

# Beyond the urban

*Contemporary arts and culture in non-urban areas as keys to a sustainable and cohesive Europe*

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Authored by:



## Rationale

When it comes to culture in non-urban and peripheral areas<sup>1</sup> in policy discourse, the focus is often given to only a few cultural sectors while being limited mostly to their economic impacts and the preservation value of tangible heritage, landscapes and monuments. Such an approach risks overlooking a vast, vibrant and complex world of non-urban contemporary art and socio-cultural practices.

At this point, when populist and anti-European sentiments are rising across the EU (including non-urban areas), **it is a high time to support the sectors which inspire innovative and sustainable ways of organising communities and practicing democracy.** Moreover, given the degrading condition of natural resources and ecosystems, **we feel the urgency to acknowledge at all policy levels that we are operating in the new reality of Climate Emergency that is demanding change across all sectors. Contemporary arts and culture have a unique potential to trigger a creative process of rethinking economic paradigms and testing new models, reconnect people to nature and foster new imagination for the system's change.**

Therefore, this policy paper aims to put forward a comprehensive approach to:

- 1) integrating culture<sup>2</sup> in all policies dealing with non-urban and peripheral areas, including the EU regional and cohesion policies;
- 2) making the EU cultural action more suited for non-urban challenges and aspirations.

The objectives are to:

- 1) **ensure the recognition** at various policy levels (global, EU, national, regional, local) of the importance of culture and the arts in non-urban and peripheral areas;
- 2) shape the direction of action through **identifying the most timely issues** which need to be addressed and researched;
- 3) **put forward key solutions** on how to support culture and the arts in non-urban and peripheral areas, at different policy levels.

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<sup>1</sup> Non-urban areas are understood in this paper as rural, remote and mountainous areas (these constitute 80% of the EU territory, and are home to 57% of its population), including islands; small towns and villages; 'invisible cities' of less than 50 000 inhabitants (that no one hears about if they do not live in them, even though 20 to 40% (depending on the country) of the EU population live in them.); peripheral and suburban areas that lack infrastructure and access to culture and other necessities.

<sup>2</sup> in its inclusive definition which embraces intangible heritage and contemporary art

## Arguments for recognition

We believe that **non-urban areas should be in focus today, more than ever**, because:

- a) The unity of the EU is unprecedentedly hindered by a wave of populism and euroscepticism. Those attitudes are prospering in various parts of Europe, but their scale and strength in non-urban contexts are not sufficiently acknowledged and addressed.
- b) At the same time, many innovative solidarity mechanisms are already taking place in rural areas, along with innovative social practices to increase civic engagement.
- c) Non-urban areas are at the frontline of a rapid transformation: climate effects of the current intensive production modes, migration, demographic changes, political turbulences, and more.
- d) The EU's overall focus on building a sustainable future<sup>3</sup> can only be realised through a radical rethinking of the current models of economic production and prevailing ways of organising social life. Non-urban areas host a large number of sustainable practices of responsible use of natural and cultural resources<sup>4</sup>, plus the rural might become a laboratory for experimentation, due to smaller scales, more time and space, and less hierarchical governance structures.

We are convinced that **contemporary culture and art in non-urban environments must be appreciated and supported**, because:

- e) Culture and the arts foster social cohesion and inclusion as well as active citizen participation, and this is particularly relevant in socially and politically isolated areas.
- f) Access to culture and the arts is an essential element of well-being, health, empowerment, happiness, self-identification and ultimately of reinvigorating or conceiving new narratives for individuals and societies. Those are vitally needed in peripheral environments, struggling with feelings of isolation, neglectedness and exclusion.
- g) Culture and the arts function in a transversal and equal way, and thus have the potential to catalyse collaboration and networking, and create links among various

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<sup>3</sup> of which the European Green Deal is the most ambitious and comprehensive example

<sup>4</sup> "Art in Rural Areas", IETM publication, March 2020

organisations and consolidation of scattered communities. This is vital for building and maintaining connections in remote and depopulating areas with scarce physical infrastructure, such as schools, transport, medical and social services, which are getting increasingly digitised or centralised, which causes a lack of informal live contacts between people.

- h) Contemporary artists and cultural professionals, in collaboration with multidisciplinary teams, can help realising the potential of rurality to be a laboratory for conceiving an innovative vision on how global societies, whether urban or rural, central or peripheral, can reinvent current modes of economic, social and political functioning and ensure a sustainable future for our planet.

## Issues at stake

We call on the EU institutions, member states and regional and local authorities to address **the following challenges** which prevent culture and the arts in non-urban areas from fully realising their potential:

- a) **Gaps in perception:** a narrow definition of “culture” (material heritage and tourism) prevailing in current policy discourses, which neglects contemporary arts, social innovation and “living” cultural practices; a distorted image of rurality and peripheries, either romanticised or associated with decline;
- b) **Over-instrumentalization of art and culture** in non-urban contexts: perceiving it solely as a potential solution to local challenges (thus expecting funded projects to be related to farming, tackle isolation, etc.). This vision is partial and detrimental as it disregards the real power of the arts and inevitably discourages both artists and audiences in the long run<sup>5</sup>;
- c) **Shortage of financial support and investment** within and towards non-urban areas and an overall lack of local resources (for example, low incomes preventing from accessing cultural services and a lack of infrastructure for rehearsals, and presenting art and culture);
- d) **Lack of acknowledgement** by funders, policy-makers and evaluators **of the specifics** of producing culture and art in non-urban areas: need of longer time for research, more efforts and dedication, in order to realise sustainable practices, build strong connections with audiences and achieve positive outcomes and impacts (which rarely mean high numbers of tickets sold);

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<sup>5</sup> “Art in Rural Areas”, IETM publication, March 2020

- e) **Insufficient mobility opportunities:** EU and most of the national mobility funding schemes are not adjusted to the needs and challenges of rural and peripheral contexts;
- f) **Scattered networks and weak connectedness:** lack of hard and soft infrastructure: transport, digital services, possibilities for live networking and face-to-face meetings among peers living in different towns / villages;
- g) **Scarcity of access to quality arts and cultural education,** which results in limited or no exercise of cultural rights and access to high-level cultural professions by non-urban and peripheral population, especially its least advantaged parts;
- h) **Poor territorial and landscape planning:** lack of strategic vision, insufficient tools for local diagnosis and evaluation; use of non-urban areas for the purposes unwanted by cities (such as waste storages, prisons, energy production, among others), as well as creating mono-spaces (spaces devoted only to one type of production, solely commercial or residential zones, etc.)
- i) **Effects of global non-sustainable economic paradigms:** environmental and social impacts of tourism, intensive agriculture, massive and low-cost production, and other side-effects of favouring growth and profits over sustainability.

## Solutions

**We call on the EU, national, regional and local policy-makers to create and augment investment in culture and the arts in non-urban environments. This should be done through including culture and the arts in all funding instruments tackling non-urban and peripheral areas, as well as through integrating rurality and non-urban contexts in all cultural programmes and funds.**

Those investments should be guided by the following principles:

- a) Expand focus from built heritage to intangible heritage and living, forward-thinking contemporary art and cultural practices;
- b) Respect the autonomy of local communities, foster motivation and self-empowerment through building awareness of existing values and active involvement of local communities in all stages;
- c) Take account of the peculiarities of artistic and cultural work in rural areas: need for longer time, more space, effort and dedication to conduct research, engage with communities and realise sustainable practices;

- d) Stimulate participation, inclusion and equality as guiding values of cultural and artistic work.

Moreover, particular attention should be paid to:

- 1) **Mobility:**

- a) Integrate non-urban needs and challenges in cultural mobility funding schemes (for example, more explicit support for slow travel, reimbursement of traveling time as working hours); implement effective ways of disseminating mobility funding calls among potential applicants beyond cities;
- b) Invest in low-carbon transport solutions and digitisation of non-urban and peripheral areas, taking into consideration the needs of cultural and artistic production.

- 2) **Networks:**

- a) Encourage long-term connections, collaboration and networking among cultural operators in non-urban contexts, by organising exchanges and peer-to-peer learning and investing in permanent networks;
- b) Design networks of local policy-makers to exchange best practices of culture-led local development;

- 3) **Capacity-building:**

- a) Provide direct, small-scale and easily manageable grants for individual artists, collectives and companies;
- b) Expand and improve training for artists and cultural producers who want to engage with rural contexts to do so with an informed position, using methodologies and analytic tools from other disciplines<sup>6</sup>;
- c) Provide knowledge to policy-makers and rural development agencies on how culture can be integrated in local policies;
- d) Improve access to quality arts and culture education on school and university levels and in lifelong learning schemes.

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<sup>6</sup> “Art in Rural Areas”, IETM publication, March 2020

#### 4) Transversal work

- a) Support cross-sectoral alliances (arts, science, social sectors) that address transversal issues and challenges (agriculture, natural resources, relationship to the landscape, etc) and serve as “change laboratories”; give visibility to such multidisciplinary projects to inspire other sectors;
- b) Encourage dialogue among various policy fields to reflect on, complement and support the transversal work happening on the ground.

#### 5) Framing further discourse and debate

- a) Frame new questions about culture, arts and cultural heritage in non-urban areas as a practice and to seek answers grounded in qualitative evidence rather than in reigning orthodoxies;
- b) Work with local actors and stakeholders to identify particular spaces and practices that are ripe and ready for reinterpretation; and
- c) Radically re-frame heritage in terms of people’s actual practices and re-imagine it through the lens of contemporary arts and living culture.

We invite policy-makers, artists, cultural operators, and representatives of other sectors engaging with culture and the arts to collectively reflect on how those solutions can be translated into concrete measures and what should be the next steps. **In this framework, we call on the European Parliament to conduct a study on the situation and value of the contemporary arts and culture in non-urban areas.**

**This policy paper is written by Culture Action Europe, European Network of Cultural Centres, IETM (International network for contemporary performing arts) and Trans Europe Halles, representing together more than 5,000 organisations and individual professionals.**

**Culture Action Europe (CAE)** is the major European network of cultural networks, organisations, artists, activists, academics and policymakers. CAE is the first port of call for informed opinion and debate about arts and cultural policy in the EU. As the only intersectoral network, it brings together all practices in culture, from the performing arts to literature, the visual arts, design and cross-arts initiatives, to community centres and activist groups. CAE believes in the value and values of culture and its contribution to the development of sustainable and inclusive societies.

[www.cultureactioneurope.org](http://www.cultureactioneurope.org)

**The European Network of Cultural Centres (ENCC)** was founded in 1994 to promote dialogue and cooperation between social-oriented cultural centres in Europe. In the 2000s it became a “network of networks”, before gradually opening membership to individual cultural centres in direct interaction with communities and citizens. It also includes other cultural organisations and professionals as associate members. Today, the ENCC reaches about 5000 cultural organisations in over 20 countries, with quite diverse structures, practices and audiences, who align on values of cultural equality, intercultural diversity and sustainability.

[www.encc.eu](http://www.encc.eu)

**IETM, International network for contemporary performing arts**, is one of the oldest and largest cultural networks, which represents the voice of over 500 performing arts organisations and institutions, including theatres and arts centres, festivals, performing companies, curators and programmers, producers, art councils and associations from about 50 countries. IETM advocates for the value of the arts and culture in a changing world and empowers performing arts professionals through access to international connections, knowledge and a dynamic forum for exchange.

[www.ietm.org](http://www.ietm.org)

**Trans Europe Halles (TEH)** is one of the oldest and most dynamic cultural networks in Europe. Based in Sweden, it has been at the forefront of repurposing abandoned buildings for arts, culture and activism since 1983 and currently counts 129 members in 37 different countries across Europe.

[www.teh.net](http://www.teh.net)

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