support for the use of public space, including funding for small upgrades and pilot projects in rural cultural venues.

- Acceptance of creative risk, including support for experimental, process-based projects in rural contexts.

At the local and regional level, EU experts should be identified, for example people who are familiar with EU programmes and can act as advisors and local mentors, creating links between EU and local contexts. To implement these recommendations, we have developed various short proposals:

### 9.1 Proposal 1 – Support socio-cultural initiatives

Socio-cultural initiatives that are rooted in specific communities play a crucial role in strengthening local identity and fostering social cohesion. Supporting such initiatives through funding programmes that prioritise ongoing processes rather than only event-based outcomes empowers local actors to create regular, shared experiences. This reduces the pressure to deliver marketable “products” and allows more time for community building and participation. Shifting the focus in EU calls from heritage or tourism toward social value and cohesion directly benefits residents, as it fosters a living, connected community. This approach produces long-lasting benefits by reinforcing trust and resilience within the region.

The recently announced *Culture Compass for Europe*, which aims to “recognise and fully harness culture’s potential” (European Union, 2025a), should include volunteer-based and socio-cultural initiatives when addressing the question of accessibility to culture and the possibility for everyone to participate in cultural life. By giving visibility to culture and arts, it is crucial to include socio-culture, broad culture and art forms that are focused on a process, or centred around a community, rather than an economic value or tangible result in the form of a consumable product.

### 9.2 Proposal 2 – Create simplified, community-oriented funding streams with multi-year continuity

Establishing simplified and community-oriented funding streams with multiyear continuity gives volunteer-based and small-scale actors in rural areas real opportunities to initiate cultural projects. By streamlining applications and reporting requirements through dedicated rural culture funding streams within programmes such as Creative Europe and the ERDF and by introducing micro-funding mechanisms that empower municipalities and local communities to manage resources efficiently, such programmes reduce administrative hurdles and enable long-term planning. Local actors gain agency to develop and pursue visions that are adapted to their specific needs, while stable, small-scale funding creates trust, supports experimentation and helps innovative grassroots projects emerge, especially where experimental and process-based projects are funded. This expands the diversity of activities and builds resilient, well-connected networks, which is an essential prerequisite for sustainable cultural development in rural regions. EU networks and dialogue forums can be created to share models such as micro-funding, sociocultural participation and third spaces and to streamline reporting methods.

These proposals should be aligned with the planned key actions to secure investment in culture in the context of the *Culture Compass for Europe*, which include simplifying access to EU funding, mainly for *Creative Europe and AgoraEU* (European Union, 2025b). While the proposed budget for the *Creative Europe Culture strand 2028–2034* would double the EU culture budget, Culture Action Europe (2025) has underlined that this represents only the bare minimum needed to sustain and develop the European cultural sector. To implement multi-year continuity and further secure culture, especially in non-urban and rural contexts, a larger budget would therefore be necessary.

### 9.3 Proposal 3 – Inclusive use of public spaces

Publicly owned spaces such as libraries, town halls, museums, school buildings and other available facilities should be recognised and equipped as cultural and artistic venues that are accessible for community art projects. A vivid community requires spaces where people can meet and participate in shared activities.

At EU level, cohesion policy and Creative Europe calls should explicitly encourage the use of existing public buildings as socio-cultural hubs, for example by allowing small scale investments, accessibility upgrades and pilot uses of underused spaces as eligible costs. Member States and regions can be required to outline, in programmes and partnership agreements, how they will support the cultural use of public buildings in rural and non-urban areas.

By thinking creatively about what already exists, such as multi-using public buildings, opening up unused ones, or introducing minor upgrades or pilot projects, communities can be supported and activated by making cultural participation accessible to diverse groups. An inclusive space regularly reflects on whether its design, rules or communication exclude specific audiences and considers how this can be overcome.

Most of the time, even a small space that invites everyone to coexist without commercial pressure can enable creativity and community. This might be a cosy sitting area with tea, a pop-up gallery space, or a shared “living room” that can host cultural and artistic activities. Such arrangements encourage regular encounters, informal learning and collaboration as well as revitalise public spaces and enhance their social value.

EU funding can support the identification of these locations, their basic structural adaptation for cultural use and the development of local governance models that keep them visible, open and accessible to diverse groups, as long as the upkeep is within the community’s capacity. The resulting increase in local engagement supports social and cultural cohesion at grassroots level.

### 9.4 Proposal 4 – Regular artist–policy dialogue

Establish regular meetups and forums for structured dialogue between artists, local administrators and policymakers in order to promote transparency and mutual understanding. Embedding these

meetings in relevant thematic contexts, such as presentations on new funding schemes or showcases of local art, helps to keep discussions productive and connected to actual needs. Such platforms improve communication, bridge gaps between policy and practice, and contribute to more responsive, needs oriented policymaking. At the same time, they give artists meaningful opportunities for visibility and participation in shaping regional cultural agendas, which strengthens the cultural sector as a whole.

This dialogue can take place in the community's third spaces or in local artist spaces and can be combined with exhibitions, art installations or other presentations. These meetings can be organised at local, regional and national levels and can be linked to EU programmes in terms of content and structure, anchored in regional and local contexts.

Networks between artists can also be strengthened by increasing opportunities for cooperation across city and country borders. The funding scheme Perform Europe (n.d.) has supported a wide range of inclusive, diverse and environmentally conscious touring projects during its two application rounds. Although it is expected to close in March 2026, it demonstrates the potential of such schemes for rural areas in terms of networking. By encouraging touring projects to include stops in rural and peripheral areas, these schemes can foster connections between artists and other actors.

The process of implementing the strategies from the *Culture Compass for Europe* is an ideal moment to initiate this type of dialogue. To ensure the meaningful implementation of culture throughout the programme, and to respond to the needs of those active in the sectors, such dialogue formats can be invaluable.

Existing Creative Europe Desks, which are located in most of our research areas to provide information on EU funding opportunities, can serve as anchor points for organising these meetings (European Union, n.d. b). While they are not yet present in all regions, they are usually based in larger cities and should therefore organise small touring events to extend their influence, networks and local knowledge across the wider region, including rural and non-urban areas.

## 9.5 Proposal 5 – Reflexive monitoring as policy instrument

Shift from rigid, KPI-based reporting toward lighter, more flexible and learning-oriented evaluation. For example, instead of solely measuring pre-defined quantitative indicators (e.g., number of participants), implement learning reviews instead. We recommend reflection sessions with the project team and stakeholders, or in written form, or even as exchanges with other actors under the same funding scheme. Such learning-oriented evaluation not only documents outcomes, but transforms reporting into a continuous dialogue that supports adaptation and capacity building, fostering evaluation and analytical skills within the team itself. Alongside basic quantitative indicators, require community feedback or short narrative reflections to show how CCIIs build trust, respond to challenges and strengthen local networks. This reduces the reporting burden on cultural actors and allows them

to focus on their creative and developmental work, while policymakers gain deeper insight into actual project impacts. Simplified and harmonised templates can promote consistency, shared learning and comparability across programmes so that evaluation genuinely supports ongoing improvement in rural cultural policy. The approach should be flexible enough to be adapted across different programmes so actors can become familiar with one style of reporting. Simple EU templates can capture aspects such as well-being, local identity and resilience while avoiding “form fatigue.”

## 9.6 Proposal 6 – Portfolio by relatedness

Non-urban regions should be supported in identifying three to five locally grounded opportunity areas for cultural and creative activities, building on unique combinations of skills, traditions and existing markets. Focusing funding, strategy and policy support on these locally determined fields promotes place-based innovation and discourages ineffective imitation of urban models. This targeted approach enables regions to diversify organically from existing strengths, increases their resilience and improves the use of available resources. By adopting plain language funding calls and providing translations into local languages, more local actors gain access to opportunities, which strengthens regional networks and supports better integration of cultural, social, green and digital innovation in rural areas.

Policymakers need a clear framework for regional funding priorities and for updates of smart specialisation strategies under EU cohesion policy. Requiring strategies to focus investments on the identified opportunity areas, and designing calls that reward cross sector projects linking CCIs with green, digital or social innovation, allows regions to build innovation and transformation on local strengths. An EU wide standard for accessibility in cultural policy should include the use of plain language briefs together with local translations.

*Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3)*, as an established instrument for regional development, could be extended to cover not only research and innovation but also social innovation and culture. This would help ensure that activities in arts and culture remain closely related to local needs, capacities and trajectories of change (European Union, n.d. a).

## 10. Risks

The proposals in this report are intended to strengthen cultural life and creative work in non-urban areas. At the same time, any change in funding structures, governance roles, and symbolic attention brings risks and possible unintended consequences. These should not prevent action, but they need to be acknowledged and mitigated. Besides the mitigation measures proposed below, it is important to bear in mind that the reflexive approach proposed in the 10-step roadmap is designed to identify such risks early and to adapt instruments across funding periods. Regular check-ins with local actors, simple feedback loops and small experimental adjustments allow policymakers to correct course



before unintended effects become visible. This requires a commitment to learning and to adjusting procedures, rather than committing to a single model.

### 10.1 Over-reliance on volunteers

Many of the recommended measures build on existing volunteer energy and locally rooted organisers. There is a risk that new expectations and procedures increase the workload for a small number of people, in particular women and people in care roles, without providing necessary support. If additional tasks are added to unpaid roles, this can deepen fatigue and exclusion instead of widening participation.

**Mitigation:** Link micro funding and programme support to at least minimal paid coordination time and clear limits on what is expected from voluntary roles. Use the 10-step roadmap and reflexive monitoring to regularly ask who is carrying the work and whose time is being taken for granted. Consider micro-credentialing programmes offering accredited recognition of skills to increase (and ‘youthen’) the pool of people willing to volunteer.

### 10.2 Inequalities, tokenism and local power dynamics

Strengthening local decision-making and proximity governance brings decisions closer to residents, but it can also reproduce existing hierarchies. Without attention to gender, age, class, disability, migration history and other axes of inequality, some people may be invited to participate only symbolically, while agenda setting and resource allocation remain in the hands of a few well-connected actors.

**Mitigation:** Combine proximity governance with simple inclusion rules. Examples include reserved seats for under-represented groups, transparent calls for participation and periodic reviews that ask whose voices are missing. Where possible, align funding to simplified inclusion indicators that are discussed with local actors rather than imposed from above.

### 10.3 Branding, trademarks and tourism pressure

Collective trademarks, regional cultural narratives and tourism-oriented storytelling can create visibility and income. They also carry the risk that external interests appropriate local cultures, that only the most marketable practices are promoted, or that cultural and environmental pressures increase in small communities. In some cases, local residents may experience a loss of control over how their culture and landscape are presented.

**Mitigation:** Ensure that any collective branding or trademark initiative is governed by a locally accountable body with clear decision rules. Include cultural and environmental mitigation strategies in agreements with external partners. Make space for practices that are not primarily market-oriented but strengthen social cohesion and identity.

#### 10.4 Digital and spatial divides

Digital tools, hybrid formats and online publicity can support participation in geographically dispersed territories. They can also reinforce divides between those with reliable connectivity, devices and skills, and those without. Similarly, investments in a small number of highly visible cultural hubs can unintentionally concentrate resources in better connected localities and leave more remote communities behind.

**Mitigation:** Treat digital and spatial accessibility as design questions, not as afterthoughts. Combine digital formats with low-tech channels such as printed calendars, local radio and community boards. When upgrading cultural spaces, track the geographic spread of these investments and programmes over time and adjust if whole parts of a territory remain underserved.

### 11. Country applications: Next steps and advice

Non-urban areas are characterised by a high degree of individuality, shaped by geographical, socioeconomic and cultural factors. As a consequence, their needs and opportunities often differ from one another. A variability that raises questions regarding the transferability of the policy proposals suggested in Chapter 8: How will the proposals impact the different areas? Which are the respectively key topics and which should be the first steps under differing conditions? The following sections examine the potential implications and region-specific outcomes of the proposals based on the research in the IN SITU Labs, taking into account the individual characteristics and requirements of the six research areas.

#### 11.1 Galway County, Ireland

With the basic income support for artists that just got extended in Ireland, local artists generally can get continuous support for their work. Since this only applies to full-time artists, socio-cultural initiatives that are often carried out voluntarily still need support in different forms. Public spaces like pubs and bars can be formally recognised as important “third spaces,” providing venues for exchange and cultural activities. While pubs can be spaces for a wide range of people, it is important to keep in mind that they can create barriers to certain ages, genders or others. The reuse of now often unused churches could further expand the range of available venues and foster community engagement. Micro-funds given by associations or actor collectives directly to their community for projects can support specifically the volunteer sector and community culture.

##### 11.1.1 Main focus in addressing the policy proposals

The implementation of policy proposals should focus on a county-wide infrastructure, with different possibilities of working together in collaborations. Future investments should promote equitable

access to creative spaces beyond the city centre. Content-wise, a continuous focus on the Irish language seems promising, since it combines accessibility, tradition and the opportunity for strengthening a local identity.

#### **11.1.2 Possible local impact of the policy proposals**

The proposed policies are likely to foster sustainable creative practice beyond city limits, reduce participation barriers for marginalised groups and strengthen volunteer-based initiatives. Enhanced micro-funding and targeted support for “third spaces” can enable more diverse and frequent sociocultural programming—bridging urban and rural divides and supporting both tradition and innovation in the local CCIs sector.

#### **11.1.3 Next steps and advice**

For the proposals to be successfully and sustainably implemented, we point to the following steps and advice:

- Ensure regular artist–policy dialogues are accessible across the county, not city-centric. An inclusive approach is crucial, where meetups can take place in different locations all over County Galway.
- Invest in transport and rural mobility to connect creative hubs, promoting both sustainability and inclusion. Both actors and audiences would benefit here.
- Prioritise affordable studios/workspaces and/or subsidise via funding for work and rehearsal space; link with broader housing discussions.
- Incentivise use/adaptation of third spaces—both pubs (with attention to inclusivity) and former churches—for programming.
- Enhance gender balance in participation and leadership; monitor through ongoing community feedback.
- Pilot county-level micro-grant schemes for supporting and fostering grassroots initiatives.
- Systematically assess how cultural capital generated in Galway can support surrounding rural CCIs.

### **11.2 Rauma and Eurajoki, Finland**

The West Coast region of Rauma–Eurajoki is marked by strong traditions, an active though small CCIs network, distinct community structures and seasonal hurdles. State support is being replaced by project-based funding, undermining continuity, especially for small or rural initiatives. The significance of village associations as cultural agents is evident, yet lack of long-term financial instruments impedes sustainability and innovation—challenges further exacerbated by harsh winters and infrastructural dispersal.

### **11.2.1 Main focus in addressing the policy proposals**

Long-term, systematic funding for CCIs, particularly for village associations and small actors, with an emphasis on gender-sensitive, year-round accessibility and community-embedded third spaces. Support for digital transformation should be balanced with provisions for analogue, inclusive community-building.

### **11.2.2 Possible local impact of the policy proposals**

By supporting socio-cultural initiatives year-round, artists and actors could be encouraged to also create formats that fit (only) in the winter season. With events and meet-ups being a lot more complicated to plan and transportation routes that can involve some risks for actors and their audience, cultural activities need more support during winter. With additional winter-related funds, actors could be encouraged to overcome these hurdles.

Traditional sauna places often contain a small wooden pavilion with barbecue on its ground, free for people to gather and enjoy some coffee and sausages together. These third spaces sound ideal to be recognised as a valuable community space. Applying a gender-sensitive approach can help open the spaces up for queers and women.

### **11.2.3 Next steps and advice**

- Pilot multi-year micro grants with minimal bureaucracy for local associations and small-scale projects, including those for winter-specific initiatives.
- Institutionalise regular roundtables with policy, regional and EU-level actors; enable cross-region peer learning.
- Encourage local authorities to recognize and advertise non-traditional “third spaces.”
- Expand (digital) visibility while actively promoting analogue meet-ups and culturally embedded events.
- Ensure digital strategies remain inclusive; critically address digital divides and fatigue.

## **11.3 West Region, Iceland**

Vesturland, drawing on Iceland’s national success in cultural policy, is a fertile ground for regionalised strategies that blend cultural heritage, identity and contemporary innovation. Yet fragmented infrastructure and reliance on volunteerism threaten the continuity especially of grassroots and seasonal initiatives. There is strong local agency but inconsistent stakeholder communication and a lack of transparency in policy implementation. Inclusive participatory methods and flexible funding together with an ongoing dialogue between policy stakeholders and actors can help reap the region’s potential. The region already developed innovative strategies for the future with the help of history. This narrative could be further used and “regionalised” or “localised” with specific issues, traditions and specificities.

#### **11.3.1 Main focus in addressing the policy proposals**

Localisation of national policy initiatives with an emphasis on participatory mapping, supporting both bottom-up and heritage-based projects. Particular attention should be given to youth agency, regional branding and ensuring the sustainability of third spaces (e.g., creative hubs, communal venues).

#### **11.3.2 Possible local impact of the policy proposals**

Flexible, accessible funding (micro-grants for youth initiatives and voluntary groups) can energise underrepresented segments, while systematic regional mapping builds an evidence base for strategic intervention. Ensuring that gender and diversity policies “on paper” find resonance at the local level will translate Iceland’s progressive reputation into everyday practice. Since local actors reported a relatively low initiative from young people despite the many possibilities that arise through structures like student councils, the suggested micro-funds could enable youth-envisioned and -led projects and visions to become reality.

#### **11.3.3 Next steps and advice**

- Build on mapping traditions and participatory strategy methods; integrate Indigenous/local knowledge into policy design and cultural initiatives while acknowledging and communicating its origin.
- Balance strong national framing with regional distinctiveness; avoid leaving remote regions behind and ensure that regional assets and needs are considered in national strategies as well.
- Foster collaboration and information-sharing via regional innovation networks and support national-local co-design forums and rural third spaces
- Ensure gender equality measures translate from national frameworks to local realities.
- Facilitate youth participation with project-oriented micro-grants, avoiding bureaucratic hurdles.
- Policy actions: establish a regional mapping fund to enable continuous assessment of cultural assets and infrastructural needs.

### **11.4 Valmiera County, Latvia**

Valmiera County has a dynamic interaction between revitalised tradition and modern cultural practice. While emerging as a key asset, insufficient funding and reserved volunteerism slows community-empowered cultural life. While new strategic frameworks promote participatory governance, disparities in access and generational digital divides still impede full inclusion and sustainability.

#### **11.4.1 Main focus in addressing the policy proposals**

Prioritise modernisation and accessibility of both digital and analogue cultural infrastructure, promoting inclusive third spaces (e.g., open-air stages, intergenerational playgrounds) and embedding

civic agency through better support for grassroots initiatives. Deliberate investment in participatory training and leadership—especially for youth and women—should accompany these measures.

#### **11.4.2 Possible local impact of the policy proposals**

While volunteering is not widely spread, supporting socio-cultural initiatives could enable this potential, give locals agency and the resources to develop their own visions and put them to practice. This carries the opportunity of activating the community, giving wider possibilities for local identification and possibly new (social) innovations. With places like playgrounds or open-air stages spread through the county, there are a lot of third spaces that can be activated by communal participation.

#### **11.4.3 Next steps and advice**

- Invest in the modernisation and universal accessibility of existing cultural infrastructure; launch modernisation programmes for existing (especially Soviet-era) venues focusing on universal access.
- Support grassroots initiatives and cross-sector collaboration (e.g., with special funds with minimised bureaucracy).
- Strengthen training in leadership, cooperation, digital skills and engagement with youth.
- Reconcile EU influence with national/civic diversity; raise the profile of volunteerism (who can afford to participate?).
- Increase visibility of Valmiera’s cultural output.
- Policy actions: volunteer ‘rebranding’ and support scheme; micro-grants.

### **11.5 Azores archipelago, Portugal**

The Azores’ insular and geographically fragmented context, located 1369 km west from the European mainland, produces a vibrant yet uneven CCI sector, shaped by strong associational life and religious/cultural traditions. The region’s main challenge lies in bridging divides, both between islands and across sectors. The Azores could benefit from better communication between artists and policy stakeholders alongside ‘lightened’ funding applications. The region’s great potential for bringing together religion, tradition, nature, art and craftsmanship can be strategically implemented even more effectively in a joint strategy.

#### **11.5.1 Main focus in addressing the policy proposals**

Facilitate cross-island cooperation and simplified funding streams easily accessible for small, volunteer-led initiatives. Recognise non-traditional venues (e.g., cafés, clubs and cultural associations that sometimes have their own places) as legitimate cultural infrastructure, and enhance regular dialogue mechanisms linking creative practitioners, civil society and policymakers. The university seems to be able to have a moderating and bridging function between politics and arts & culture.

### **11.5.2 Possible local impact of the policy proposals**

By reducing bureaucracy and supporting community organisers through mentoring to requested topics, the region will foster both continuity of tradition and contemporary innovation. Strengthening networks and improving communication can counteract geographical isolation, allowing culture to flourish.

### **11.5.3 Next steps and advice**

- Implement a small-grant programme with minimal administrative requirements for community initiatives.
- Regularly convene cross-sectoral forums, probably leveraging the university as a facilitator.
- Recognise cafés and clubs as cultural infrastructure; support safer, family-friendly formats alongside traditional ones and ensure communication platforms highlight the unique mix of Azorean cultural and creative life.
- Ensure equitable access to funding/platforms across all islands.
- Support digital and analogue platforms for intra-regional communication and cooperation.

## **11.6 Šibenik-Knin County, Croatia**

The Šibenik–Knin region is emblematic of marked coastal-continental divides, with a flourishing touristic CCI scene in Šibenik and persistent underdevelopment in Knin. While adaptive reuse of heritage sites and vibrant grassroots activity drive the coastal CCI ecosystem, connectivity gaps (infrastructure, transport, institutional support) across the county continue to hinder inclusive development.

### **11.6.1 Main focus in addressing the policy proposals**

Integrated regional strategies focusing on strengthening the network of rural culture centres, cross-area collaboration (e.g., between Šibenik and Knin) and targeted support for transport and mobility. The sustainability of volunteer-driven and grassroots collectives, alongside investments in library and community centre infrastructure, is crucial.

### **11.6.2 Possible local impact of the policy proposals**

Policy proposals, if implemented with participatory mechanisms, will likely boost cooperation between urban and rural actors, foster sustainable networks for cultural activity and reduce the sense of isolation among inland communities. Mobility schemes and joint programming can distribute opportunities more evenly and energize both traditional and innovative cultural practices. By supporting socio-cultural initiatives in Šibenik-Knin County, the connection between Šibenik and Knin could be strengthened. While the cultural scene in Šibenik seems to be already thriving, artists in Knin formulate a feeling of falling behind. By giving the opportunity to collectively organise events, beyond town borders, both locations would benefit. Regional cooperation would enable shared responsibilities and money, and programme options like multiple stops for a touring event. Where the

travel for only one show would be too pricey, a second show in a cooperating place could be the solution.

### **11.6.3 Next steps and advice**

- Strengthen non-urban hubs (e.g., Knin) and address transport/library closures limiting rural participation by establishing mobility funds for artists and audiences.
- Address closure of libraries and community venues; invest in spaces serving as cultural connectors.
- The ongoing national policy review is an opportunity for hybrid governance models and investment.

Define/service a network of rural culture centres and expand the existing network from Šibenik to the inland area for the rural parts to benefit from existing infrastructure.



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