

ARTS IN RURAL AREAS: TURNING SCARCITY INTO ABUNDANCE

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ABSTRACT

The article begins with a personal reference to the publication on rural culture *Art in Rural Areas* developed by key European cultural networks - IETM, CAE, ENCC and TEH - back in early 2020, a few weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in Europe. One of the key policy messages of the study was that Europe needs to consider rural culture as a laboratory for developing and testing new, greener and fairer economic and social models, in the face of the overall pressure to instigate profound changes. The present article will re-examine this message, exploring the value of rural culture in the light of today's new reality. Observing the current trends, such as economic recession, ongoing war, worsening climate situation, undermined wellbeing, the record high number of displaced people and growing inequalities, the piece will conclude that rural culture, with its unique relationship with communities, nature, and time, currently represents even a higher value for European societies than it did before the pandemic. At the same time, rural areas are more fragile and need stronger policy attention, due to the disproportionately high impact the pandemic had on non-urban areas, accelerated depopulation and demographic shifts caused by migration. The article will conclude with a few recommendations on how the EU should on the one hand, regenerate rural areas through culture and, on the other hand, use rural culture as a model for progress in times of scarcity and looming climate transformations.

KEYWORDS

Ruralities, Europe, Cultural Policies

INTRODUCTION

In February 2020, four European cultural networks worked intensively to prepare a policy conference on rural culture in Brussels. The organisers - International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts (IETM), Culture Action Europe (CAE), European Network of Cultural Centres (ENCC), and Trans Europe Halles (TEH) - are among key representatives of the cultural sector at the EU level. The conference aimed to introduce the publication *Art in Rural Areas* developed in partnership by these four networks and coordinated by IETM.

The study was driven by the growing need of the European cultural sector to shed light on the value of artistic practices in rural areas. As environmental concerns and social tensions intensified, cultural advocates were compelled to explore and showcase the solutions rural arts could offer. Amid rapid social and environmental transformations, several cultural networks turned their eyes towards the models shaped and tested by artists and cultural operators in the unique context of rurality. These were alternative - more sustainable - forms of living and engaging across sectors, communities and generations. Apart from looking into the values and assets of rural arts, the research was also motivated by the concern that rural areas shaped the 'geography of EU discontent'¹. These and other matters were going to be raised at the policy conference on rural culture in March 2020.

However, as the coronavirus was spreading exponentially, the Belgian government announced the first nationwide lockdown. The event that was originally meant to be physical was transformed into a webinar, which was one of the first of its type to be hosted under the circumstances of social distancing.

¹ Dijkstra L, Poelman H & Rodríguez-Pose A, *The Geography of EU Discontent* (2018), viewed 4 April 2023, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00343404.2019.1654603>

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² National Centers for Environmental Information n.d., *Assessing the Global Climate* in January 2023, viewed 4 April 2023, <https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/news/global-climate-202301#:~:text=According%20to%20NCEI%27s%20Global%20Annual,10%2Dwarmest%20years%20on%20record>

³ Chancel, L., Piketty, T., Saez, E., Zucman, G. et al. *World Inequality Report 2022*, World Inequality Lab *wir2022.wid.world*

⁴ European Council n.d., *Impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on the markets: EU response*, viewed 4 April 2023, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1CYdhB--nCR2-YRjIBC0Zp0A3Gq-NFY6tuiznQrZvNBE/edit>

⁵ International Monetary Fund November 2019, *Regional Outlook Europe (2019)*, viewed 4 April 2023, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/REO/EU/Issues/2019/10/24/REO-EUR-1119#:~:text=On%20balance%2C%20near%2Dterm%20growth,risk%20in%20the%20near%20term.>

⁶ European Parliamentary Research Service 14 March 2022, *The future of the EU's rural areas*, viewed 4 April 2023, <https://epthinktank.eu/2022/03/14/the-future-of-the-eus-rural-areas/#:~:text=The%20European%20Commission's%20long%2Dterm,30%20%25%20of%20the%20EU%20population.>

⁷ IETM 2020, *Art in Rural Areas*, p. 12

⁸ European Parliamentary Research Service 14 March 2022, *The future of the EU's rural areas*, viewed 4 April 2023, <https://epthinktank.eu/2022/03/14/the-future-of-the-eus-rural-areas/#:~:text=The%20European%20Commission's%20long%2Dterm,30%20%25%20of%20the%20EU%20population.>

⁹ European Commission 2021, *A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas - Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040*, p. 6, viewed 4 April 2023, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:6c924246-da52-11eb-895a-01aa75ed71a1.0003.02/DOC_1&format=PDF

¹⁰ IPCC 2022, *Synthesis Report of the IPCC sixth Assessment Report*, p. 7

¹¹ European Commission 2021, *A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas - Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040*, p. 1

¹² *Macrotrends*, European Union Rural Population 1960-2023, viewed 4 April

Back then, I worked for IETM as the Head of Policy and Research. My job was to support the preparation of the publication, design the chapter on policy recommendations, and, together with colleagues and partners, deliver the event. After the webinar ended, I personally felt that even though our key message was clear and strong, the timing was not right. The audience was too anxious and confused amid the unfolding health crisis. It was obvious that our main plea - to give rural culture a prominent place in EU policies - would fade away, at least at that point. Looking back, I think it did.

Today, after three years, it is interesting to set my eyes back on rural culture and its place in the current context. The urgency to reinvent social and economic paradigms while navigating the multiplicity of crises is yet again strong. Scientists keep on sending us stark warnings about the rapid climate transformations: according to the *Annual Global Temperature Outlook*, it is certain that the year 2023 will rank among the 10-warmest years on record². Social inequalities continue to grow and divide societies within countries³. Furthermore, Russia-Ukraine war leads to a large influx of refugees, energy crises and inflation⁴. All this is happening at the backdrop of a continuous economic slowdown that had started before the pandemic⁵ and was intensified by it.

Is our webinar's message - that rural culture offers new models and inspires new philosophies of life - still valid today, in this new world? How resilient are rural areas in the face of the multiple crises we are currently facing? And what policy strategies and measures can better support rural culture and fully unlock its potential?

LOCAL REALITIES UNDER GLOBAL PRESSURES

It is assumed that living in rural areas can be a healthier alternative to urban lifestyles and rurality can be a laboratory for creating more sustainable economies⁶. As Fernando García Dory reflects in IETM's *Art in Rural Areas*, rurality has the potential to inspire more sustainable patterns of consumption and behaviour: slow living, reconnecting with nature, responsible production, close connections and spontaneous communication⁷. However, today's rural Europe deals with an array of hurdles: effects of environmental degradation, demographic decline, low income and employment rates, shortage of opportunities, poor access to services and connectivity, and low education and digital skill levels⁸.

Let us look deeper into some of these challenges. First of all, rural areas tend to be more acutely aware of the impacts of climate degradation, often noticing them sooner than urban areas. For instance, farming and forestry, key rural businesses, are more vulnerable to environmental cataclysms, such as storms, floods and droughts, than urban economic activities⁹. As adverse impacts from climate change will continue to grow¹⁰, rural economies may become even more fragile.

Furthermore, the urban-rural divide in terms of demographics has been only widening in the last few years. Rural residents constitute around 30 percent of the EU's population¹¹, facing a steady decrease of around 0.6-1 percent every year¹². According to the European Commission's staff working document *The impact of demographic change - in a changing environment*, the demographic decline in rural areas is coupled with factors that make them less attractive to live and work, such as lack of connectivity, poor infrastructure, and low access to public services including education and care¹³. The trend of a decreasing proportion of young people in rural areas is expected to persist and to become more pronounced¹⁴.

Development of digital technologies and the COVID-19 pandemic that boosted the wide-spread practice of remote work stimulated some urban residents to relocate to rural areas. However, this rather temporary 'de-urbanisation' did not outweigh the negative effects the pandemic had on rural regions. According to the OECD study *The COVID-19 crisis in urban and rural areas*, the health crisis has had a disproportionate impact on the rural population compared to their urban counterparts. One of the key reasons for this is the higher proportion of older and more vulnerable to COVID-19 residents in rural areas. The limited healthcare capacity was another factor that led to a higher death toll in villages and remote areas, compared to cities. Moreover, rural regions usually have a less diversified economy, which made, for instance, the closure of rural tourist facilities especially devastating for the livelihoods of local people¹⁵.

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2023, <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/EUU/european-union/rural-population#:~:text=Aggregation%20of%20urban%20and%20rural,a%201.06%25%20decline%20from%202020.>

¹³ European Commission 2023, The impact of demographic change – in a changing environment, p. 2, viewed 4 April 2023, https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2023-01/the_impact_of_demographic_change_in_a_changing_environment_2023.PDF

¹⁴ Ibid, p.11

¹⁵ OECD 2021, OECD Regional Outlook 2021 Addressing COVID-19 and Moving to Net Zero Greenhouse Gas Emissions

¹⁶ European Commission 2023, The impact of demographic change – in a changing environment, p. 17, viewed 4 April 2023, https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2023-01/the_impact_of_demographic_change_in_a_changing_environment_2023.PDF

¹⁷ Dijkstra L, Poelman H & Rodríguez-Pose A, The Geography of EU Discontent (2018), viewed 4 April 2023, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00343404.2019.1654603>

¹⁸ European Commission 2021, A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas – Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040, viewed 4 April 2023, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:6c924246-da52-11eb-895a-01aa75ed71a1.0003.02/DOC_1&format=PDF

¹⁹ Ibid p.1

²⁰ Ibid p.2, p.6

²¹ Ibid p.2

²² Ibid p.3

²³ Ibid p.8

²⁴ Proposals from the Rural Pact preparatory group for the Rural Pact conference on 15-16 June 2022, p. 2, viewed 4 April 2022, https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-07/rural-pact-proposal_en.pdf

This situation may diminish the capabilities of rural areas to counter the demographic crisis and emerge as economically and socially viable regions. As the Commission's staff working document *The impact of demographic change – in a changing environment* warns, current issues may impede the capacity of rural areas to build 'sustainable, competitive and knowledge-based economies', and the urban-rural divide can widen further¹⁶.

Furthermore, the rural population is more likely to be eurosceptic, as the study *The Geography of Discontent* revealed in 2018¹⁷. As socio-economic divides between urban and rural areas increase, there is no visible pathway for countering the rural political discontent. The combination of these pressures is ultimately a huge impediment to building a cohesive and economically strong Europe.

A NEW MOMENTUM FOR RURAL AREAS

Challenges faced by rural areas have not gone unnoticed at the EU level. On the contrary, there is a growing awareness that there has never been a more urgent need to focus on the realities of rural life than there is at present.

'We will cherish and preserve our rural areas and invest in their future' – this commitment is central to the European Commission's *Long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas – Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040*¹⁸ (2021). Adoption of this document, developed following a public consultation, is a significant policy event in the field of rural development.

The communication states that 'rural areas are the fabric of our society and the heartbeat of our economy', at the same time recognising that the significance of rural areas has been under-appreciated, as almost 40 percent of respondents who took part in the public consultation said 'they felt left behind by society and policy-makers'¹⁹. Moreover, the document maps the most acute needs of the European rural population, those related to infrastructure, access to services, digital connectivity, skills, and employment. Finally, the communication strongly propels rural regions as key players in achieving the targets of the EU Green Deal and the Digital Agenda²⁰.

Importantly, the Commission admits that the European rural areas are very diverse, and there are no one-size-fit-all solutions. From natural conditions and cultural and historic specificities, to economic specialisation and geographic position, the multiplicity of unique characteristics make rural areas radically different from one another. This diversity requires tailor-made solutions designed in line with specific local needs, challenges, assets and opportunities²¹. This is reflected in anchoring the 'place-based' approaches²².

The *Long-term Vision* makes a specific emphasis on fostering active participation of rural communities in public and social life and their involvement in decision making. This is regarded as both the way to make rural areas more attractive and to counter the 'left-behind' feeling of rural residents²³.

The EU's Rural Pact is proposed by the *Long-term Vision* as the framework for addressing the recognition gap, fulfilling the acute needs of rural citizens, and making rural areas a strong part of a cohesive and green Europe. The Rural Pact is meant to work through engaging EU, national, regional and local stakeholders in making European rural areas stronger, more connected, resilient and prosperous. Especially the actors that are usually less involved in debates and initiatives on rural development are meant to be engaged in the Rural Pact community²⁴.

WHAT ABOUT CULTURE?

Based on the current situation in rural areas, we have two clear components: a multitude of challenges that European rural regions are grappling with, and a strong commitment from the EU to rejuvenate these areas. What is the place for culture in this puzzle? Can culture help to revitalise European rurality in the current environment shaped by urgencies and crises? Can rural culture help make Europe more cohesive and sustainable?



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First of all, let us define the role the Commission's *Long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas* has allocated for culture and the arts. The document states that cultural and creative industries must 'contribute to the economic diversification in rural areas around the green and digital transformation of society and lead to the strengthening of value chains in manufacturing and in cultural and creative industries'²⁵. Moreover, the communication affirms that actions related to CCI should contribute to the rural regions' attractiveness for investment and other economic activities²⁶. There is also a brief reference to the participation in cultural and artistic activities that can 'influence the relative attractiveness of rural areas'²⁷.

Given the challenges faced by Europe and its rural regions and the scale of the EU's ambition to revive them, can an exclusively industrial approach to culture be sufficient as part of future thinking?

Assessing the current snapshot of rural Europe, one may conclude that there is an overall *situation of scarcity*: a shortage of skills and talent, diminishing population and resources, shrinking budgets, and simply tightening space for opportunities and alternative futures. Beyond economic development, there seems to be a sharp need for intangible - social, cultural and simply human - assets and drivers that can help overcome this scarcity, and importantly - create a resilient social framework that would help rural places not to fall back into it. I therefore believe that culture is that inexhaustible resource that the EU needs to embed in its long-term rural strategy, in order to rejuvenate rural areas in a sustainable way.

WHAT IS SPECIAL ABOUT RURAL ARTS?

In the period when I was working for IETM (2014-2022), we hosted several sessions²⁸ on the arts in rural areas, where members and invited speakers - contemporary performing arts professionals working in rural areas - talked about their projects and shared ideas about the values of rural arts. Back then, the performing arts field seemed to have an increased interest and belief in the power of rural arts. They shared with us multiple examples that showed how rural culture and arts in rural areas can be a hub for imagination and a resource for regeneration of social fabrics. We have also heard multiple stories about how art and culture empowered marginalised voices and connected people across communities and borders. What did we learn from these stories and exchanges?

The multiple IETM discussions on rural arts spanning across several years all led to the same conclusion: you do not need to bring culture from cities to villages. Moreover, the rich culture that already exists in rural places can serve as a laboratory for innovative ideas for societies at large, including urban communities.

However, for a rural art project to be a success, artists must be mindful of the peculiarities of the local context and aware of the local needs and assets. Art collectives and companies cannot just go from place to place without taking the responsibility of listening and engaging with local people and their realities. Artists in rural areas must take time, commit to a place, be courageous and resilient. And as speakers in the IETM Wales Satellite meeting (2018) agreed, 'being brave and resilient does not always mean creating something new. Sometimes it is about using what is already there'²⁹. The market-oriented logic of going from place to place and showing an artwork to as many people as possible, preferably in a large venue, will simply not work in rural areas. Not only because there might be no single large or appropriate venue, but because audiences would simply not engage in this way.

Many art practitioners who talked about their successful rural art projects at IETM meetings agreed that 'trendy things' do not work for rural communities, and if the project is not driven by the people themselves, they would complain that they miss the concept. Therefore, before even conceiving a cultural project in a rural setting, it is important to map the needs and potentials of local people³⁰. Moreover, rural audiences simply need to feel included and heard, and if this is achieved, any art project will become relevant for them.

An exemplary story was shared by Karine Decorne, the Artistic Director of Migrations, at IETM's Plenary meeting in Porto, Portugal (2018). She wanted to bring high profile international artists to

²⁵ European Commission 2021, A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas - Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040, p. 23, viewed 4 April 2023, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:6c924246-da52-11eb-895a-01aa75ed71a1.0003.02/DOC_1&format=PDF

²⁶ Ibid, p.8

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Reports from these events can be found here (select 'Rural' in topics): <https://www.ietm.org/en/resources>



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North Wales, a rural area which is quite challenging in terms of touring and showing productions. After having done some research, Karine realised that the local contemporary art scene was underdeveloped, international contemporary dance audiences were tiny or nonexistent, there was a lack of suitable venues and long distances to cover. 'None of the patterns and methods I knew were relevant there', Karine admitted³¹. Her keys for successful programming in this region appeared to be contextualisation of every work she would bring to the area, and search for alternative venues for presentation, such as abandoned shops or other unused spaces, and engagement with the audience, which, according to Karine, 'is as important as artwork itself'³².

As examples show, contextualisation of artistic projects is often coupled with engaging with other sectors and non-artistic communities. Indeed, addressing local needs assumes working with key stakeholders in the field - farms, schools, social services, plants, ports, heritage sites, etc. For instance, *We, the Pig Country* performance produced by Dutch company New Heroes, actively involved local pig farmers in their work, and the participatory project *We're Still Here* by National Theatre Wales explores the struggle of the people of Port Talbot, one of the last sites of heavy industry in Wales³³. Contextualisation in rural areas can also lead to an organic engagement with nature. For example, aMORE festival moru, taking place at various locations on the Istrian peninsula and other areas in Croatia, is dedicated entirely to the sea and aims to draw attention to the environmental, social, economic and cultural importance of marine ecosystems³⁴.

POTENTIAL OF RURAL ART TO TURN SCARCITY INTO ABUNDANCE

Let us summarise the key features of artistic practices and projects in rural areas. The key premises of successful rural art projects are *commitment* to the place and its culture, *knowledge* of local needs and potentials, and *courage* to navigate challenges through creative solutions sought together with local people. Furthermore, high *engagement* of local communities and *contextualisation* of artistic ideas and forms are key foundations for a successful artistic project in a rural context.

These features make rural art highly relevant both for the current situation of European rural areas and for the EU's strategy to revitalise them, and here is why.

First of all, rural art projects, by definition strive to be meaningful, take more time for research and preparation and thus potentially leave a deeper impact on villages and communities. Rural art is often slow, thoughtful, and operates at a smaller scale. In fact, this is how many contemporary artists define *sustainable* arts, arts that strive for green transition. Opposite to large-scale productions of uniform works hastily travelled across borders, sustainable art is often assumed to focus on relationships, meaningfulness and long-term impacts. Data shows that, indeed, rural areas are home for many art projects tackling environmental themes: according to On the Move's *Cultural Mobility Yearbook 2023*, 'environment and sustainability themed calls often prefer activity in rural sites', and 'among the 52 calls that involved a defined worksite, 20 involved urban sites [38.5%], 27 rural sites [51.9%], and 5 both [9.6%]'³⁵. Engaging with nature and being in contact with local farming cultures, rural arts can help to shape hubs for rethinking models of production and coexisting with each other and with nature. Hopefully, such hubs can be the source of learning and inspiration for urban societies as well. In times of looming climate degradation and ambitious Green Deal commitments, we need this more than ever.

Secondly, the specificity of rural arts explored above - need for contextualisation and high engagement with audiences (otherwise, an artwork will simply not be accepted or noticed) - can be the firm pathways towards giving people voices, stimulating people's participation in social life, governance and decision-making, and countering the 'left-behind' feeling. This is so vital in the times of post-COVID hardship, depopulation and growing urban-rural divides. Moreover, this is in line with the philosophy of multi-level engagement anchored in the EU's Rural Pact that aims to facilitate governance across various levels and sectors and include stakeholders generally less involved in policies and debates.

Thirdly, rural art is in line with the effective place-based approach mainstreamed in the EU's long-term vision. Listening to local voices and seeking tailor-made solutions are at the heart

²⁹ IETM 2018, Fields of Visions, Other voices, rural places, global stories, viewed 4 April 2023, https://www.ietm.org/system/files/publications/report_wales_2018.pdf

³⁰ Ibid p.10

³¹ IETM 2018, Artistic creation outside the urban areas, p. 3

³² Ibid

³³ IETM 2018, Fields of Visions, Other voices, rural places, global stories, p.11

³⁴ IETM 2020, Art in Rural Areas, p. 12

³⁵ On the Move 2023, Cultural Mobility Yearbook 2023, viewed 4 April 2023, https://on-the-move.org/sites/default/files/library/2023-03/OTM_yearbook-2023.pdf



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of viable rural practices - those that aim to succeed in reaching everyone in the village and co-create relevance and meaning. This has an impact on the starting point of each project - why it is conceived, for whom, and with whom. Moreover, as every village is unique in terms of what its community wants, lacks and has to offer, artists need to know local assets, resources and shortages, and in case of missing a standard element of presenting art, like simply a venue with chairs and walls, be prepared to resort to another building, or go ahead without a building at all. This approach not only requires an understanding of the uniqueness of the place you are in, but also entails focusing on assets ('what is there'), rather than shortcomings ('what is not there'). Ultimately, this is what means to turn scarcity into abundance.

Therefore, I strongly believe that the key features of arts produced in and with rural communities are crucial elements for reviving rural areas which are struggling to overcome multiple pressures, as well as facing long-standing and emerging vulnerabilities. The EU's vision on rebuilding its rural regions must acknowledge the tremendous potential of culture for making rural areas more attractive, inclusive, cohesive, and resilient to environmental disasters and economic shocks. And even more so, culture produced in the context of rurality - with all its inherent features, such as slow pace, contextualisation, smaller scales, engagement with people and nature - can offer viable prototypes to urban artists to transit to a greener, more inclusive and sustainable ways of producing and showing art.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, let us reflect on how culture can be made a central element of the EU's vision on rural areas.

First of all, EU rural policies move away from a solely industrial approach to culture in rural places and acknowledge culture's enormous social and ecological values both for rural communities and regions, and for Europe at large. This should result in including culture in all relevant funding programmes. Furthermore, culture must be recognised as an equal partner with other sectors in shaping and implementing strategies for rural development. This would allow for exchange of expertise and shaping multisector hubs for social, economic and environmental innovation.

EU and national cultural policies should acknowledge the value and peculiarities of rural culture and adapt its funding mechanisms to the needs of artists and organisations based in rural places. This could include support for research- and process-oriented practices and shifting the focus away from large scale-productions and high pace touring towards engagement with communities and places. Moreover, culture funding programmes should provide capacity-building and networking opportunities for artists and cultural professionals working in rural places.

Finally, it is important to raise the awareness about arts in rural areas, showing its richness, diversity and innovation potential. The ability of rural culture to inspire sustainable thinking, engage with places and people, and make their voices heard can be a powerful resource for the art community at large, including the urban creative sectors. In times of crises and tightening of resources, each of us needs tools and inspiration to turn scarcity into abundance - both in terms of mindsets and everyday practices. And culture can certainly be such a tool.