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## 1. Introduction

The Horizon Europe project “IN SITU: Place-based Innovation of Cultural and Creative Industries in Non-urban Areas” ([www.insituculture.eu](http://www.insituculture.eu), 2022-2026) aims to advance understanding of the forms, processes, and governance needs of cultural and creative actors located in non-urban areas of Europe. In doing so, it also looks to foster their ability to act as drivers of innovation, competitiveness, and sustainability for the places where they are located. Aiming to counter the fragmentation of cultural and creative work into separate spheres with limited cross-communication, the project’s scope includes Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs), arts, and heritage-related initiatives, which together form cultural and creative ecosystems within and across territories (all referenced here as ‘CCIs’). Similarly, aiming to look outside large metropolis or ‘big city’ contexts, *non-urban areas* incorporate rural, remote territories, and peripheral locations as well as small islands, towns, villages, and small cities which may serve as regional hubs for broader territories.

IN SITU research recommendations are presented at a timely moment. European Union strategies continue to affirm culture’s cross-sectoral relevance<sup>1</sup> and recent policy developments underscore culture’s cross-cutting role. The adoption of the Cultural Compass for Europe reinforces culture as a strategic resource across policy domains<sup>2</sup> while the New European Bauhaus initiative and the European Union’s commitments to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals<sup>3</sup> continue to link cultural transformation to social and environmental change. The recently released OECD report, *Rural Innovation Pathways*<sup>4</sup>, also highlights the importance of place-based experimentation, locally embedded innovation systems, and capacity-building in non-urban areas. These priorities align with the EU’s Rural Vision 2040<sup>5</sup> and ongoing Cohesion Policy partnership frameworks aimed at strengthening regional resilience, demographic sustainability, and youth engagement in order to allow these communities to reach their full potential.

In this context, the evidence generated by IN SITU through research and experimental Labs located in peripheral, non-urban territories provides grounded insight into how CCIs operate as drivers of these cross-sectoral priorities in addition to playing an important role in creating a livable environment, fostering a comfortable community, nurturing community resilience. Nevertheless, their integration into mainstream innovation and territorial policy frameworks currently remains highly uneven. Organisations are fragile, and infrastructure is frequently lacking. The research recommendations presented here build directly on these findings, aiming to address knowledge gaps and to provide new evidence-based insights to inform the EU’s strategic research policy frameworks so that culture-based innovation is coherently embedded in the forefront of non-urban development agendas.

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<sup>1</sup> Council of the European Union (2025). *Revised Presidency text on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on establishing the European Competitiveness Fund (ST-15348-2025-REV-1)*. [URL](#)

<sup>2</sup> European Commission (2025). *Proposal for a regulation establishing the European Competitiveness Fund (COM(2025) 555 final)*. [URL](#)

<sup>3</sup> <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

<sup>4</sup> OECD (2025). *Rural Innovation Pathways: Connecting People, Places and Ideas*. OECD Rural Studies, OECD Publishing. [URL](#)

<sup>5</sup> European Commission (2021). *A long-term Vision for the EU’s Rural Areas - Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040*. [URL](#)

## 2. Evidence

### Indicators and metrics

**Innovation indicators.** One of the project's most significant new findings is the mismatch between traditional innovation metrics and rural reality. While patent applications are heavily concentrated in urban centres, IN SITU research found that trademarks exhibit a much broader diffusion in non-urban areas. Trademarks in rural regions are more strongly associated with creative jobs and show a higher correlation with female participation in creative occupations than patents, which carry an inherent male bias. Collective trademarks are instrumental in leveraging territorial assets, including cultural heritage and community identity, and are aligned with non-technological innovation pathways. The potential of collective trademarks as innovation indicators and drivers of regional development is underexplored. Overall, a broad, inclusive definition of innovation that includes social, cultural, and territorial dimensions is needed to capture the many types of innovation in non-urban areas, valuing social and organisational change, community engagement, and cross-sectoral experimentation rather than technological disruption alone.

**CCI development metrics.** The development of the IN SITU Index exposed critical limitations of current European statistical frameworks for peripheral regions. Core findings show that no single metric can adequately capture cultural development. Regions follow diverse paths: some stand out in economic dynamism, others in public visibility, and others in cultural infrastructure. Existing systems privilege economically visible urban activity, rendering informal, seasonal, and hybrid rural work invisible.

**Making visible social values.** IN SITU research proved that traditional economic indicators fail to capture the hidden social values that underpin regional development. The Finnish Lab demonstrated that emotional mapping produces significantly richer, actionable data than standard quantitative surveys by capturing place-based identity. In Šibenik-Knin County (Croatia), evidence revealed culture's critical role in recovery after an extended period of decline, serving as a foundation for social cohesion that precedes economic growth. Affective and place-based methods do not only reveal the 'soft' aspects of local creativity – they can bridge the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of the local creative economy. The project found that participatory community-engaged research and reflexive monitoring approaches are essential evidential tools for understanding how cultural ecosystems foster demographic resilience, youth retention, and social connectedness in transitional or peripheral contexts.

### CCIs in regional development – vitality and vulnerabilities

**Rural cultural work driven by societal issues.** The IN SITU project identified a clear strategic shift in the objective of rural cultural work, moving from pure artistic production to broader societal outcomes. For example, the IN SITU case studies show that social inclusion, youth engagement, and community empowerment are central to project implementation, primarily delivered through participatory and co-creation formats. In addition, case studies' attention to preservation and

sustainable uses of cultural-natural heritage highlights care and stewardship for place, environment, and nature as one driver of CCI actions.

**Foundational infrastructure.** In the project findings, CCIs were reframed not merely as a sector of the economy, but as the foundational infrastructure for regional development. Anchor institutions, such as libraries, museums, and creative hubs, working in tandem with community-led initiatives, have an important role to play in shaping social connections and culture in non-urban areas. Where official institutional support is weak, particularly regarding a shortage of physical space and infrastructure upgrades, independent initiatives tend to fill the gap. However, physical infrastructure remains the primary bottleneck for cultural ecosystem growth in peripheral regions. A recurring constraint across all Labs is the lack of stable, adequate physical space. Many initiatives operate in a state of permanent short-term temporality, relying on multi-purpose or improvised venues that limit scalability and long-term planning. In parallel, digitalisation and platformisation of rural CCIs is a growing and accelerating trend. CCIs intensify their communicative, promotional, and commercial reach by adopting hybrid, physical-digital approaches. However, digital tools often require higher expertise and better infrastructure (broadband) than is currently available in many rural areas.

**Human resources.** Research revealed that non-urban CCIs are characterised by a strong spirit of collaboration rather than competition, often led by passionate individuals and grassroots initiatives. However, the IN SITU project identified a clear burnout threshold, where reliance on informal volunteerism and passion-driven labour becomes unsustainable without formal institutional support and fair remuneration. Furthermore, while there is a visible trend toward professionalisation as a survival strategy to meet funding requirements, this shift is creating more transactional relationships with volunteers and a greater need for diversified funding streams to combat the instability of short-term, project-by-project cycles and the rising cost of living in rural areas. In non-urban areas, when a passionate individual leaves or burns out, there is often no institutionalized successor. This succession gap makes the cultural ecosystem organisationally fragile and threatens long-term territorial stability.

**Adaptability as a fundamental capacity.** Research across the 12 IN SITU case studies reveals that adaptability is not an incidental skill but a fundamental capacity for non-urban CCI survival. Projects demonstrate a high level of mission consistency while frequently pivoting their implementation models in response to constraints. Common adaptations include scaling down activities, shifting from mobile to fixed locations, or restructuring partnerships to match fluctuating funding or infrastructure.

**Networks.** In rural areas often excluded from developments and opportunities taking place in urban contexts, sustaining collaborative networks – the social glue of any cultural ecosystem – is of great importance but requires institutional support that is currently lacking. IN SITU case study projects show high engagement in cross-sectoral partnerships (local authorities, education, community organisations). However, these networks face significant challenges in stakeholder alignment and long-term coordination. The Azores’ “Horizontal Network” created within IN SITU showed that the

local university team could successfully connect stakeholders who had no prior contact with one another, creating a bridge between CCI practitioners and local/regional government.

### Development trajectories for CCIs in non-urban areas

**Diversification pathways.** Evolutionary economic geography argues that regions tend to diversify into activities similar to those they already produce as the locally available capabilities provide opportunities but also limits this diversification process in regions. Our analysis of the diversification opportunities in peripheral regions shows that cultural and creative activities are central in the economic structure of peripheral regions. This makes them an important set of stepping stones for diversification dynamics in non-urban regions.

**An array of opportunity spaces for CCIs in non-urban areas.** The IN SITU roadmapping process established a comprehensive taxonomy of 32 opportunity spaces for non-urban CCIs. Validated across six diverse Labs, IN SITU demonstrated that while innovation is highly context-dependent, shifting based on territorial priorities and cultural ecosystem maturity, four themes consistently drive regional development: eco-sustainability and circularity, collaborative networks, digital transformation, and community-based social innovation. Evidence across the Labs revealed that innovation in non-urban CCIs is not a linear technological progression but a dynamic interaction between Market Pull (responding to urgent societal, environmental, and territorial needs) and Technology Push (leveraging digital and emerging technologies). In these peripheral areas, technology acts as a critical enabler for place-based social and environmental solutions rather than a standalone driver.

**Capacity-building.** The IN SITU capacity-building programme across the six Labs provides robust evidence that one-off events, and standardized, one-size-fits-all professional development is ineffective in peripheral contexts. The most profound organisational transformation occurred through continuous, relationship-based learning based in long-term, tailored mentoring and iterative feedback loops. These were shown to be far more effective than one-off workshops for fostering strategic reflection and organizational resilience, with participants reporting clear improvements in strategic thinking, but only when the training was tailored to specific non-urban resource constraints.

### 3. Knowledge gaps

#### Data gaps – statistical invisibility, data granularity, and inclusive metrics

In the context of a general lack of quantitative data for non-urban areas, EC Rural Observatory efforts to improve data availability and accessibility is commendable. However, many of the most important cultural dynamics in non-urban regions do not map neatly onto formal statistical categories, with existing statistical frameworks for innovation and for CCI designed for urban, formal, and industrial economies, leaving non-urban CCIs largely invisible. A set of categories for CCIs is needed that includes but also extends beyond economic categories. Although categorisations such as NACE provide essential economic data, they do not provide a full picture of the cultural ecosystem in non-urban areas where there is a significant presence of cultural activities, events, and organisations with economic, social and cultural impact that fall outside these codings (e.g., events, festivals, associations, and government-led initiatives). Additionally, existing data may not be disaggregated to the regional or local level and data collection across different regions and administrative levels may not use consistent definitions.

The statistical focus on official employment ignores the significant involvement of volunteer-based work in artistic projects and cultural organisations in non-urban areas. Little information is available on informal, voluntary, freelance, part-time, and hybrid forms of cultural production in non-urban areas, as well as their relationship to place, belonging, and community capacity. Additionally, little is known about how professionalisation affects labour conditions in this context and what sustainable alternatives exist to “passion-driven” or informal labour models.

Research on the use and impact of collective trademarks is largely underexplored, with potential as innovation indicators and drivers of regional development, and their ability to reveal hidden contributions of CCIs in non-urban areas. A lack of standardised and comparable frameworks to assess the social impact of cultural initiatives in non-urban contexts means monitoring practices remain uneven, and evidence on long-term outcomes is particularly limited. This constrains the ability to demonstrate the broader societal value of cultural interventions. Standardized KPIs often fail to capture the societal value of culture, leading to a “trust gap” between grassroots actors and institutions, often limiting CCIs rather than acting as a supportive tool.

Local and regional knowledge often remains overlooked or insufficiently integrated in international research discourses. Community-engaged research methods in which researchers and local community members hold integral and interconnected roles in knowledge-building and research processes are still rarely used, leading to the exclusion of local, oral, and experiential knowledge from research and policy spheres. To integrate CCI actors as full collaborators in CCI-related research, CCI pilot projects should be funded directly (i.e., through cascading grants) and be integrally involved across the R&I processes.

### Long-term resiliency, capacity-building, and funding models/configurations

The CCI Index developed within the IN SITU project highlights the importance of tracking movement and trajectory rather than simply measuring absolute levels of activity. However, the evidence base remains underdeveloped in this regard. At the macro level, more longitudinal research is needed to understand how peripheral cultural ecosystems evolve, what triggers change, and which policy interventions are most effective at different stages of development. At an organisational level, despite strong empirical evidence of adaptation, there is limited systematic understanding of which strategies lead to long-term sustainability of cultural organisations. Existing knowledge remains fragmented and case-specific, with little comparative or longitudinal analysis. Altogether, further research is needed to understand how organisational models, funding structures, and territorial conditions interact to shape resilience.

It also remains unclear how roadmapping results can be adapted, replicated, or scaled across different non-urban contexts. In general, there is little attention to how CCI-relevant “Technology Push” (urban-centric tech) interacts with “Market Pull” (local demand and social needs) in low-density, non-urban areas, requiring comparative and longitudinal empirical validation of CCI opportunity spaces across territories.

Little knowledge exists on the optimal design of integrated capacity-building models for CCIs in non-urban areas, including the balance between training, mentoring, and coaching; the duration and intensity of interventions; and the conditions under which hybrid and/or digital formats are most effective. There is also limited longitudinal evidence on the sustained impact of combined training–mentoring approaches on organisational performance, entrepreneurial development, and long-term resilience of CCIs in non-urban contexts. The observed improvements in confidence, skills, and strategic thinking are clear, but their durability over time is not yet fully understood. The role and long-term impact of peer learning and “learning communities” also remains underexplored.

### Territorial dynamics, transferability, and infrastructures

Although the CCI Index allows for comparison, more work is needed to understand how findings travel between regions with different institutional, demographic, and geographic conditions. Research should therefore investigate how policy learning can occur without assuming simple transferability of models or interventions. One important question raised by the CCI Index concerns the relationship between external visibility and deeper structural capacity. Some regions may appear culturally prominent without strong underlying cultural ecosystems, while others may have significant local depth but low external profile. Further research is needed to examine how visibility, reputation, and embedded capacity interact. The cultural production capacities and distinct structural barriers of very remote and ultraperipheral regions warrant particular attention. How the value chains of CCI subsectors connect urban and non-urban regions is also underexamined.

Culture in low-density areas requires specific infrastructural research. Little research has been conducted on which infrastructure models (e.g., multi-functional spaces, networked, shared) are most

effective in different low-density areas and contexts, where public spaces are often underused as potential cultural venues. A related knowledge gap is how spatial conditions influence cultural participation, professionalisation, and the development of local cultural ecosystems. The role of digital tools and digital cultural activities and consumption in supporting decentralised cultural networks also remains underexplored.

### Governance

Although attention to participatory governance is growing, there are few models of participatory cultural mapping and cultural planning for non-urban communities and territories through which residents can collectively identify and catalyse strategic actions based on local cultural resources (not necessarily for tourism). There is also limited evidence on multi-level governance and policy frameworks for culture and effective governance models for cross-sector collaboration in rural cultural ecosystems, including how to structure alliances between grassroots actors and institutions, how to sustain collaboration without over-reliance on individual capacity, and how to manage cross-sectoral dynamics sustainably. All this research must consider power relations, social dynamics, and dimensions such as gender, race, class, and others.

While the CCI Index points to important associations between cultural strength and wider territorial vitality, further research is needed to clarify causal pathways. In particular, there is scope for more work on how cultural ecosystems influence demographic resilience, youth retention, social innovation, place attractiveness, and local development over time. There is also a knowledge gap on how cultural actors can help non-urban communities manage politically sensitive/contested context problems (e.g., post-conflict memory, nuclear infrastructure, etc.).

## 4. Policy recommendations

These policy recommendations aim to inform a transition from urban-centric innovation models to place-sensitive research frameworks that recognize the unique socio-economic structures and contexts of non-urban CCIs and their strategic value-added in terms of cohesion, employment, well-being, and resilience. The recommendations are designed to move beyond isolated project findings, establishing a systematic cycle that informs a strengthened, statistically visible cultural and creative ecosystem and, in turn, generates new high-level research questions, ensuring continuous institutional learning and territorial cohesion. By prioritising longitudinal and non-extractive Community-Engaged Research methods validation, disaggregated data, and the unique structural needs of CCIs in peripheral regions, this research-led approach serves the research community as well as EU policy cycles, enabling other departments to integrate cultural dimensions into rural development programs: e.g., DG REGIO, integrating cultural metrics into Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3); DG AGRI, for better targeting of cultural actors within CAP/LEADER rural development funds; DG EAC, having more inclusive rural collaboration and branding strategies (e.g., leveraging collective trademarks); and DG ENEST, relating to strengthening cultural development and exchanges in the ultra-periphery regions of the EU and its borders.

### Recommendation 1: Integrate broad innovation metrics and improve data granularity

To lead the transition toward a more inclusive definition of innovation that moves beyond “Technology Push,” DG RTD should fund Research and Innovation Actions (RIA) to develop a standardised yet adaptable monitoring framework for CCIs that operates at the NUTS 2 and NUTS 3 levels. These metrics must capture hidden innovation, such as collective trademarks, social innovation, and community embeddedness, providing a full picture of the cultural ecosystem that NACE codes currently overlook (e.g., informal and volunteer-based labour).

→ **Expected impact:** By moving beyond urban-centric innovation metrics (like patents) to include social innovation and collective trademarks, the EU will gain an enhanced evidence base for rural development. This approach reduces the urban bias in innovation policy and ensures that future research funding is allocated to the actual, diverse drivers of regional growth and development, making the presence and roles of non-urban CCIs statistically visible and measurable.

### Recommendation 2: Foster Community-Engaged Research and non-extractive methods

DG RTD should mandate methodologies that return value to the studied territories and incorporate requirements for Community-Engaged Research (CER) in future calls, ensuring local communities hold integral roles in knowledge-building. Prioritising the use of “Cascading Grants” to fund local CCI pilot projects directly will allow grassroots actors to act as full research collaborators rather than just data sources. Additionally, establishing non-extractive participation principles for EU-funded rural research to prevent research fatigue and resistance in peripheral regions is crucial.

→ **Expected impact:** Adopting CER principles will bridge the trust gap between EU institutions and grassroots actors. This methodology ensures that research is a mutual value exchange, leading to higher-quality, locally-validated data while simultaneously strengthening the capacity of peripheral communities. It establishes a new ethical standard for EU-funded research in sensitive or remote contexts.

### **Recommendation 3: Prioritise longitudinal studies on resilience and capacity building**

One-off project evaluations are insufficient to capture the territorial absorption capacity and long-term health of non-urban cultural ecosystems. DG RTD should fund longitudinal monitoring actions to track the evolution of cultural initiatives and the durability of capacity-building interventions, such as training and mentoring programmes, over 5-10 year cycles. Specific research is needed to investigate the passion-to-professional transition and to identify which funding and organisational configurations prevent the over-reliance on individual capacity that often leads to work overload and unsustainable working conditions. This evidence will provide a systematic understanding of the causal pathways that move a region from temporary project success toward permanent structural resilience.

→ **Expected impact:** Transitioning to longitudinal monitoring allows DG RTD to move from identifying potential to proving causal pathways of resilience. This provides the evidence needed to design policy and funding frameworks that prioritise the durability of cultural ecosystems over temporary project-based survival, significantly increasing the long-term impact of EU grants.

### **Recommendation 4: Expand research on territorial specificities, remote regions, and transferability**

DG RTD should address the remote and ultraperipheral gap to ensure European territorial cohesion within the creative economy. It is essential to establish dedicated research strands for remote regions, including Europe's Outermost Regions (e.g., the Azores), focusing on their Article 349 TFEU status and the specific structural barriers (e.g., geographical remoteness, market fragmentation), that distinguish them from less remote non-urban areas. Furthermore, research should investigate the transferability of place-based approaches to determine the specific institutional and demographic conditions under which models from one peripheral context can be successfully adapted and scaled to another, supporting place-sensitive transferability. As well, research should reflect on types of transferability, from experience exchanges and co-learning to full model transfer, which is often challenging due to context differences.

→ **Expected impact:** Dedicated research ensures the “Leave No One Behind” principle is operationalised within the CCI sector. By understanding the unique structural barriers of Article 349 TFEU regions, DG RTD can develop validated transferability tools that allow innovation models to be successfully scaled across diverse, non-standard European geographies.

### Recommendation 5: Monitor cultural implications of digital and other macro transitions

As rural areas undergo geopolitical changes and multiple, entangled transitions (e.g., green, digital), research must track the specific cultural implications of these shifts. Studies on the long-term impact of these intertwined transitions on non-urban CCIs, including investigating how digital tools can support decentralised networks without eroding place-based identity, could provide insights on the nature of adaptation and resiliency in rural communities and culture-based economies. This also includes researching how culture can be strategically integrated into regional Smart Specialization Strategies (S3). Research on these transitions must explicitly analyze power dynamics and social dimensions (including gender, race, age, and class) within EU-regional dialogues.

→ **Expected impact:** Continuous scientific monitoring ensures that non-urban CCIs act as leaders rather than passive observers of geopolitical changes and the multiple transitions now underway. This evidence base allows for the successful integration of culture into S3 frameworks, transforming CCIs from isolated sectors into integrated engines of cross-sectoral regional innovation (e.g., the culture-tourism-tech nexus).

### Recommendation 6: Research the governance of inter-sectoral and grassroots–institutional collaboration for CCIs in non-urban areas

DG RTD should fund research aiming at formalising the connective tissue between informal creative actors and public institutions and developing participative governance approaches. Through Coordination and Support Actions (CSA), the Commission should identify and test governance models that facilitate sustainable collaboration between grassroots actors and multi-level policy institutions in regional contexts, including building on learnings acquired through the URBACT programme. This research should specifically address how to maintain collaborative structures without over-reliance on individual capacity, which is a high risk in low-density areas, and how to manage politically sensitive or contested content (e.g., post-conflict memory). This research should be grounded in participative cultural mapping and co-diagnosis processes, and develop guidance on cultural planning in rural areas and the integration of culture in broader regional development strategies. Additionally, a supporting scientific monitoring process should be established to monitor how policy instruments are developed, implemented, and adapted across differing regional administrative cultures.

→ **Expected impact:** This will provide a blueprint for moving from fragile, project-based cooperation to institutionally anchored governance. It ensures that cultural roadmaps are not just theoretical documents but are effectively embedded into regional planning, reducing administrative burdens and fostering long-term trust between the EU and its peripheral creative citizens.

## Technical info/Project Identity and contact

<b>PROJECT NAME</b>	<b>Place-based innovation of cultural and creative industries in non-urban areas (IN SITU)</b>
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<b>FURTHER READING</b>	Castaldi, C., Cortinovis, N. & Tessarin, M. S. (2025). <i>Out of sight? Revealing creativity-led innovation in rural regions</i> . Papers in Evolutionary Economic Geography (PEEG) 2517, Utrecht University. <a href="#">URL</a> Castaldi, C., Tessarin, M. S., & Yamanoglu, R. C. (2026). Inclusive intellectual property rights? The case of collective trademarks. <i>Journal of Development Studies</i> , 62(3), 501-518. <a href="#">DOI</a> Collins, P. (2025). <i>IN SITU CCI index development</i> . Deliverable 3.6, IN SITU project. <a href="#">URL</a> Duxbury, N., Rainey, M. J., & Hildibrandsdóttir, A. H. (2025). Collective and collaborative cultural entrepreneurship based on emergent placemaking in rural areas. <i>Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais</i> , no. 138, 131-152. <a href="#">DOI</a> Duxbury, N., Silva, S., & Hildibrandsdóttir, A. H. (2026). Cultural and creative actors in non-urban areas: Enacting local stewardship as a regenerative approach. <i>Frontiers in Communication</i> . <a href="#">DOI</a> Heinicke, J., Ranczakowska, A. M., & Walther, H. (2025). <i>Cultural policy proposals for CCIs in IN SITU Lab areas</i> . Deliverable 5.4, IN SITU project. <a href="#">URL</a> Torre, A., Frey, O., Wang, T., & Filippi, M. (2025). <i>Innovation policy proposals (for KICs) for CCIs in non-urban areas</i> . Deliverable 5.3, IN SITU project. <a href="#">URL</a>

