



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



Policy handbook for CCI in non-urban areas

Work package WP5 – Innovation and Culture Policy Proposals
Deliverable 5.6 (D5.6)

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TITLE

Policy handbook for CCIs in non-urban areas

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Why this handbook?

Across the four-year IN SITU project, two policy streams were developed in parallel: one on innovation policy and one on cultural policy. This handbook brings these two bodies of work into dialogue. It does not treat them as identical, but draws from their shared findings to develop an integrated view of how cultural and innovation policies can support one another in non-urban areas. The detailed analyses and recommendations remain available in previous IN SITU reports, *Innovation policy proposals (for KICs) for CCIs in non-urban areas (D5.3)* and *Cultural policy proposals for CCIs in IN SITU Lab areas (D5.4)*, which are available on the IN SITU website: insituculture.eu.

However, we do not try to merge innovation policy and cultural policy into a single narrative. That would either remain too abstract, or it would impose a one-size-fits-all model on places whose defining feature is diversity of capacity, geography, and institutional density.

Instead, the handbook pursues two more pragmatic and operational objectives:

- It names the mechanisms that repeatedly enable culture to function as innovation in non-urban places, as well as the mechanisms that repeatedly prevent it from doing so.
- It gives local decision-makers a structure for working with those mechanisms in relation to a real challenge in their own context, without turning the handbook into an expert-led programme.

The handbook is meant to give local policy- and decision-makers a clearer basis for deciding where to intervene first, how to keep initiatives alive beyond pilot cycles, and how to structure collaboration so that cultural work becomes legible as development work without being reduced to short-term visibility or tourism-only logic.

Where to start

This handbook can be read from beginning to end, but different readers may want to enter the document at different points, depending on whether they are trying to understand the policy argument, position their own work, or act on a concrete local challenge. Suggested starting points are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1 - Where to start

If you are	Start with...	Then read...
A cultural or creative practitioner/CCI organisation	Section 3.2, “Reframing the intersection: Culture as a form of innovation capacity” — to see how cultural work can be positioned within innovation and territorial development debates without being reduced to tourism, events, or visibility.	Chapter 4 — to work from a concrete local challenge and identify which actors, forms of support, and conditions are needed to make action possible.
A local intermediary, cultural coordinator, Local Action Group, hub, library, or community organisation	Section 1.3, “Framework: The three lenses of innovation and cultural policy” — to clarify how ecosystem, continuity, and governance problems appear in non-urban cultural work.	Chapter 2 — to connect intermediary work, coordination, access to spaces, and local cooperation to concrete policy proposals.
Regional/municipal official	Section 4.1, “Step 1. Start from one concrete challenge,” gives a clear sense of where to intervene first, which actors need to be involved, what kind of support must be stabilised, and how to judge whether an intervention is beginning to take root.	Chapter 2 — to translate the challenge into measures related to ecosystem support, continuity, and governance.
Regional/municipal official	Chapter 2, “Innovation and culture policy proposals for CCIs in non-urban areas” — to see how CCIs can be recognised within regional development, innovation, rural development, and place-based planning.	Section 3.2, “Reframing the intersection: Culture as a form of innovation capacity,” which names mechanisms that repeatedly make culture function as innovation in non-urban places and shows where policy design most often succeeds or fails.
An actor of the cultural sector working across sectors, such as education, tourism, heritage, social economy, or community development	Section 2.1, “The ecosystem lens: Building the local conditions that let cultural and creative work take root” — to understand how cultural and creative work connects dispersed actors, spaces, and local capacities.	Sections 4.3 and 4.4 — to think through who needs to be involved and how a first pathway for action can be shaped.





1.
Context
and
background

The IN SITU project, funded within the Horizon Europe research and innovation framework, was a four-year project investigating place-based innovation of cultural and creative industries in non-urban areas. By combining research with experimental actions such as training and mentoring programmes and two case studies in each of the six IN SITU research areas (called “IN SITU Labs”), the project collected a wide range of data and learned from an array of different stakeholders in each location, including local actors, artists, policymakers, and other researchers. Information about the Labs, case studies, and all public project resources can be found on the IN SITU project website (insituculture.eu).

1.1. Culture as innovation, and innovation as cultural capacity, in non-urban policy

Rural and peripheral cultural work is rarely a standalone “sector.” It is an operating system for place-based development, one that connects education, social cohesion, local economies, environmental stewardship, tourism pressures, demographic change, and the basic question of how people keep living together across distance and difference. The point is not to present culture in non-urban areas as naturally cohesive, resilient, or self-sustaining, nor to treat it as an add-on to economic strategy. Rather, in many non-urban settings, culture is where innovation becomes socially legible, institutionally workable, and locally owned.

The IN SITU report *Innovation policy proposals (for KICs) for CCIs in non-urban areas* (D5.3) argues that current policy architectures often remain shaped by metropolitan assumptions, sectoral silos, and output driven evaluation, which systematically misses the hybrid, process-oriented reality of non-urban cultural practice. Especially, the S3 policies miss their goal, whereas LEADER programmes are mainly based on bottom-up initiatives. The report *Cultural policy proposals for CCIs in IN SITU Lab areas* (D5.4) reaches a closely related conclusion from the other side: non-urban cultural ecosystems thrive when policy recognizes social and cultural value alongside economic outcomes, lowers administrative thresholds, and brings decision making closer to daily practice. Taken together, these are not parallel arguments. They form a shared diagnosis: when policy treats culture as peripheral, it also disables the very mechanisms through which

non-urban territories generate innovation, resilience, and continuity. From this shared diagnosis, the handbook develops three interlocking “synergy dimensions” (Section 1.3) that local policymakers can use as a lens for action.

1.2. Methodology

This handbook brings together the policy research on culture and innovation carried out throughout the IN SITU project. The development process included cross-team close reading of the previous reports, identification of aligned themes, and collective discussion of the results of this analysis. The detailed research process, data collection methods, and analytical frameworks for the individual reports are described in the corresponding project reports. An overview of those reports is provided in Table 2.

Table 2 - Overview of IN SITU project reports on innovation and cultural policy

Report	Carried out by	Methodology
<i>State of policies and S3s on innovation and CCIs in non-urban areas (D5.1)</i>	INRAE - National Research Institute for Agriculture, Food and Environment	Analysis of EU policies related to the topic of innovation, specifically CAP, Cohesion Policy, and S3
<i>State of cultural policies for CCIs in non-urban areas (D5.2)</i>	University of Hildesheim	Literature review, document analysis, and qualitative, empirical, and ethnographic methods
<i>Innovation policy proposals (for KICs) for CCIs in non-urban areas (D5.3)</i>	INRAE - National Research Institute for Agriculture, Food and Environment	Text-mining method BERTopic, coding of projects to analyse project data from LEADER and S3 project data, and interviewing of local stakeholders and coding
<i>Cultural policy proposals for CCIs in IN SITU Lab areas (D5.4)</i>	University of Hildesheim	Structured synthesis of analytical and practice-based research

For developing the cultural and innovation policy proposals as presented in this handbook, we merged the sets of proposals from the IN SITU reports D5.3 and D5.4, with slight adaptations to enhance cross-fertilization between both domains. Throughout this process, three dimensions emerged that not only connect the innovation and culture policies, but structure them, giving guidance for policy action: ecosystem, continuity and governance.

1.3. Framework: The three lenses of innovation and cultural policy

By reading the innovation and cultural policy proposals together, the handbook identifies three interlocking lenses: ecosystem, continuity and governance. As shown in Figure 1, these lenses organise the proposals that follow and give local and regional actors a way to move from analysis to action. They are not separate policy fields, but connected ways of asking what allows cultural and creative work in non-urban areas to take root, continue, and become part of territorial development.

Each lens is framed as a policy question because the intended readers are not only cultural operators. They are also local and regional actors who may already recognize the value of culture, but need to make it governable, fundable, and defensible in political settings where cultural initiatives are still too easily treated as optional, decorative, or secondary.



Figure 1 - Three lenses of cultural and innovation policy

1.3.1. The ecosystem lens: From projects to infrastructures of coordination

Cultural labs, development agencies, municipal cultural officers, libraries, community centres, informal collectives, and third places function as connective tissue. They broker partnerships, reduce transaction costs, support capacity building, build shared visions and trust, and make continuity possible. In non-urban contexts, the primary constraint is rarely a lack of “good ideas,” but the absence of roles and organisational structures

capable of mediating between policy and practice, and of sustaining initiatives over time and across electoral cycles, staffing turnover, and the fatigue of volunteer dependence. Instead of asking “Which events should we support this year?” the more strategic question becomes “Which local anchors make it possible for cultural activity to accumulate into long-term value, and what would it take to stabilise them?” That question is immediately actionable: it can be answered through mapping, governance design, and targeted micro-investments that are proportionate to local capacity.

1.3.2. The continuity lens: Continuity as a precondition for innovation

A second dimension concerns temporality. Both reports emphasise a profound mismatch between the time horizons of cultural ecosystem building and the time horizons of standard funding instruments. Trust, participation, and social cohesion are cumulative. They are produced through repetition, predictability, and learning over time. Short-term project cycles, in contrast, generate “pilot fatigue”: initiatives are launched, reported, and closed before the relations, routines, and production conditions around them can stabilise. The burden falls on the actors who have to restart similar work under a new call, and on the local social context, which is asked to invest trust in initiatives that may disappear just as they begin to take root.

This is not only a cultural policy problem. It is an innovation policy problem too because the kind of innovation that matters most in non-urban settings is often cumulative, relational, and embedded in everyday institutions. Under short project cycles, even useful innovations can be abandoned because the funding system asks for novelty before previous work has had time to mature.

1.3.3. The governance lens: Proximity, legitimacy, and learning

A third critical lens is governance itself. The cultural policy proposals offer a structured method for co-creating policy with local actors, including proximity governance, clear communication, inclusive participation, and monitoring that supports learning and adjustment. The innovation policy report, in parallel, argues for more relational and participatory policy models and for evaluation frameworks that fit process-based work rather than treating it as an accountability problem to be audited. Here, learning does not mean the passive collection of feedback after a project has ended. It means building arrangements through which local experience can be retained, compared, discussed, and used to adjust policy while work is still unfolding.

Horizontal governance covers the mainly informal exchange among local actors themselves, which allows projects to emerge at the local level. It encourages interaction among cultural actors, public institutions, associations, local businesses, educational

organisations, and other actors in the territory. This is where trial and error, shared reflection, and practical learning take place: actors identify what has worked, what has failed, which forms of cooperation can be repeated, and which conditions need to change. In this sense, horizontal governance is not only about participation. It is also about preventing local knowledge from disappearing when projects end, staff change, or volunteer energy is exhausted.

Vertical governance refers to the more formal exchange between actors operating at different levels of decision-making power. It should give local actors a real opportunity to take ownership of the tools made available by public authorities, especially at national and European levels. It should also require public authorities to learn from local practice. Policy tools need to be usable and understandable, but they also need to be adjustable when they do not correspond to the realities of non-urban cultural work. Decentralised public authorities can play a key role here by helping local collectives form, supporting innovation processes, and carrying lessons from local practice back into regional, national, or European policy discussions.

Horizontal and vertical governance meet when local knowledge is given a route into institutional decisions. A recurring local forum, a municipal working group, a cultural coordinator, a Local Action Group, a library, or a development agency can all play this mediating role. Through horizontal exchange, local actors identify what is blocking action: unused spaces, unclear procedures, unpaid coordination work, weak links between sectors, or initiatives that repeatedly disappear after project funding ends. Through vertical governance, these observations can be translated into concrete adjustments: a named contact point, simplified access to a public building, a small coordination budget, clearer eligibility rules, or a mandate for an intermediary to convene actors across sectors. Without this link, participation remains consultative and policy remains distant from practice.

Together, both directions point to a governance principle that is especially relevant for local policymakers who “do not want to feel alone”: sustainable cultural innovation policy is not primarily a matter of importing best practices, but of building legitimate local decision-making and learning capacity. This means delegated authority with clear limits, named contacts in municipal or regional structures, and locally recognised conveners who can keep communication flowing beyond personal networks. It also means recognising that policy change carries risks, including over-reliance on volunteers, tokenistic participation, tourism and branding pressures, and digital or spatial divides. The response is not to freeze action, but to embed reflexive monitoring, regular check-ins, and shared records of what has been tried, so that unintended effects are identified early, and policy can be adjusted before weak arrangements become routine.



2.

Innovation and
culture policy
proposals for CCIs
in non-urban areas

This chapter brings together the innovation and cultural policy proposals developed within IN SITU and organises them through the three lenses introduced above: ecosystem, continuity, and governance. The lenses do not describe separate policy domains. They name the conditions through which cultural and creative work in non-urban areas can take root, continue, and become part of territorial development.

The starting point is a structural gap in current policy design. Innovation policy frameworks, particularly those associated with Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3), still tend to prioritise technological innovation, measurable outputs, and sectoral specialisation. This leaves many process-based and cross-sectoral forms of CCI innovation under-recognised. Cultural policy research shows the same problem from practice: in non-urban areas, CCIs often operate less as a bounded sector than as a form of territorial capacity, connecting social, economic, and institutional life through concrete work, relationships, and shared infrastructures.

The key policy challenge is therefore not only to support cultural or innovative activities, but to adjust policy instruments so that they can recognise and sustain the processes through which innovation occurs in non-urban territories: collective problem-solving, cross-sector collaboration, place-based experimentation, and the coordination work that holds these processes together.

2.1. The ecosystem lens: Building the local conditions that let cultural and creative work take root

In non-urban areas, cultural and creative activities rarely depend on one single organisation, venue, or funding scheme. They depend on whether a place has enough connective tissue to turn scattered activity into a working ecosystem: shared spaces, intermediary roles, local networks, and institutions able to hold cooperation over time. This is where the innovation and cultural policy proposals meet most clearly. The innovation stream argues for a broader definition of innovation, for place-based and rural-proofed policy, for ecosystem logic rather than siloed project support, and for recognition of intermediaries as essential infrastructure.

Where instruments such as Smart Specialisation Strategies tend to focus on sectoral specialisation and technological innovation, the role of CCIs as cross-sectoral actors embedded in local economies and social systems is often overlooked. Without coordination infrastructure, scaling risks becoming superficial: an activity may become more visible without becoming more rooted. Cultural policies face the related problem from another side. If activities are funded without supporting the structures that hold them together, cultural work is left dependent on short cycles, individual commitment, and uneven local capacity. Sociocultural initiatives, local networks, public infrastructure, third spaces, and locally grounded strategies therefore need to be treated as part of the infrastructure through which cultural and creative work connects, accumulates, and remains useful over time.

Building connective structures in low-density regions

In several IN SITU Lab regions, the problem was not the absence of cultural activity, but the lack of structures able to connect existing initiatives. Local actors often moved between several roles—organiser, facilitator, educator, producer, volunteer coordinator—without formal recognition or stable support.

Some Labs therefore focused less on launching new projects than on strengthening intermediary functions: cultural hubs, informal networks, shared spaces, and local organisations able to coordinate between actors.

These cases show that small interventions can alter the capacity of a territory: funding coordination time, opening shared spaces, or recognising an existing intermediary can make dispersed cultural work easier to organise and less dependent on individual exhaustion.



In low-density regions, the existence of cultural activity does not, by itself, create connection. Links between actors, places, and institutions have to be organised, recognised, and supported.

2.1.1. Key policy directions for supporting CCI ecosystems in non-urban areas

- **Broaden the definition of innovation to include social, cultural, territorial, and institutional processes.** Policy frameworks should explicitly include social, cultural, territorial, and institutional innovation, not only technological disruption. Many of the innovations that shape non-urban life emerge through collective and often site-specific action, local problem-solving, and cross-sector experimentation.
- **Recognise CCIs as cross-sectoral innovation actors within regional development strategies.** Cultural and creative industries should be treated not only as cultural and artistic assets, but as actors that contribute to governance, economic diversification, social cohesion, and place-based development. National and regional frameworks must make this role explicit in rural development, cohesion policy, territorial planning, regional innovation systems, and Smart Specialisation priorities.
- **Move from project-based support to ecosystem-based approaches.** For policy to produce and encourage sustainable initiatives and programmes, it ought to support the local relations through which culture intersects with education, agriculture, tourism, environmental work, social economy organisations, and civic life. This is an approach which contrasts with the significantly less strategic and impactful *modus operandi* which mostly considers one-off funding and siloed sectoral tools. The point is not simply to fund activity, but to strengthen the actors, spaces, and relations that allow cultural and creative work to keep producing value.
- **Strengthen intermediaries, networks, and coordination structures.** Cultural labs, libraries, municipal cultural officers, community centres, third spaces, informal collectives, local development agencies, and similar actors need to be recognised as essential infrastructure. They broker relationships, translate between policy and practice, reduce transaction costs, and help initiatives survive changes in staffing, funding, and political attention. They need stable support, clearer mandates, and formal recognition.
- **Promote cross-sector collaboration between CCIs and other fields, including education, tourism, social economy, and environment.** EU programmes should support collaborative platforms, hubs, and cross-sector partnerships that combine cultural, technological, entrepreneurial, and civic capacities. The aim is to strengthen the hybrid networks which already drive development in non-urban areas, rather than forcing cultural actors into narrow sectoral boxes.

2.1.2. Concrete implementation measures supporting CCI ecosystems

Level	Action	Context
Local	Support intermediary roles (e.g., cultural coordinators, hubs) as recognised and funded functions and strengthen sociocultural initiatives as the social base of the ecosystem	Locally rooted sociocultural work should be supported as a form of everyday infrastructure for participation, creativity, and resilience. That means prioritising inclusive, process-led initiatives over prestige events, tourism-driven visibility, or culture-washing. It also means supporting networking, peer learning, advisory services, and stronger links between artists, schools, associations, and other existing local structures.
Local	Enable shared use of public infrastructure (e.g., schools, libraries, community spaces) for cultural activity	Libraries, schools, sports facilities, municipal buildings, community halls, museums, and other publicly owned spaces should be opened up for regular artistic and cultural use with minimal bureaucracy. Policy should also support low-threshold access to vacant or underused buildings, shared management models, and modest upgrades that make spaces more flexible, welcoming, and multifunctional.
Regional and European	Integrate CCIs into Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3) and regional innovation priorities	CCIs should be integrated more systematically into rural development, cohesion policy, and place-based planning. Culture should also be connected more clearly to wider EU priorities, including social resilience, regional cohesion, and the green and digital transitions.
Regional	Develop cross-sector platforms linking culture with tourism, education, social economy, and environment	Third places, where people traditionally gather, can serve as spaces for cross-sectoral networking. The infrastructure of pubs, local clubs, libraries, and village community centres should be strengthened so that communities can meet there and make plans for the future. For actors from the education and tourism sector, contact for collaboration also becomes easier to initiate.

Regional	Build on local strengths through a portfolio approach	Regions and municipalities should identify three to five grounded priority areas for cultural and creative activity based on local skills, traditions, existing networks, and realistic partners. This “portfolio by relatedness” approach gives places a clearer direction without forcing them into imported models or external jargon. Advisory tools, mentoring, and local-language materials should help communities articulate these priorities in their own terms.
National	Recognise CCIs as innovation actors in territorial development frameworks	The potential of CCIS to foster innovation can be embedded in development plans and cultural policy visions and taken into account as part of strategic planning.
European	Strengthen complementarities between S3 (top-down) and LEADER (bottom-up) approaches	LEADER should continue to recognise and support cultural actors and activities, and Smart Specialisation Strategies should make clearer room for cultural, social, and institutional innovation. These instruments already shape development choices in many non-urban regions; they should not keep culture at the margins.
European	Fund ecosystem capacity (e.g., networks, mentoring, advisory services), not only project outputs	EU support should cover the advisory and training structures that make ecosystems function: regional hubs, mentoring, long-term support services, and other forms of practical scaffolding that small organisations and micro-enterprises often lack.
European	Create territorialised, rural- and periphery-sensitive support structures	Programmes and calls should reflect the different conditions of non-urban territories, including rural, remote, sparsely populated, and institutionally peripheral areas. This means using local mapping, plain-language calls, local-language support, proportionate reporting, and modest advisory structures, and identifying opportunity areas grounded in existing skills, networks, and infrastructures. Rural- and periphery-sensitive support should not mean adding a territorial label to a standard instrument; it should change the assumptions of the instrument itself, including administrative burden, distance from funding networks, access to co-financing, and the time needed to build cooperation.

2.2. The continuity lens: Giving initiatives enough continuity to become meaningful

The second shared issue is continuity. Cultural development in non-urban areas is often community-driven, site-specific, and cumulative, while many funding instruments still run on short cycles, relaunches, and quick visible returns. This mismatch produces exhaustion. Initiatives are launched, reported, and closed before the relations, routines, and production conditions around them can stabilise.

Continuity is therefore not a secondary concern. It is the time and stability needed for people, spaces, and institutions to assemble, learn, and act together. In policy terms, this means multi-year micro-funding, paid coordination time, predictable access to spaces, and light feedback loops that allow adaptation without turning reporting into another burden.

From pilot projects to sustained local practices

Across several IN SITU Labs, stakeholders reported a recurring pattern: initiatives were successfully launched, often with strong community engagement, but struggled to continue once initial funding ended. This created cycles of repetition, where similar ideas were repeatedly restarted rather than developed further. In response, some regions experimented with **longer-term, small-scale support mechanisms**, allowing initiatives to stabilise and adapt over time. These included multi-annual micro-grants, flexible use of local budgets, and recognition of coordination work as a legitimate cost.

The result was not necessarily more activity, but more **continuity**: initiatives became easier to sustain, partnerships more stable, and local knowledge less likely to be lost between funding cycles.



What makes a difference is not only starting initiatives, but accompanying that with the types of support which enables them to continue and evolve. In non-urban areas, innovation is not a singular event but a cumulative process that requires continuity in funding, coordination, and institutional support to become effective.

2.2.1. Key policy directions for supporting continuity

- **Shift from short-term project logic to long-term process support.** Policy should give greater weight to initiatives that build participation, relationships, and local capacity over time, rather than rewarding only short-lived events, highly visible products, or tourism-focused showcases. The aim is to support work that stays in place and keeps generating value after the first moment of attention has passed.
- **Adapt innovation funding instruments to support long-term, place-based, and site-specific processes.** In particular, EU innovation and cultural funding should make more room for sustained, community-driven work and reduce the pressure to package everything as a product, event, or short-term visibility exercise. In many non-urban places, long-term participation and local identity-building matter more than scale effects alone.
- **Recognise continuity as a condition of innovation, not as a post-project concern.** Innovation in non-urban areas often depends on whether people, spaces, and relationships can remain in place long enough for new practices to take root. If support ends before cooperation has stabilised, the result is not only cultural discontinuity; it is also the loss of accumulated knowledge, trust, and local capacity. Policy frameworks should therefore treat continuity as part of innovation design, including in evaluation, programme timelines, and institutional support, rather than as an issue to be addressed after a project has already ended.
- **Support the stabilisation of people, spaces, and relationships.** EU and national programmes should support small-scale investments that enable public buildings and third spaces to be used continuously for local cultural work. In non-urban contexts, predictable access to a room can matter as much as the grant itself.
- **Design evaluation frameworks that capture long-term and qualitative impacts.** Policy must reward the maturation of initiatives, not just their launch. Where practice has already proved useful, support should help it consolidate, become easier the second time, and spread through the territory instead of collapsing at the end of one cycle.

2.2.2. Concrete implementation measures supporting continuity

Level	Action	Context
Local	Provide staged micro-grants and follow-up support for small-scale and community-based initiatives	Annual micro-grants can give small initiatives enough room to test an idea without forcing actors to start from zero each year. Where an initiative shows local relevance, repeated participation, and capacity to continue, support should be able to grow modestly through a continuation grant, paid coordination time, or access to space and equipment. The aim is not to keep successful work permanently at micro-grant level, but to allow it to stabilise when it begins to take root.
Local	Ensure stable access to spaces and fair paid coordination time	Public buildings should be understood and offered continuously as possible space for local cultural work. In non-urban contexts, predictable access to a room can matter as much as the grant itself. Further, continuity depends on more than grants. It also depends on fair paid coordination time, and feedback loops that help initiatives adjust without drowning them in administration. These elements should be treated as legitimate costs of policy support, not as extras.
Regional	Introduce simplified, low-threshold funding schemes adapted to small organisations	Grant systems should be easier to access for small organisations, volunteer-led groups, and municipalities with limited capacity. Plain-language forms, lighter reporting, and standardised templates should become the norm for small-scale and pilot work.
Regional	Allow co-applications and shared responsibility across local actors	Where useful, policies should permit co-applications, shared responsibility between cooperating initiatives, and re-granting through trusted intermediaries such as municipalities, associations, or cultural centres. Small local budget lines should also be used to support self-organised projects where larger schemes are too slow or too heavy.
National	Support long-term programmes focused on ecosystem development rather than isolated projects	Long-term mentoring, advisory services, regional hubs, and territorially anchored support structures should be strengthened. These are often more useful than another short-term call because they help small actors stay active, learn, and adapt.

European	Design funding instruments allowing multi-year, small-scale support managed close to the ground	EU programmes should allow multi-year, small-scale support that can be managed close to the ground, whether through municipalities, trusted intermediaries, or local partnerships. Continuity in funding helps build trust, stabilise relationships, and allow grassroots initiatives to grow into durable local institutions.
European	Allow investments for equipping public buildings as Third Spaces	EU programmes allowing small-scale investments enable public buildings and third spaces to be used continuously for local cultural work.
European	Reduce administrative burdens (e.g., simplified applications, lighter reporting)	Administrative burdens remain a major barrier, especially for rural organisations with little staff capacity and weak access to EU networks. Simpler procedures and more proportionate reporting would make European support far more usable in practice.
European	Recognise site-specific processes and community-driven continuity as a funding value, not only innovation outputs	EU programmes should be flexible enough to be adapted to site-specific circumstances. By acknowledging community-based processes and processes of trust-building, as well as tasks that promote structural continuity, as fundamental, individual rural realities can be met within a single policy framework.

2.3. The governance lens: Making policy reachable, legitimate, and receptive

On European, national, and regional levels, different policy and funding instruments exist, often operating in parallel, with limited coordination and different logics. This fragmentation creates significant barriers for local actors. Therefore, the third lens brings together proposals that are currently split between innovation governance and cultural policy process. On the one hand, the innovation proposals call for collaborative governance, better coordination across sectors and levels, and stronger absorption capacity. On the other hand, the cultural proposals insist on regular dialogue, proximity governance, inclusive participation, and reflexive monitoring. These are not separate agendas. They address the same issue: policy is only effective when local actors can understand it, access it, shape it, and work with it without having to navigate

a fragmented maze. In non-urban areas especially, good governance is not about copying best practice from elsewhere. It is about building workable arrangements: clear responsibilities, named contacts, regular dialogue, learning-oriented monitoring, and coordination that matches the actual texture of the place.

However, non-urban policies are also connected to national and European levels with their specific structures and hierarchies. The challenge is to connect these macro policy levels to local understandings and regional needs, as well as to find ways these different governance structures can meet and cooperate.

Making policy usable at the local level

In many IN SITU Lab regions, actors described existing policy frameworks as difficult to navigate. While multiple funding opportunities were available, they were often spread across different programmes, with complex procedures and unclear points of contact.

To address this, some Labs focused on improving proximity governance. This included creating regular dialogue spaces between policymakers and practitioners, simplifying communication, and identifying local coordinators who could act as intermediaries between institutions and communities.

These measures did not require major structural reform, but they significantly improved the accessibility and usability of policy. Actors reported a stronger sense of clarity, trust, and capacity to engage with public support systems.



Policy becomes effective when it is not only available, but understandable, accessible, and adaptable to local realities. Existing innovation and cultural policy instruments need strong coordination and alignment between them to avoid fragmentation and inaccessibility.

2.3.1. Key policy directions for supporting governance

- **Improve coordination across governance levels and policy domains.** European, national, regional, and local instruments need to work together more coherently. At the moment, weak coordination across levels and sectors limits territories' absorption capacity and leaves local actors to deal with systems that are formally available but hard to use in practice.
- **Strengthen proximity governance and local decision-making capacity.** Proximity governance means equipping local actors and intermediate authorities with the mandate, time, and support to act on what they already know. This strategy will improve their capacity of decision.
- **Simplify administrative procedures and access conditions.** Plain-language calls, lighter reporting proportionate to grant size, standardised templates, and the option to apply or report in national or regional languages should become the default for small-scale and pilot work, not exceptional accommodations.
- **Promote participatory and collaborative governance that connects local practice with institutional decision-making.** Participation should not stop at consultation. Local forums, working groups, cultural coordinators, third spaces, and intermediary organisations can bring practitioners, municipal officers, and regional actors into regular exchange. Their task is to carry knowledge from practice—unused spaces, administrative blockages, excluded groups, coordination burdens, fragile collaborations—into decisions about funding, access, mandates, and support. This is where horizontal governance among local actors and vertical governance through public institutions meet: local knowledge only becomes useful for policy when there is a route for it to change procedures, responsibilities, or resources.
- **Develop learning-oriented monitoring and site-specific evaluation systems.** Monitoring should support learning, not exhaust the people it is meant to help. Narrative reflection, community feedback, simple templates, optional oral reporting, and learning exchanges between projects should at least complement, if not directly replace, rigid KPI-based systems, especially for small organisations and volunteer-led work.

2.3.2. Concrete implementation measures supporting governance

Level	Action	Context
Local	Establish regular, low-threshold dialogue forums between policymakers and practitioners	Municipalities and regions should establish recurring, low-threshold forums where artists, creative practitioners, public officials, civil society actors, and other stakeholders can discuss needs, bottlenecks, and live policy questions. These actors should not sit outside decision-making. They should be linked to funding reviews, local development plans, and other policy processes that shape real choices.
Local	Designate clear contact points within institutions for cultural and innovation actors	Good governance needs named contacts, delegated authority with clear limits, and recognised local conveners who can keep communication moving beyond informal networks. Advisory groups and working groups should include different artistic disciplines, different communities, and, where relevant, young people and/or specific minoritised demographics.
Regional	Coordinate policies across sectors (e.g., culture, innovation, rural development, education)	Culture, innovation, rural development, education, tourism, cohesion, and social policy should not remain separate administrative worlds that local actors have to stitch together for themselves. National and regional frameworks should identify which decisions belong locally, which regionally, and which nationally, and should connect those levels more clearly.
Regional	Support intermediary organisations to facilitate communication and coordination	On a regional level, intermediary organisations can be encouraged to serve as connecting anchor points for strengthening the cultural and creative ecosystem and providing space and networking opportunities to smaller organisations and actors. This could connect to the dialogue forms, organised at the local level to foster networking.
National	Clarify roles and responsibilities across governance levels	Good governance needs named contacts, delegated authority with clear limits, and recognised local conveners who can keep communication moving beyond informal networks.

European	Improve alignment between S3, LEADER, Creative Europe, and other instruments	These instruments often act on the same territories, but through different logics: LEADER supports bottom-up territorial work, S3 structures regional innovation priorities, and Creative Europe supports cultural cooperation. Programme guidance should make these relationships explicit, so that local initiatives do not have to restart from zero when moving between instruments or levels of support. Alignment should create routes from local experimentation to regional priority-setting and wider cooperation, without forcing cultural actors to translate their work into a new administrative language each time.
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European	Establish ongoing local–EU dialogue	Dialogue is most significantly more useful and relevant when it goes beyond information points concentrated in larger cities. Regular exchanges between artists, administrators, policymakers, and regional actors should be embedded in thematic contexts so that European policy is shaped by practice and local actors can see where and how to engage.
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European	Replace rigid KPI-based reporting with learning-oriented monitoring systems	Monitoring should become a policy instrument in and of itself. EU programmes should use simpler, more comparable reporting styles and learning-oriented reviews that help programmes adapt while reducing form fatigue for applicants and grantees.
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European	Support governance capacity-building through cooperation projects and networks	Small and medium-sized European cooperation projects should be supported not only for their outputs, but because they help build multi-partner teams, shared learning, and stronger coordination among actors who might otherwise remain disconnected. Additionally, many non-urban actors work across roles and sectors and therefore cannot realistically navigate heavy governance structures built for large institutions. EU support should therefore recognise smaller-scale, collaborative models and strengthen the support mechanisms that make them viable.
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3.

The synergy between
innovation and
cultural policy
and their impact on
non urban areas

The three lenses—ecosystem, continuity, and governance—shift the question of support away from individual cultural projects and towards the conditions that allow cultural and creative work to organise people, hold relationships, and produce local capacity over time. The proposals in Chapter 2 are therefore not simply a merged list of innovation and cultural policy recommendations. They identify the conditions under which culture can operate as innovation in non-urban areas: connective structures, continuity, and governance arrangements that local actors can actually use.

3.1. Where cultural policy and innovation policy actually meet in non-urban places

In non-urban contexts, “innovation” is rarely a standalone technology story, and “culture” is rarely a standalone arts story. Instead, each often becomes the other’s enabling condition.

The IN SITU report *Innovation policy proposals (for KICs) for CClIs in non-urban areas* (D5.3) argues that, in rural and semi-rural territories, innovation must be understood in broader terms than technological disruption. What brings change to people’s lives is often social, cultural, organisational, and institutional innovations, rooted in collective action and local needs. It also shows how policy frameworks tend to carry urban assumptions (about scale, professionalisation, administrative capacity, and measurable outputs), which then do not fit the hybrid, process-based reality of cultural work outside metropolitan centres. A recurring theme is the “connective tissue” problem: the people and organisations who translate policy into practice, coordinate partnerships, and keep initiatives alive across funding cycles are essential yet precariously supported.

The IN SITU report *Cultural policy proposals for CClIs in IN SITU Lab areas* (D5.4) reaches a parallel conclusion from the practice side. It emphasises continuity, inclusion, accessibility, and local agency as the decisive variables of non-urban cultural ecosystems. It also sets out a replicable, ten-step method for co-creating cultural policy and activity with local stakeholders: mapping assets and needs; building community dialogue; visioning; setting up proximity governance; activating third places and spaces; and

maintaining reflexive monitoring and learning. It is explicit that “what works” is less about adopting a model, and more about adjusting governance, language, rhythms, and infrastructure to the lived conditions of place.

When culture is recognised as an essential component of local development rather than a supplementary sector, cultural ecosystems can act as civic infrastructure by supporting social cohesion, participation, collective learning, and local leadership. In many non-urban and low-density areas, they represent one of the few policy fields capable of building long-term local capacities and resilience. Conversely, cultural policy becomes more powerful when it borrows the discipline of innovation policy (involving iteration, portfolios, learning loops, and coordination across instruments), but also supports its own processes and agendas. This field of tension between economic and societal needs and values supports community-driven creative innovation. It uses CCIs in their ambivalent structure, but without inheriting measurement metrics or urban default settings.

3.2. Reframing the intersection: Culture as a form of innovation capacity

In non-urban settings, “capacity” matters because so many initiatives are structurally small, multi-role, and stretched in time. People wear many hats: they are organisers, facilitators, producers, educators, caretakers, administrators, and advocates all at once. A cultural ecosystem is therefore not simply a set of cultural products and actors, but a **local ability to organise collectively over time**.

Innovation policy often assumes that ideas become innovations through scale, investment, and market diffusion. In many non-urban cultural ecosystems, the more realistic pathway is different: innovations begin as ways of coordinating scarce resources, maintaining social infrastructure, and making participation possible across distance, mobility limitations, seasonality, care responsibilities, and limited venues. The “output” is often only the visible tip of a much deeper process: trust-building, shared ownership, and the gradual development of practical governance. What this means is that in non-urban territories, the relationship between culture and innovation is best understood as mutual enabling: cultural ecosystems generate collective capability, while innovation policy becomes effective only when it supports the infrastructures that allow such capability to accumulate.

- **Culture is innovative when it increases a rural territory’s collective problem-solving and forward-looking capacity**, not only its cultural offer.
- **Innovation policy is relevant to culture in non-urban areas when it protects and supports the conditions for continuity**, not only the conditions for novelty.

This perspective matters because it changes the target of policy support. Instead of funding only “**what happens,**” the more important question becomes: **What makes it possible for things to keep happening, to become easier the second time, and to be shared across places?**

3.3. Obstacles to implementation

Calls for place-based approaches, stronger coordination, broader definitions of innovation, support for intermediaries, and more accessible funding have appeared repeatedly in European policy debates. Their recurrence points to an implementation problem rather than a lack of ideas. The analysis developed through IN SITU points to four recurring obstacles:

- A mismatch between policy instruments and the realities of non-urban cultural ecosystems;
- A mismatch between short funding cycles and time-intensive, community-based cultural work;
- The invisibility of coordination and intermediary labour; and
- Fragmentation across culture, innovation, rural development, education, tourism, cohesion, and social policy.

Support schemes are often built around assumptions more typical of metropolitan settings: specialised organisations, stable administrative capacity, clearly bounded sectors, dense professional networks, and visible outputs that can be measured within short programming cycles. In contrast, in non-urban areas cultural activity is frequently carried out by small organisations, hybrid actors, part-time professionals, volunteers, municipalities with limited capacity, and informal collaborations that cut across culture, social life, education, tourism, heritage, and local development. As a result, policies that appear coherent in abstract terms often prove difficult to apply in

practice because they do not correspond to the institutional texture of the places they seek to support.

This links to the concerns regarding continuity: Cultural development in non-urban areas is cumulative and community driven, and thus depends on trust, repeated cooperation, local legitimacy, and the slow consolidation of spaces, routines, and relationships. Yet policy instruments remain overwhelmingly organised around short-term projects, pilot schemes, and temporary funding windows. This creates a recurrent tension between the temporalities of administration and the temporalities of cultural life. Initiatives are expected to demonstrate rapid results, even when their most significant effects lie in strengthening local confidence, improving cooperation, widening participation, or stabilising fragile forms of organisation. In such conditions, promising practices are often launched but not sustained, producing discontinuity rather than institutional learning.

Implementation is also hindered by the relative invisibility of coordination work. In many non-urban contexts, the decisive factor is not only the existence of funding, but the presence of people and organisations able to connect actors, translate between administrative and local languages, organise cooperation across sectors, and maintain continuity between one activity and the next. This work is often treated as secondary, or left to unpaid commitment, when in fact it functions as a form of essential infrastructure. Where such intermediary capacity is weak or absent, even well-designed measures can fail to take root. Where it exists, it often does so despite policy frameworks rather than because of them.

Finally, the implementation gap reflects a broader fragmentation of public action. Culture, innovation, rural development, cohesion, education, tourism, and social policy continue to be governed through partially separate rationales, funding streams, and administrative arenas. In principle, this plurality could be productive. In practice, it often disperses responsibility, multiplies thresholds of access, and leaves local actors to navigate a landscape that is both dense and poorly connected. *What is required, therefore, is a clearer understanding of how these policy objectives—strengthening place-based development, improving coordination, supporting intermediaries, and widening access to resources—can be translated into workable arrangements adapted to the realities of non-urban territories.*

3.4. Understanding and enabling conditions for implementation

These four obstacles are precisely where this handbook seeks to intervene. Its contribution does not lie in proposing an entirely new normative agenda, nor in suggesting that the main challenges of nonurban CCIs can be resolved through a single model. Rather, it lies in shifting the focus from declarative recommendations to the practical conditions of implementation. In other words, the question is no longer only what should be supported, but how support can be organised in ways that are proportionate, intelligible, and effective in places where transport connections may be weak, public and cultural spaces unevenly available, administrative support limited, and intermediaries few. In such settings, cooperation can be strongly rooted in local relations while still remaining fragile, because the infrastructures that allow it to continue are often thin.

The added value of the handbook is therefore operational. Its approach to policy is not only a matter of strategic orientation, but also as a matter of practical organisation, translation, and institutional design. This means asking concrete questions that are too often left implicit: who is expected to act, at which level, with what kind of authority, within what timeframe, and with which forms of support? Which functions require long-term recognition rather than temporary project funding? Which small adjustments in administration, communication, or governance can remove disproportionate barriers for local actors? And how can monitoring frameworks recognise continuity, learning, and ecosystem development, rather than rewarding only immediate visibility?

Seen from this perspective, implementation is not a secondary phase that follows policy design. It is part of policy design itself. In non-urban areas especially, the success or failure of a measure may depend on apparently modest elements: the availability of coordination time, access to a room, a simpler application form, the possibility of re-granting through trusted intermediaries, a clearer local point of contact, or a reporting system that does not consume the capacity it is meant to support. These are not minor administrative details. They are often the conditions that determine whether a policy remains aspirational or becomes actionable.

For this reason, the next chapter turns from general recommendation to operational pathway. It asks how a local or regional actor can begin from one concrete challenge, read that challenge through the three lenses, identify who needs to be involved, and decide what kind of support would make action possible. The aim is not to produce another model, but to make implementation visible as work: coordination, translation, timing, access, decision-making, and the maintenance of local capacity over time.



4.

Operationalisation:
From framework to
local pathway

Many proposals in this handbook are already familiar from the IN SITU policy roundtables: stronger coordination, support for intermediaries, longer timeframes, simpler procedures, and closer dialogue. The difficulty is making them work in non-urban territories, where mandate, continuity, budget, coordination capacity, and institutional responsibility are often missing.

Building on the roadmap developed in *Cultural policy proposals for CCIs in IN SITU Lab areas* (D5.4), this chapter translates the framework into a shorter local pathway. It helps local and regional actors start from one concrete challenge, read it through the three lenses, bring together the actors needed to work on it, and shape a first pathway for action.

The questions under each step are prompts for collective discussion, not a checklist. They help keep the pathway specific to the place before moving too quickly to a funding application, a general strategy, or claims of wider change. The short case boxes from the IN SITU Labs show how the same questions can look when worked through in practice in a specific territory.

4.1. Step 1 – Start from one concrete challenge

The first step is to resist the temptation to begin with everything at once. In practice, many territorial discussions fail not because actors disagree on objectives, but because the starting point remains too broad: “we need more support for arts and culture,” “we need better coordination,” “we need stronger innovation.” Such formulations may be accurate, but they do not yet make action possible. A workable pathway starts with one challenge that is concrete enough to be named in ordinary language and specific enough to be recognised by the people affected by it.

That challenge may concern the absence of a stable place to meet, the repeated collapse of promising initiatives after a first funding cycle, the lack of a concrete municipal contact, weak links between cultural actors and other sectors, low accessibility for certain groups, or the exhaustion of a small number of volunteers who hold too much together. The point is not to begin from the most ambitious issue, but from one bottleneck that makes broader development harder than it needs to be.

At this stage, the guiding question is simple: Where does the current arrangement fail to support continuity, participation, or coordination? This makes the first move diagnostic rather than programmatic. It prevents local actors from jumping too quickly to a funding application, a new event, or a general strategy before the underlying blockage has been named.

One principle should remain explicit from the beginning: Do not build a pathway for local actors after “consulting” them; build it with them, step by step. Otherwise, participation becomes a legitimising gesture rather than part of the work itself.

Questions for Step 1

- What is the concrete problem that local actors recognise in ordinary language?
- Who experiences this problem directly?
- What does the problem prevent from continuing, connecting, or becoming accessible?
- Is the challenge narrow enough to act on without becoming a full strategy?
- What would be lost if this problem remained unresolved for another year?

By the end of this step, the group should have one challenge statement that is specific enough to act on. For example: “existing cultural spaces are present but unevenly accessible”; “initiatives repeatedly stop after pilot funding”; “local actors do not know which institution to approach”; or “coordination depends on one or two exhausted individuals.”

4.2. Step 2 – Understand and focus local challenges and their contexts

After identifying one specific challenge, the next task is to understand what is producing it. The three lenses outlined in this handbook can help structure that discussion. They should not be used to force local realities into neat categories. Their purpose is to identify which condition is missing, and what kind of support would actually change the situation.

The **ecosystem lens** asks whether the problem lies in weak connections. Are the links between actors, organisations, and sectors too thin? Is there a lack of intermediary capacity, shared infrastructure, or people able to move between policy and practice? Non-urban cultural and creative activity rarely depends on isolated projects alone. It depends on relationships, local anchors, and enabling roles that hold activity

together. Without that structure, even strong local initiatives can remain scattered, with each one beginning and ending on its own.

The **continuity lens** asks whether the challenge is about continuity. Has the territory slipped into a pattern of restarting and wearing out, with people asked repeatedly to reapply, rebuild trust, and reconstruct working relationships after every call or administrative cycle? Continuity is not only about the length of funding. It also depends on recurring activity, stable points of contact, accessible third spaces, and some shared record of what has already been tried. When those conditions are missing, what appears as a lack of motivation or creativity may in fact be a failure of support.

The **governance lens** asks who can act, decide, interpret, and carry things forward. Are responsibilities clear? Is there a named contact in the municipality or region? Can a small association make sense of the instruments available to it? Sometimes the difficulty is not that policy is absent, but that it is hard to reach. It may be buried in fragmented communication, technical language, or decision-making that sits too far from everyday practice. Policy only works when people can understand it, access it, and see how to use it in their own setting.

In practice, one lens usually comes forward more strongly than the others, even if all three are present. A region may describe its problem as a lack of space, while a closer reading shows weak governance around access to spaces that already exist. Another territory may speak of a lack of innovation, when the deeper issue is that cross-sector work remains too disconnected to become stable or useful. The lenses slow the process down enough to ask what kind of condition is missing before solutions are proposed.

Questions for Step 2

- Is the main problem a lack of connection between actors, places, institutions, or sectors?
- Is the problem caused by short funding cycles, interrupted relationships, or lost institutional memory?
- Is the difficulty linked to unclear responsibility, inaccessible procedures, or weak communication between local actors and public authorities?
- Which of the three lenses best explains why the problem persists?

By the end of this step, the group should be able to say whether the challenge is primarily an ecosystem problem, a continuity problem, a governance problem, or a combination of these. This diagnosis does not need to be final, but needs to be clear enough to guide the next decision.

Valmiera is a region with a lively festival calendar, open-air stages spread across the county, a recognised theatre in the city, and a growing sense among decision-makers that culture deserves a more serious place in public life. The European Capital of Culture bid, even though it did not succeed, shifted something. It pushed culture further into public conversations and was followed by the county's first Cultural Development Strategy. But IN SITU research revealed something beneath this momentum. Activity is there, yet access is uneven. Some spaces need upgrading. Cooperation exists, but it is not always steady enough to carry work across the whole county in a sustained way. In a place like Valmiera, then, the challenge is how to stop the cultural life from remaining scattered, dependent on individual effort, or concentrated in certain places.

4.3. Step 3 – Build the actor group and the support structure

No single institution can develop a pathway on its own. This is especially true when the challenge touches culture, local development, education, tourism, social life, and everyday infrastructure at the same time.¹ Once the first identified challenge has been read through the three lenses, the next step is to decide who needs to be involved further and in what role(s). This is not a matter of inviting everyone. It is a matter of bringing together a small but credible group with practical knowledge, some decision-making reach, and enough legitimacy to carry the process forward and involve others later, ideally throughout their own networks as well.

In many non-urban settings, that group will need to extend beyond cultural actors in any narrow sense. Depending on the challenge, it may include municipal staff, local associations, schools, libraries, development agencies, community hosts, informal conveners, and people working across tourism, heritage, education, or the social economy. The composition of participants should follow the identified bottleneck. If the problem is fragmentation across sectors, the group needs to reflect that reality if it is to do anything about it. If the problem is continuity, the people who manage space, schedules, finance, communication, or volunteer coordination need to be part of it. If the problem is accessibility or legitimacy, the group must include those who are usually excluded or those most directly affected, and it must do so in ways that

¹ Wingert, C. (2024). *Kulturpolitik für ländliche Räume. Kulturverständnisse und Ländlichkeitskonzepte in Kulturpolitik und Forschung [Cultural policy for rural areas: Understandings of culture and concepts of rurality in cultural policy and research]*. Materialien 17, Institut für Kulturpolitik der Kulturpolitischen Gesellschaft, p. 26. www.kupoge.de/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Wingert_Kulturpolitik-fuer-laendliche-Raeume.pdf

do not simply repeat the familiar pattern of unpaid symbolic participation. Inclusive governance depends on practical support for involvement, including attention to timing, travel, care, interpretation, and the real value of people's time.

This is also the point at which intermediary roles become decisive. In practice, this means that where a cultural lab, library, local development agency, municipal liaison, or trusted association already plays a brokering role, it should not be seen as a passive stakeholder. We must include those who can keep communication moving, translate between different registers, sustain attention across a sequence of meetings, and carry the thread from one step to the next. In some contexts, LEADER-type arrangements are especially valuable for this reason because they are built on a bottom-up logic, rely on local intermediaries, and allow projects to take shape within a specific cultural and social context rather than being forced into a fully predefined call.² Even so, they work best when they are connected to wider regional strategies and longer time horizons rather than left to operate on their own.³

Questions for Step 3

- Who needs to be involved to understand the challenge from different perspectives and experiences?
- Which actors have the ability to make decisions, allocate resources, or influence implementation?
- Which actors are directly affected by the challenge but are currently absent from discussions?
- Are there trusted intermediary organisations or individuals who can connect different sectors, institutions, or communities?
- What forms of support are needed to enable meaningful participation (e.g. travel costs, childcare, accessibility measures, interpretation, compensation for time)?
- Are there existing networks, forums, partnerships, or local initiatives that could provide a foundation for collaboration rather than creating a new structure from scratch?

By the end of this step, the group should have identified a core actor network that is both representative and operational: broad enough to reflect different perspectives, yet small enough to sustain trust, dialogue, and collective action over time. Particular attention should be paid to intermediary actors who can bridge institutional, sectoral, and community boundaries, as they often play a decisive role in maintaining continuity throughout the process.

² Ray, C. (2000). Editorial. The EU Leader programme: Rural development laboratory. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 40, 163-171. doi: 10.1111/1467-9523.00138

³ Ray (2000)

The identified, local challenge has to be reflected by the group and its participants.

In Valmiera, where scattered initiatives have been identified as a key challenge, it would not make sense to gather only cultural producers and expect everything else to follow later. The problem already reaches beyond culture in any narrow sense. It touches public space, infrastructure, access, education, coordination, and the everyday question of who keeps things moving once the first burst of energy has passed. A working group here would probably need municipal cultural staff, festival and forum organisers, people responsible for venues and public spaces, local associations, education actors, and those already involved in the newer cross-sector platforms connecting culture to tourism, business, and learning. The annual Cultural Forum matters precisely because it suggests some of this groundwork is already in place. The task would not be to gather everyone in the county, but to bring together those who know where the blockages are, those who have the standing to act on them, and those who are trusted enough to hold the process together between meetings. In a region like this, formal authority matters, but so do the people who understand how things actually work on the ground.

4.4. Step 4 – Shape a first pathway for action

Only after naming the challenge, understanding its context, and gathering the right people, can the issue itself be addressed effectively. Even then, the aim should not be to produce a full strategy in one go. In many non-urban contexts, an oversized plan becomes another way of delaying the work that actually needs to be done. What is needed first is a pathway: a sequence of early steps that is modest enough to be realistic and clear enough to begin shifting the conditions that allow the problem to persist.

One useful way of thinking about this is to do so through the following three layers:

1. **Immediate adjustments.** These are changes that can be made without waiting for major institutional reform: opening an existing room for regular use, naming one clear local contact, simplifying a local procedure, starting a recurring roundtable, agreeing on a shared calendar, or setting aside a small amount of coordination time.
2. **Stabilisation.** This is where short-term activation begins to take a more durable form through multi-annual micro-funding, re-granting through trusted intermediaries, recognition of intermediary roles, a light monitoring routine, a clearer agreement between actors, or a shared set of priorities that links local strengths to wider support.

- 3. Alignment and extension.** This is where local work begins to connect to regional, national, or European instruments and partnerships without losing its grounding in the territory.

Additionally, it is important to keep in mind that different instruments suit different moments. Where a challenge calls for bottom-up mobilisation, accompaniment, and locally owned experimentation, LEADER-type approaches and trusted territorial intermediaries will often serve better than large competitive calls.⁴ Where the issue is broader regional positioning instead, sectoral coordination, or larger-scale investment, regional innovation frameworks, and Smart Specialisation may offer a stronger frame, provided they treat CCIs as cross-sectoral actors rather than marginal cultural add-ons.⁵ Cooperation programmes, including European ones, become most useful once a territory has enough internal clarity to enter them without drifting away from the local problem it set out to address in the first place. In that sense, operationalisation is not simply about choosing a good instrument. It is about matching the right instrument to the right moment in the pathway.

Existing practices can support this step, but they are most useful as references rather than models to be copied. A pioneering project helps most when it showcases possibilities to local actors⁶: a heritage project that builds coordination capacity instead of chasing short-term visibility, for example, or a cross-sector initiative that brings together digital tools, accessibility, education, tourism, and landscape interpretation within a single place-sensitive pathway. The point is never to ask whether the same project can simply be repeated somewhere else. The more useful question is what kind of mechanism became visible, and whether that mechanism speaks to the specific challenge now being worked on.

Questions for Step 4

- What can be changed now, using the actors, spaces, and authority already present?
- Who will carry the next step?
- What is actually needed: coordination time, access to space, small funding, technical support, political permission, or administrative simplification?
- What should wait because the local conditions are not yet in place?

4 Ray (2000)

5 Marasco, A., Lazzeri, G., Tartari, M., Ubaldi, S., & Sacco, P. L. (2024). Revisiting the CCIs-tourism nexus: Insights from Smart Specialisation Strategies. *European Journal of Cultural Management and Policy*, 14, 12393. doi: 10.3389/ejcmp.2024.12393

6 Dargan, L. & Shucksmith, M. (2008). LEADER and Innovation. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 48, 274-291. Doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9523.2008.00463.x

A first pathway in Valmiera would not need to begin with another broad vision statement. The county already has enough signs of ambition. What it needs is a manageable sequence that starts from what is already present. That might mean choosing one shared priority and testing it in a limited but visible way. The county could begin, for instance, with a small group of spaces that already matter locally: an open-air stage, a community hub, or one of the newer intergenerational meeting places that have emerged across the region.

The next question would be practical. What is actually stopping these places from being used more consistently? Is it equipment, access, scheduling, the absence of a named contact, weak coordination, or simply the lack of a small amount of flexible support? Once that is clear, the first steps become far less abstract: a modest fund for minor improvements, a shared calendar, clearer responsibility for coordination, and a handful of recurring activities that begin to build rhythm rather than relying on one-off efforts. That kind of pathway may look unassuming on paper, but in practice it is often the moment at which a place stops improvising and starts building something it can actually sustain.

4.5. Step 5 – Decide how to judge whether the pathway is taking root

The final step of implementing a place-based innovation and culture policy development process is to decide, early on, how people in the territory will recognise whether the pathway is beginning to work. This should not be treated as a separate stage of evaluation added at the end but as part of the policy design, with monitoring that helps people to learn from practice rather than simply producing material for audit.⁷ The issue is how to make it fit the realities of place-based, process-led work.

For that reason, evaluation and communication about the process should begin with a small number of questions that local actors can actually use to communicate into their own networks: What was tried? What changed? What continued? What should stop? These questions shift attention away from one-off figures and towards the more telling signs that something is beginning to settle into the territory. Is participation becoming easier rather than harder? Are roles and contact points becoming clearer? Do meetings, activities, or forms of cooperation repeat instead of starting from nothing each time? Are more people able to act because procedures have become lighter, language clearer, or access to space more predictable?

⁷ Dax, T., and Oedl-Wieser, T. (2016). Rural innovation activities as a means for changing development perspectives An assessment of more than two decades of promoting LEADER initiatives across the European Union. *Studies in Agricultural Economics*, 118(1), 30-37. doi: 10.7896/j.1535

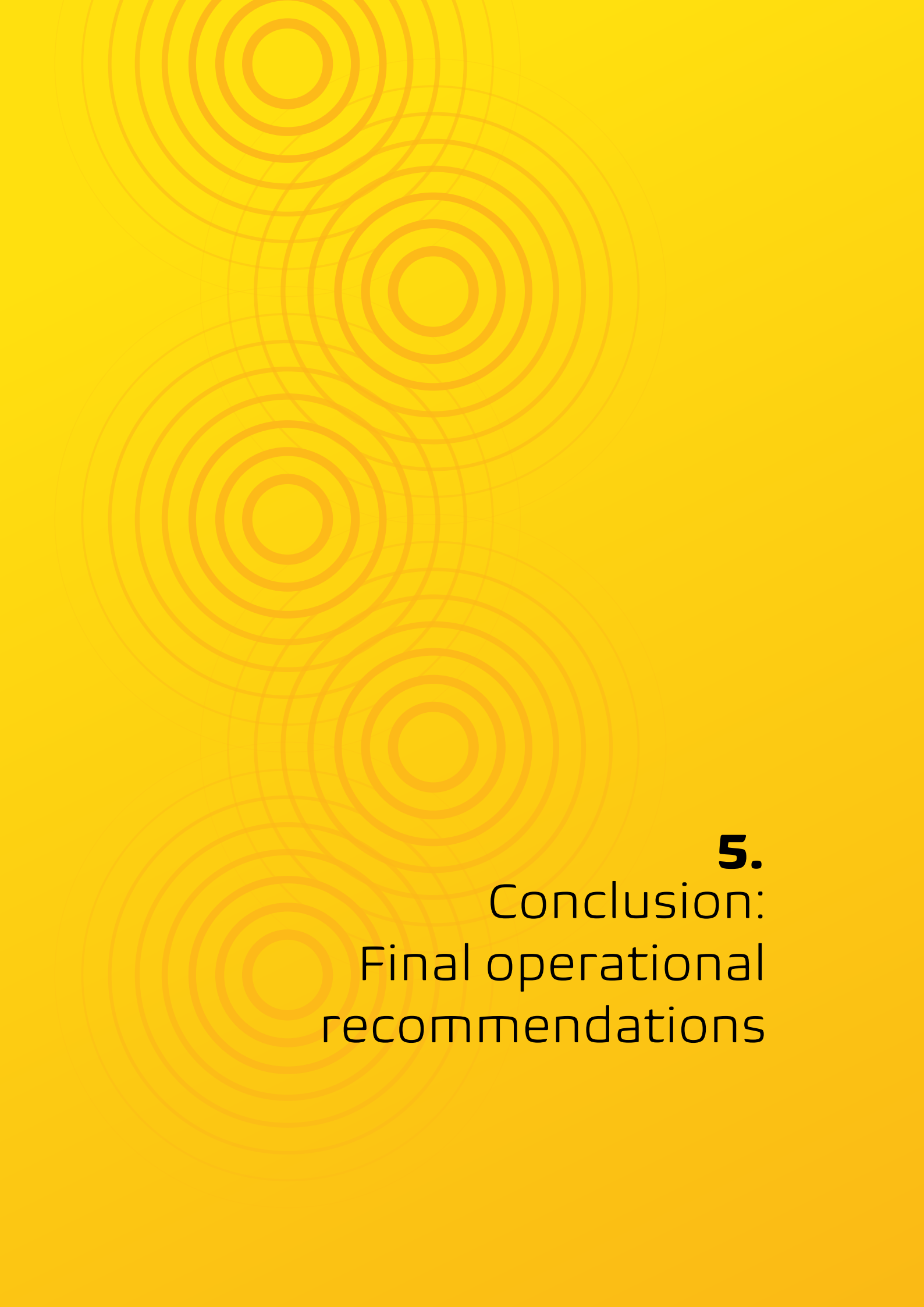
That does not mean numbers lose their purpose, but they need to stay in proportion. A pathway may still want to note attendance, funding secured, or the number of organisations involved. But those figures should sit alongside short narrative accounts, concise public notes, and honest shared reflection on whether trust, continuity, and cooperation are actually growing. In non-urban settings especially, the most important result may not be a single visible output. It may be the quieter fact that an activity becomes easier the second time, more inclusive the third time, and more stable after that. That is often the point at which a pathway stops being an experiment and begins to function as part of the local infrastructure.

Questions for Step 5

- What changed because of the pathway, however small?
- What continued or newly emanated after the first activity, meeting, or funding moment passed?
- Is the work becoming easier to repeat, easier to join into, and less dependent on one person's unpaid labour or exhaustion?
- What should stop because it creates a burden without significantly helping the pathway take root?

In Valmiera, the first signs that a pathway is working would probably not be dramatic. They would be easy to miss if one looked only for headline results. A venue would begin to be used more regularly. Organisers would know who to call when a small problem comes up. A partnership that once depended on personal goodwill would start to feel normal and repeatable. Communication across culture, education, and other sectors would require less effort to keep alive.

Perhaps just as importantly, fewer things would fall apart because one person became exhausted, moved on, or simply ran out of the capacity to keep carrying the work alone. In a county where cultural energy already exists, that kind of quiet change matters a great deal. It means activity is becoming less fragile. It also means that support is starting to do what it is actually there to do: not just produce events, but strengthen the conditions that make cultural life easier to continue, easier to join, and more evenly shared across the territory. That is usually the point at which a local initiative moves from good intention to something more dependable.



5.
Conclusion:
Final operational
recommendations

Analysis of the cultural and innovation policies directed towards non-urban areas, and the experiences of the IN SITU Labs, demonstrate that aligning innovation and cultural policies in non-urban areas is not an abstract objective, but a practical necessity. By focusing on implementation conditions—such as continuity, coordination, and accessibility—and by grounding policy design in the realities of local ecosystems, local actors and policymakers can create the conditions for cultural and creative practices to generate lasting value. Based on these conclusions, we propose a few major recommendations in terms of focused and efficient good practices related to the implementation of operational actions in favour of cultural and creative industries in non-urban areas:

Rethink support: From projects to ecosystems



What to do

Support local cultural and creative ecosystems as **ongoing processes**, not just as a series of isolated projects. This means investing in the conditions that allow initiatives to emerge repeatedly: stable relationships, local coordination, shared spaces, and opportunities for learning over time.



What to avoid

Avoid focusing support in a top-down manner and exclusively on **short-term outputs** such as events or one-off projects. These may generate visibility, but without continuity they rarely produce lasting territorial impact.

Recognise the role of CCIs in innovation

What to do

Treat cultural and creative actors as **partners in innovation**, not only as beneficiaries of cultural funding. Engage them in broader development strategies and visions (e.g., innovation, rural development, social inclusion) and recognise their role as connectors across sectors.

What to avoid

Avoid limiting CCIs to **narrow cultural functions** (e.g., tourism branding or event programming). This underestimates their contribution to local problem-solving and innovation capacity.

Design policies that fit non-urban realities

What to do

Adapt policy instruments to the realities of non-urban contexts by recognising:

- Small-scale and hybrid organisations,
- Part-time and multi-role actors, and
- Informal and cross-sector collaborations.

Design support that is **proportionate, flexible, and accessible**.

What to avoid

Avoid applying **urban-based policy models** that assume high administrative capacity, strong specialisation, and clearly bounded sectors. These conditions rarely exist in non-urban areas.

Support continuity, not just innovation

What to do

Ensure that funding and support mechanisms allow initiatives to **continue, stabilise, and evolve**. This can include multi-year funding, follow-up schemes, or support for organisational development.

What to avoid

Avoid structuring support only around **pilot projects or short funding cycles**, which often lead to discontinuity and loss of accumulated knowledge.

Invest in coordination and intermediaries

What to do

Recognise and fund the actors who:

- Connect stakeholders,
- Facilitate collaboration, and
- Translate between European/national policy and local practice.

These intermediary roles are essential for making policies work in practice.

What to avoid

Avoid treating coordination as **secondary or invisible work**. Without it, even well-designed policies struggle to take root.

Reduce fragmentation across policies

What to do

Strengthen links between cultural, innovation, rural, and social policies. Encourage coordination between funding schemes and create clearer entry points for local actors.

What to avoid

Avoid maintaining **strict separation between policy domains**, which increases complexity and limits accessibility for local stakeholders.

Make policies accessible

What to do

Simplify procedures and reduce administrative burden. Use mechanisms such as **re-granting, local intermediaries, or partnerships** to reach smaller actors and informal initiatives.

What to avoid

Avoid designing programmes that are only accessible to **well-resourced organisations with strong administrative capacity**.



ANNEX A:
Facilitation Cards

When, why, and with whom to use the Facilitation Cards

These facilitation cards are for groups that want to discuss innovation and cultural policy in relation to a concrete local challenge. They are especially useful when people from different roles, sectors, or institutions come together. Ideally this would include actors and stakeholders from creative and cultural domains, administration, and policy, but the facilitation also works for groups from the same background. The aim is to foster a dialogue and collective learning to collectively start a participatory and place-based policy development process.

The ideal number of participants is five people, while larger groups can easily be divided into smaller groups playing among themselves with a plenary discussion afterwards to conclude the ideas and steps set up. This method can be used as an opener for the process, or reused as a recurring evaluation and moderation tool throughout.

You should dedicate around 90 minutes for one session, with additional time for a plenary session if you have parallel groups playing.

Materials

The method consists of:

- Facilitation Cards (16 cards in total)
- Pathway Sheet

Additionally you will need:

- A group with around 5 people (or separate groups playing alongside each other)
- 90 minutes time
- The IN SITU Policy Handbook as a reference resource
- Some pencils and paper
- A table and enough seats for every participant.
- Water, or soft drinks – ensure the participants feel comfortable

Preparation

After printing and cutting out all 16 cards, sort them according to the numbers on the cards from one to 16. Place the card deck in the middle of the table with the first card (number 1) sitting on top.

Print out the Pathway Sheet and place it in the middle of the table as well. We suggest printing out on a DIN A3 paper, to serve as a large, wide-canvas workspace on the table. If an A3 printer is not available, it can be printed on two standard DIN A4 pages and taped side-by-side to create a shared reference for note-taking.

Game instructions

The cards will be guiding your group through the process of a structured policy dialogue. You will find short text containing information and instructions on each card as well as small tasks on what to discuss or take notes on the Pathway Sheet about. The first card will also assist with setting up roles for the duration of the 90 minutes. You will find all the information on the card.

Additionally each card will give you the following information:



Tells you where, on which page of the IN SITU Policy Handbook, you can find additional information about the current topic of the card. This will be important for the person assigned with the role “researcher” for the duration of the game process.



Tells you how many minutes are roughly planned for this specific card. Be aware that there is a 10 minute buffer time calculated into the suggested timeframe. This will be important for the person assigned with the role “timekeeper” for the duration of the game process.

Getting started

If you are unsure what to do: reread the last card you drew. If that isn't helping: reread the last card from the Moderation Card Deck (dark green) you drew. This session is a shared dialogue and learning process. The aim is not to solve everything today, but to turn one local challenge into a first practical pathway.

Briefly introduce yourselves with:

- your name; preferred pronouns;
- your role or connection to the topic;
- one skill, experience or perspective you bring.

Then agree on the roles for the session:

- **Moderator:** reads the cards and keeps the process moving.
- **Note-taker:** writes on the Pathway Sheet.
- **Timekeeper:** helps the group stay within 90 minutes.
- **Awareness person:** notices who is not being heard.
- **Research person:** checks information when needed.

Keep in mind:

- The roles mentioned are for today's session only and entirely separate from the long-term projects roles.
- Treat every participant and their experiences with respect.
- Do not expect solutions immediately. This session is about dialogue, trust and shared learning.

Now draw the first card and read it out loud.

START

1 Challenges
1A / 1B / 1C

1A . Structural barriers

Note one to maximum three topics.

1B . Concrete challenge

Who...

cannot...

because...

which means...

1C . Challenge statement

[Who] cannot [do what] because [what condition is missing, unclear or unstable], which means [what is blocked].

2 Context

Use the three lenses.

2A . Ecosystem Lens

2B . Continuity Lens

2C . Governance Lens

Strongest explanation:

- Ecosystem
- Continuity
- Governance
- Combination

5 Shaping a first Pathway

Keep 5A and 5B separate.

5A . Concrete Steps

PATHWAY LAYERS

- Immediate adjustment _____
- Stabilisation _____
- Extension _____

5B . Outlining the Steps

What will happen? Who carries it? Support needed? By when?

What will happen?	Who carries it?	Support needed	By when?

Group: _____

Place/Territory: _____

3

Opportunities and Strengths

What is already present?

People

Skills & Knowledge

Space

Opportunities

4

Support and Negotiation Alliance

First working circle.

Actor/organisation	Possible role	Support/authority	Participation conditions

6

Evaluation + Communication

Recognise progress and share it.

6A . Evaluation

How will you recognise the pathway is taking root?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

6B . Communication

Who needs to know? What do they need? Channel? Who? By when?

7

Closing

Next step.

Next meeting date:

Where:

What must be prepared:

Who is responsible:

FINISH

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FACILITATION
CARDS

WHY ARE WE HERE?

Think about why you joined this session.

Briefly share one experience where cultural or creative work in your region felt held back by a structural barrier.

This may be something you experienced yourself, or something you observed happening to others.

Listen for patterns. Do not try to solve anything yet.

➔ Draw the next card and read it out loud.

● MODERATION CARD



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FACILITATION
CARDS

1A. STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

After listening to the experiences, look for repeated concerns. **Discuss:**

- Which topics came up more than once?
- Which barriers felt structural, not only personal?
- Which topics affect more than one person, organisation or place?

Write **one to three topics** in **Box 1A: Structural barriers** on the Pathway Sheet.

➔ Draw the next card and read it out loud.

● CHALLENGE CARD



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FACILITATION
CARDS

1B. CONCRETE CHALLENGE

Choose one topic to work on first.

Use the prompts in **Box 1B: Concrete challenge:**

- **Who** is directly affected?
- What can they **not** do, access, continue or connect?
- **Because** what condition is missing, unclear or unstable?
- **Which means** what is blocked or made harder?

Write rough notes in **Box 1B**. Keep it concrete. The challenge should be recognisable to the people affected.

➔ Draw the next card and read it out loud.

● CHALLENGE CARD



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FACILITATION
CARDS

1C. CHALLENGE STATEMENT

Now turn the notes into one clear challenge statement. Use this structure if helpful:

[Who] cannot [do what] because [what condition is missing, unclear or unstable], which means [what is blocked].

Before writing it down, check:

- Is it written in ordinary language?
- Is it specific enough to work on today?
- Is it wider than one person's individual frustration?

Write the final sentence in **Box 1C: Challenge statement.**

➔ Draw the next card and read it out loud.

● CHALLENGE CARD



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FACILITATION CARDS

CONTEXT: WHY DOES THE CHALLENGE PERSIST?

Now look at the challenge through three lenses. The lenses help you understand what keeps the challenge in place. You do not need to choose the “correct” answer. Use them to see what is missing.

Ecosystem – Are people, spaces, organisations or sectors disconnected?

Continuity – Does work stop and restart because time, funding, knowledge or coordination are unstable?

Governance – Are responsibilities, procedures, contact points or decision routes unclear?

➔ Draw the next card and read it out loud.

● LENSES CARD

📖 12 and 37 ⌚ 4

IN SITU

FACILITATION CARDS

2A. ECOSYSTEM LENS

Discuss the challenge and its connection to the contexts of the ecosystem and take notes on the Pathway Sheet (Box 2A):

- Are there missing links between cultural actors and other fields, such as education, tourism, social economy, environment, heritage or local development?
- Which actors, spaces or organisations would need to be better connected for this challenge to become easier?

➔ Draw the next card and read it out loud.

● LENSES CARD

📖 14 ⌚ 3

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FACILITATION CARDS

2B. CONTINUITY LENS

Discuss the challenge and its connection to continuity as a context and take notes on the Pathway Sheet (Box 2B):

- Does the challenge re-occur after a project, event, or funding period?
- Could continuity of something in particular help addressing this challenge?

➔ Draw the next card and read it out loud.

● LENSES CARD

📖 21 ⌚ 3

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FACILITATION CARDS

2C. GOVERNANCE LENS

Discuss the challenge and its connection to the contexts of governance and take notes on the Pathway Sheet (Box 2C):

- Who has the authority to change the situation?
- Are the ones affected already involved in decision-making processes?

➔ Draw the next card and read it out loud.

● LENSES CARD

📖 24 ⌚ 3

IN SITU

FACILITATION CARDS

2. CHOOSE THE STRONGEST EXPLANATION

You have now looked at the challenge through the three lenses. **Discuss:**

- Which lens gives the clearest explanation of why the challenge persists?
- Is there a second lens that also matters?
- What does this tell you about where to intervene first?

Mark the relevant lens or lenses on the Pathway Sheet. Then complete this sentence in **Box 2: Context:**

This challenge persists because...

➔ **Awareness person: remember to ensure everyone can contribute to the discussion.**

➔ **Draw the next card and read it out loud.**

● LENSES CARD



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FACILITATION CARDS

3. OPPORTUNITIES AND STRENGTHS

Before moving to action, look at what is already present. A pathway should not only respond to problems. It should also build on strengths, resources, relationships and local knowledge. **Discuss:**

- What is already working, even if it is small or fragile?
- Which people, spaces, networks or relationships are trusted?
- What skills, knowledge, materials or tools can support the pathway?

Write notes in **Box 3: Opportunities and Strengths:** People, Skills and knowledge, Space, Opportunities.

➔ **Draw the next card and read it out loud.**

● OPPORTUNITIES AND STRENGTHS



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FACILITATION CARDS

4. SUPPORT AND NEGOTIATION ALLIANCE

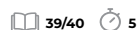
A Support and Negotiation Alliance is the first circle of people, organisations or institutions supporting the Pathway. Look back at the challenge, context and strengths. **Discuss:**

- Who has practical knowledge of the challenge?
- Who brings trust, resources, network, authority, access or coordination capacity?
- What conditions would make participation fair? Think about time, place, travel, accessibility, care responsibilities, language or recognition of people's time.

Write the actors and their possible roles in **Box 4: Support and Negotiation Alliance.**

➔ **Draw the next card and read it out loud.**

● SUPPORT AND NEGOTIATION



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FACILITATION CARDS

5A. CONCRETE STEPS

A first pathway should be modest, clear and realistic. Write at least one step for each layer in **Box 5A: Concrete Steps:**

Immediate adjustment

What can change now, using people, spaces or resources already present?

Stabilisation

What would help the work continue beyond one meeting, event or funding moment?

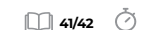
Extension

What could later connect this pathway to regional, national or European support?

Do not make a full strategy. Focus on first steps.

➔ **Draw the next card and read it out loud.**

● ACTION CARD



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FACILITATION CARDS

5B. OUTLINING THE STEPS

Now make the steps practical. For each step, agree:

- What will happen?
- Who carries it?
- What support is needed?
- By when should it happen?
- What should wait because the conditions are not ready yet?

Write this in **Box 5B: Outlining the Steps**.

The pathway should be clear enough for someone outside the room to understand what happens next.

➔ Draw the next card and read it out loud.

● ACTION CARD

🕒 7

IN SITU

FACILITATION CARDS

6A. EVALUATION

Evaluation here means learning from the pathway, not proving a big impact.

Imagine that the pathway is beginning to work. **Discuss:**

- What would become easier?
- Who would find it easier to participate, organise or ask for support?
- What should continue after this session?

Write **3–5 signs of progress** in **Box 6A: Evaluation**.

These signs can be practical, relational or organisational.

➔ Draw the next card and read it out loud.

● EVALUATION CARD

📖 43/44 🕒 6

IN SITU

FACILITATION CARDS

6B. COMMUNICATION

Communication is not only about promoting activities. It helps make the process visible, keeps people informed and builds trust.

Discuss:

- Who needs to know what was agreed today?
- What do they need to know?
- Which channel is the simplest and useful?
- Who will communicate it, and by when?

Check **Box 3: Opportunities and Strengths** for existing newsletters, forums, personal contacts or other trusted channels.

Write your plan in **Box 6B: Communication**.

➔ Draw the next card and read it out loud.

● EVALUATION CARD

🕒 4

IN SITU

FACILITATION CARDS

CLOSING

Congratulations! You have completed the Facilitation Cards Deck and thereby outlined your co-created Pathway to Action for a place-based policy approach.

Please decide if you want to continue this work and when you want to meet again (or who will take on the responsibility to set up a new meeting). **Note this down on the Pathway Sheet (Box 7).**

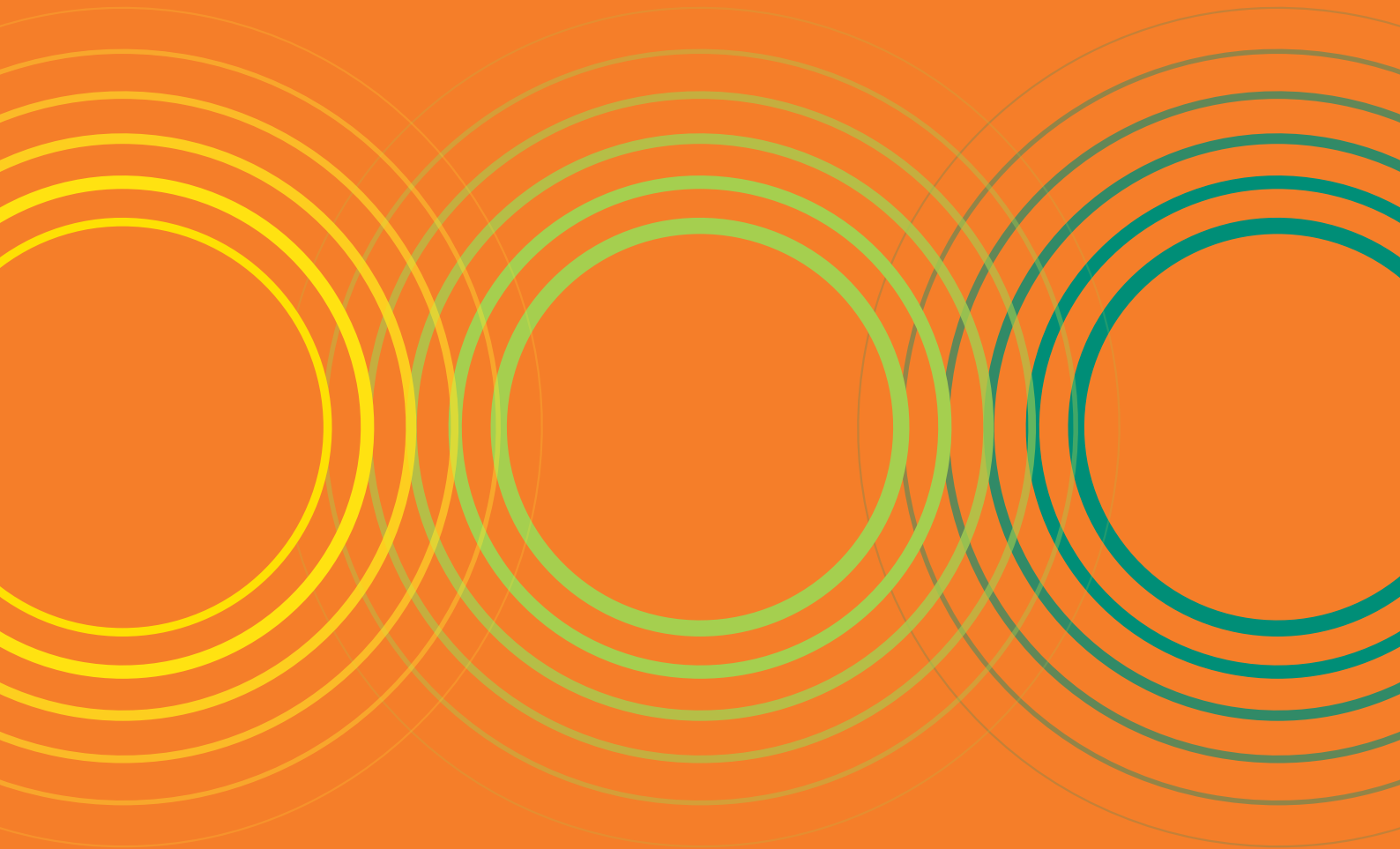
To conclude, share among the group:

- What did you learn during the 90 minute process you just went through?
- What are you excited to become reality in the future?

If you have additional thoughts you want to share, now is the time. You are invited to replay this game as often as you wish. Keep your Pathway Sheet to add on the existing notes and to come back to the actions you agreed on.

● MODERATION CARD

🕒 6



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