

Vision Paper

Deliverable 7.5

Authors
Simona Tondelli
Claudia de Luca
Hanna Elisabet Åberg

October 2020



Thinking beyond the COVID-19 crisis: heritage-based opportunities for the regeneration of rural areas

RURITAGE 
Heritage for Rural Regeneration

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic is considerably threatening rural areas, posing challenges exacerbated by low available financial resources, inaccessible health and public services and greater physical and digital isolation. At the same time, the lockdown experienced in many countries has often led to rural areas being considered as safe shelters, characterised by an easy to maintain social distancing and higher access to nature-based recreational activities; that are crucial for maintaining social cohesion and mental wellbeing and for enhancing local development.

RURITAGE bases its regeneration methodology on local heritage resources, perceiving heritage in its wider sense, beyond tangible monuments and landscapes. Further it recognises intangible forms of traditions, social practices, and knowledge as the values that tie communities together and as a resource for sustainable local development. The paradigm for regenerating rural communities lies in the identification of six powerful drivers that boost regeneration in rural communities. These six drivers identified in the project are the RURITAGE Systemic Innovation Areas (SIAs), Pilgrimage, Local Food Production, Art and Festivals, Landscape Management, Migration and Resilience.

Building upon the RURITAGE narrative, this Policy brief summarises how the new challenges posed in rural areas by the COVID-19 pandemic can be turned into **opportunities for the sustainable growth of rural communities in the future**. Furthermore, it approaches the multidimensional topic by focusing on recommendations divided into **six different capitals**: natural, cultural, social, human, built and financial.

The insights and recommendations summarised in this deliverable are based on three activities arranged by RURITAGE:

- An open call for actions was launched in April 2020 to collect practices to increase and strengthen resilience in rural communities. The call was open between April and mid-June. In total, it collected 66 actions from all round the world.
- A participatory workshop took place during the RURITAGE General Assembly on May 28th, 2020. All project partners discussed challenges and opportunities for the future of rural areas during the session.
- A public webinar on the 8th of July 2020 to present preliminary results based on above work and to further discuss them with EU institutions and relevant actors within rural development (Eu Commission, CoE, ENRD).



Foundations for comprehensive responses to COVID-19 challenges

Rural areas are facing challenges exacerbated by less available resources and greater isolation issues. Rural communities struggle in finding tailored solutions for their already fragile environments. However, rural areas are responding to the challenges posed by COVID-19 by reinforced networks, better collaboration, and solidarity for strengthened resilience. They are showing that co-operation was and is essential. What is now emerging is a better understanding of local community needs to use and manage capitals in an integrated way to achieve sustainable and inclusive growth of rural areas.

Human Capital

- **Increase people's knowledge, skills and motivation** also in time of crisis.
- **Leave no one behind** by carefully planning the digital transition in rural areas, allowing different population groups to receive basic digital literacy to access information and activities available online.
- **Bridge the digital divide** between urban and rural areas
- Provide rural communities with **field training** to enable new business opportunities deriving from rapidly changing customer needs and to allow new SMEs and start-ups to enter the market.
- Properly plan future sustainable development of rural areas, to **repopulate ageing and scarcely rural areas while avoiding unplanned gentrification issues**.
- Develop sustainable and resilient communities while **integrating urban inhabitants interested in moving to rural areas**.

Social Capital

- **Strong cooperation** between institutions, communities, businesses, trade unions, schools, and voluntary organisations.
- **Promote formal and informal partnerships** to cope with the emergency while leading to a long-standing development.
- **Strengthen solidarity and reinforce vulnerable**

groups; women, elderly, young and children, persons with reduced mobility, and ethnic minorities, by assuring less isolation access to services.

- In addition, **enhance the commitment and the capacity of employers and recruiters to protect migrant workers**, thus helping to address the future integration of migrants into local communities.

Built Capital

- Promote rural areas as **multifunctional places to live in**, beyond the traditional agricultural-related jobs and to further enable remote working.
- Improve **transport, mobility and digital infrastructures**.

Cultural Capital

- **Exploit digital interaction** and promote small-scale **open- air events** with smaller audiences, also cooperating locally for using school playgrounds, fields, etc.
- **Encourage adaptation to local needs** and practices by developing more flexible “menus” of arts and festivals, while allowing opportunities for artists to perform and for locals to take part in performances.
- **Ensure a variety of cultural participation opportunities** thanks to the availability of cultural venues and citizens’ proximity.

Financial Capital

- Even if the pandemic obviously claims for **investments in the healthcare sector**, a comprehensive response to the crisis also **needs to address other sectors, sustaining holistic strategies** for the heritage-led regeneration of rural territories.
- **Improve the long-term competitiveness of rural territories**.

Natural Capital

- Reinforce environmental sustainability through raised awareness of **interconnections between human and ecosystem health**. By strengthening the understanding of local heritage, and **inhabitants will further value and care for their surrounding environment**.
- Use cultural and natural heritage as a driver to develop new forms of **slow, sustainable and proximity tourism to further boost local economy**.
- **Invest in green infrastructure, and slow mobility infrastructure** for improving and restoring natural ecosystems, while creating options for natural and cultural recreation.
- **Rediscover local food production** thus improving the quality and the health of the food we eat, but also contributing to reduce greenhouse gas emissions related with the food industry, and simultaneously, supporting local farmers and rural microeconomy.

Actions and recommendations for thinking beyond the COVID-19 crisis in rural areas

Actions and recommendations for thinking beyond the COVID-19 crisis in rural areas refer to three different areas of improvement:

- **Policy:** a need for more effective and coherent implementation of existing EU policies, legislation and instruments. We do not propose new regulations, rather informal revisions of existing ones, to better meet rural needs, practices, responsibilities, continue networking efforts and feedback from the stakeholders implementing policies on the ground, in line ENRD work.
- **Funding:** A need to identify, support, integrate and improve existing, as well as innovative sources of funding for rural areas at the relevant institutional level, including European Structural and Investment Funds (E-SIF), promoting a strategic approach for ensuring synergies among the different funding tools and policies, at the EU level as well as at the national and regional level, and for avoiding duplications.
- **Knowledge:** A need to boost evidence-based policy making working on capacity building at local level and to introduce actions that aim to improve local knowledge or skills through dedicated education and training activities.

There is a strong need for a **fully integrated framework of policies and investments** able to sustain such a complex environment of natural, cultural, human, social, and built capitals. To **support the renaissance of rural areas** as vibrant hubs of development based on local heritage, natural resources, creativity and social inclusion, the EU should boost an effective rural regeneration and transition beyond sustainable food production through a better integration of other sectors. The recommendations address the six capitals addressed before and are applicable at three different levels; EU, national/regional and local level, as follows:

Actions at EU level

- **Rural Development Programme (RDP) should support diversification of jobs and incomes** of rural communities by dedicating funding to local heritage and cultural sector activities that contribute to sustainable development of rural areas.
- **Agriculture and natural services and capital:** funding for the enhancement and protection of natural capital and services, also in terms of nature-based tourism, should be better integrated with existing instruments and related funding streams such as the the New Green Deal and the Biodiversity Strategy.

- **Culture:** better integration of funding coming from cohesion funds and Creative Europe in the new programming period 2021-2027. Boost the integration of culture into the regional smart specialization strategies (RIS3).

- **Accessibility, both digital and physical:** dedicated funding scheme for transport, mobility and digital infrastructures to reach rural and remote areas and to improve their accessibility. Initiatives such as the WiFi4EU should be further boosted and more widely spread in rural and remote areas.

- **Education and training:** promote initiatives to overcome the digital and entrepreneurial divide, to raise awareness of existing opportunities for business support. Support local SME in rural areas through funding for accessing to dedicated and enhanced training opportunities through the European Social Fund, the new Erasmus programme, or dedicated call for rural-based SMEs within the SME Instrument.

- **Research and Innovation:** boost research on sustainable and inclusive rural development and further study community resilience, services differentiation impact assessment and multi-criteria analysis of participatory planning options (Horizon Europe). Boost innovation at local level by increasing the opportunities of cascade funding of pilot cases (Horizon Europe) to allow also small enterprises and NGOs to access to EU grants or dedicated call for innovation to local SME (European Regional Development Fund and European Rural Development Funds, SME instrument). Provide new evidences about culture as a powerful driver of regeneration – economic, social and environmental.

Moreover, RURITAGE highlights a need to **enlarge the scope of the many initiatives addressing cities** (e.g. Green City Capital, Creative cities initiatives, European Capital of Culture, Urban Innovative Action) to include rural areas or possibly launching dedicated ones. RURITAGE calls for a better cooperation to identify and address common issues and exchange ideas and practices. By building a network of rural communities keen on working on sustainable regeneration through natural and cultural heritage, RURITAGE aims to integrate and complement the effective networking and cooperation with European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) along with other European initiatives.

Actions at national/regional level

There is the need for a comprehensive approach in line with the policies promoted at EU level:

- **Guarantee access to basic services** in rural areas (health, education, accessibility) through better funding.
- **Improve infrastructures – both digital and mobili-**

ty: toned to enforce infrastructures in rural areas, in synergy with EU funds, through a fair digital transition allowing people to get the basic digital literacy to access information and activities online.

- **Integrate regional priorities, embedded into the Regional operational programme, the rural development plans and the RIS3 strategy** to work towards the reinforcement of the social, human, cultural, natural, built and financial capitals and transversally connecting RURITAGE System Innovation Areas, further boosting and maintaining local traditions, local arts, artefacts and festivals, boosting human and social capital.

Actions on local level

- **Boost the role of the communities** in the development of sustainable regeneration strategies, exploiting local resources and capitals, in line with the LEADER and the RURITAGE approaches.

- **Enhance the role of local administrations and stakeholders** to properly plan future development of the areas, to create favourable conditions to repopulate ageing and sparsely populated areas.

- **Aid participatory approaches** to strengthen local solidarity and cooperation, to further join forces for increased resilience.

References

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Acknowledgements

A special thanks to the RURITAGE Consortium for contributing with their knowledge and experience during the workshop on rural challenges and opportunities during COVID-19.

We would like to thank all speakers at the webinar *Thinking beyond the COVID-19 crisis: heritage-based opportunities for rural regeneration*. In addition, we would also like to thank Flavio Conti, Elena Di Federico (ENRD), and Victoria Beaz Hidalgo (EASME) for their valuable support and inputs. Lastly, we want to thank everyone who contributed with rural actions during the RURITAGE Call for Actions. You may find some of the initiatives here: ruritage.eu/resources/resilience_actions



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 776465. The sole responsibility of this publication lies with the authors. The European Union is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.