Cultural Connections

ROBUST Community of Practice
Synthesis Report

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1. Introduction

1.1. Overview of the functional theme

ROBUST posits that strong, mutually supportive linkages between rural and urban areas are key to realising smart, circular and inclusive development for a sustainable Europe. One way to strengthen synergies between rural and urban areas is by looking at the role of cultural connections.

While it can be challenging to develop a concise operational definition of culture, it matters in our lives and localities, and plays an important role in bringing people and places together. Culture is a broad concept with several meanings and permeates different aspects of our lives. Likewise, cultural connections between urban and rural areas can come in many different forms and reflect different strategies for facilitating the flow of goods, knowledge, and people.

Cities and rural areas tend to be associated with differing cultural offers, everyday rhythms and features that are nonetheless valued by residents and visitors. However, recent technological developments and mobility practices can blur the boundaries between urban and rural culture. These advances can be leveraged to stimulate mutually beneficial movement of people, ideas and resources, but they can just as easily result in heritage commodification and lead to the perpetuation of stereotypes and cultural fossilisation.

In view of the above, the **exploration of cultural connections between the urban and the rural aims to understand how different cultural offers and experiences can be connected for mutually beneficial cross-fertilisation (incl. between sectors), smart development and sustainable growth**, thus contributing to the overall goal of ROBUST.

1.2. Aim of the CoP

The Cultural Connections community of practice (hereafter – CoP) is a network of researchers and practitioners from four European regions. The work in these regions involves multiple stakeholders, such as local and municipal government, development agencies, non-profit institutions, civil society organisations, and businesses.

The Cultural Connections CoP is grounded in practice and action research from the following regions: Tukums (Latvia), Metropolitan Area of Styria (Austria), Lucca (Italy) and Mid Wales (UK). These regions collaborate to generate ideas and identify tools to strengthen cultural connections by creating:

- shared innovation objectives and action plans;
- good practice examples that can be applied in other regions;
- guidance to inform regional, national and European policymaking.

The main research and practical questions guiding the work of the CoP are:
- How can cultural connections enhance rural – urban synergies and what are manifestations of these?
- How do cultural connections shape new localities?
- How do cultural connections stimulate smart development?
- How can cultural connections inspire (new) governance networks and novel political arrangements?

In addition to exploring and enhancing rural-urban cultural connections, members of the CoP share various <u>common goals, themes and questions</u> that cover a wide range of cultural practices, services and concerns.

- Possibilities of **coordinating cultural events and cultural life** within municipalities, across urban and rural territories
- Culture as a marker of **local/regional identity**
- **Sustainable valorisation** of local cultural resources

Furthermore, the living labs involved explored the possibilities to formulate and develop cultural strategies for the regions concerned, which gave the CoP a practical purpose. During the ROBUST project, the Cultural Connections CoP discussed and shared experiences on how cultural strategies and visions for cultural development are set up, organised and implemented in different regions. The CoP aimed to identify, analyse and promote the strategic lines over which the regions may work together to enhance the role of culture in sustainable development.

1.3. Co-ordination and management of the CoP

The achievement of the overall ambitions of the CoP was contingent upon the continued input and commitment of all partners (both practice and research) in the form of practical and methodological insights, feedback and identification of possible challenges and enabling factors.

The CoP had dedicated sessions at consortium meetings (May 2019 [Helsinki], November 2019 [Riga] etc.) with online communication (email, webinars) between consortium meetings to discuss activities and common issues, and circulate documents.

In addition, the CoP has jointly worked on a range of different outputs.

- Joint work on a collective conference paper "Strengthening rural–urban cultural connections in practice: lessons from living labs in Europe" for the 9th AISU Congress 'The Global City: The Urban Condition as a Pervasive Phenomenon. The Urban-Rural Discourse in the Field of Cultural Heritage', Bologna, 11-14 September 2019 (see Annex 7.1).
- Joint work on a publication "Strengthening rural-urban cultural connections. Three lessons from ROBUST's Cultural Connections community of practice", 2019.
- On-going work on reports about governance of cultural life and heritage commodification, difference in cultural offers between urban and rural areas.

1.4. Report aim and structure

The report provides an overview of the activities of the Cultural Connections CoP and the main lessons learned in the process. The second part of the report describes the research process and different activities in which members of the CoP have been engaged. The third part is devoted to the main insights gained and the issues that have been considered in reflecting on cultural connections between urban and rural areas.

2. The research process and learning cycle

2.1. Composition of the CoP

The Cultural Connections CoP is a network of four European regions: Tukums (Latvia), Metropolitan Area of Styria (Austria), Lucca (Italy) and Mid Wales (UK).

- Tukums is represented by a team from the local government of Tukums (practice partner) and the social research institute Baltic Studies Centre (research partner).
- The Metropolitan Area of Styria Living Lab is represented by the Regional Management of the Metropolitan Area of Styria (practice partner) and the Federal Institute of Agricultural Economics, Rural and Mountain Research (research partner).
- Lucca is represented by the Province of Lucca (practice partner) and the Universities of Florence and Pisa (research partners).
- Mid Wales Living Lab is represented by Aberystwyth University (research partner) and the Welsh Local Government Association (practice partner).

Each region had its own thematic priorities that were explored in their respective living labs. This means that, while there was ample opportunity for cross-fertilisations between different topics (e.g. culture, food, infrastructure), the role of cultural connections was not equally prominent in all the regions. Regardless, each living lab had an interest in culture and cultural connections, even though culture was not the first priority for all the members of the CoP.
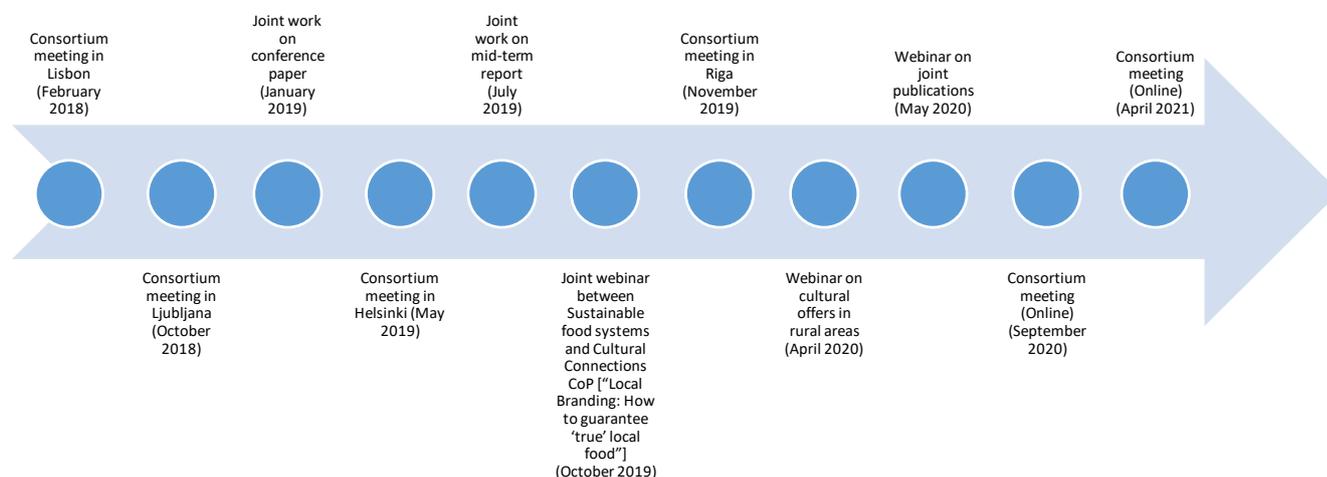
In the case of **Tukums, culture was the 1st priority**. The living lab dealt with issues concerning the historical cultural identity of the region, and the uncoordinated calendar of cultural events in the municipality. The living lab's specific interest was in developing a cultural strategy, a municipal planning document, that would allow for a cohesive approach to cultural life, better use of the available resources and cultural repertoire, and a synergy between urban and rural culture.

In the case of **Lucca, culture was the 3rd priority**. The living lab looked at attempts to make connections between local cuisine and rural identity. Meanings and values attached to local food and typical products as vehicles for the conservation of landscape and traditional knowledge have become central to the promotion of rural-urban relations in the tourist experience. The main challenge for Lucca was identifying and articulating a framework for sustainable valorisation of cultural resources in the face of tourist influence on cultural life in the region.

In the case of **Mid Wales, culture is the 2nd priority**. The living lab highlighted the role of language in the context of cultural connections by looking at the importance of Welsh and tackling a policy discourse that equates the rural with agriculture and the environment. The living lab explored the sustainability of cultural initiatives in a short-term oriented funding environment, and the links between culture and rural wellbeing. In addition, the living lab aimed to produce an encompassing 'Vision for Rural Wales', which will be used by the practice partner (WLGA Rural Forum) as a campaigning platform to inform debates in the run-up to the 2021 Welsh Government elections.

In the case of the **Metropolitan Area of Styria, culture is the 3rd priority**. It is a larger area compared to the others and includes the second biggest city of Austria, Graz, and the districts of Graz Umgebung (surrounding of Graz) and Voitsberg. To strengthen the regional identity of the Metropolitan Area of Styria, the living lab aims to foster synergies between cultural life in the rural and urban areas of the region.

2.2. Timeline of activities / meetings and document interactions (real and virtual)

Consortium meeting in Lisbon (February 2018)

Joint work on conference paper (January 2019)

Joint work on mid-term report (July 2019)

Consortium meeting in Riga (November 2019)

Webinar on joint publications (May 2020)

Consortium meeting (Online) (April 2021)

Consortium meeting in Ljubljana (October 2018)

Consortium meeting in Helsinki (May 2019)

Joint webinar between Sustainable food systems and Cultural Connections CoP ["Local Branding: How to guarantee 'true' local food"] (October 2019)

Webinar on cultural offers in rural areas (April 2020)

Consortium meeting (Online) (September 2020)

2.3. Processes for communication / knowledge exchange / learning

Initially, communication and exchange of ideas primarily took place during dedicated CoP sessions at consortium meetings. However, this was gradually supplemented with communication via email to share ideas and potentially useful publications, and discuss joint work on papers and reports. The CoP has also organised two dedicated webinars to discuss (i) topics of common relevance and (ii) potential outputs. The CoP has also been involved in the organisation of a joint webinar with the Sustainable food systems CoP. When preparing the CoP's research and innovation agenda, mutual exchange visits were proposed if partners had the means and budget for this. However, this did not materialise, largely due to the restrictions on travel imposed as a result of Covid-19.

Main forms of communication

Consortium meetings   **E-mail**   **Webinars**

During the meeting in Helsinki the CoP discussed the expectations of the members regarding the outcomes and outputs of the CoP**. Partners agreed on the need to make the CoP practically relevant.** This could take the form of new ideas to promote rural/urban synergies through culture and clear arguments for why cultural connections are important for territorial reform. Ultimately this could lead to the development of usable outputs of practical relevance that are widely shared.

In addition, several challenges were raised during the Helsinki meeting.
- How to create awareness about the importance of cultural connections?
- How to translate make CoP findings relevant to policy?
- How to introduce cultural issues in planning tools?

3.CoP themes and common learning

3.1. Initial scoping

In the initial stages (2018), CoP members grappled with the issue that **culture has many different meanings**, which hampers attempts to operationalise it. The main difficulties arise from the **fluid and multifaceted nature of culture**. It was suggested that this presents challenges because the actors involved in the individual living labs may have their own cultural visions and understandings of culture that are tied to specific artefacts, practices, and manifestations of sociality. Aligning them and embedding culture in regional development to stimulate urban-rural synergies may therefore be challenging. This led to the conclusion that **dialogue and collaboration between various agents matter**, as people may have divergent visions regarding culture and the role of culture.

The initial meeting in Lisbon touched upon several themes that have stayed with the CoP. Due in part to the composition of the CoP, culture was associated with festivals, heritage, food, identities, and specific geographical areas (Figure 1).The meeting in Lisbon also involved an exercise in which members from the different regions discussed the future of cultural connections in their regions (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Word cloud of topics discussed in Lisbon (2018)

Figure 2: Word cloud of future visioning exercise (Lisbon 2018)

As the word cloud shows, the future of cultural connections was conceptualised locally and regionally, with an emphasis on the renewed strength of the connections, innovation, knowledge, and their overall quality.

Likewise, the CoP discussed the desirable impacts and outcomes of cultural connections (Figure 3).
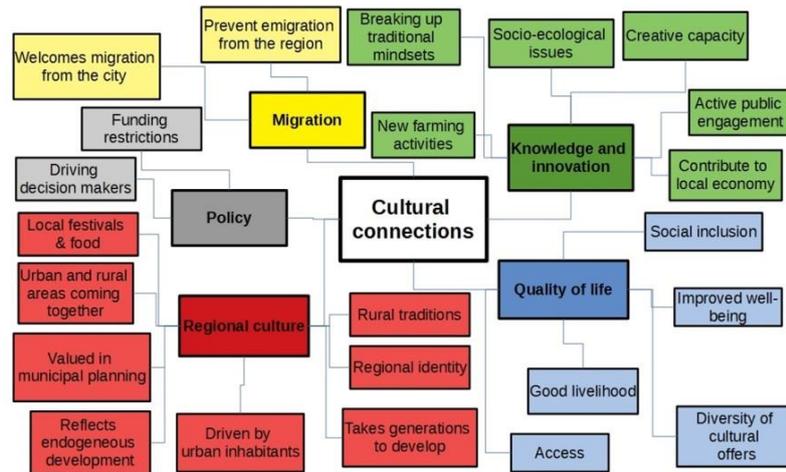
Figure 3: Desirable outcomes and impacts of cultural connections (Lisbon 2018)

As is evident from the word cloud, CoP members initially associated the outcomes and impacts of cultural connections with: (i) regional culture, identity and economy, (ii) quality of life, (iii) migration processes, (iv) knowledge and innovation capacities, (v) improved policy making. However, the foci gradually shifted.

In the subsequent meeting in Ljubljana, several propositions were made as to how culture could be framed and understood for the purposes of ROBUST. For instance, it was suggested that **culture could be approached as a way of adding value to places through the specific meanings, histories and values** attached to objects and places. Collaborations between different actors and policy decisions in relation to tourism and heritage can turn culture into a means of keeping rural areas liveable. However, a broader take is also possible, looking at **attitudes, values and the valorisation of urban-rural synergies**. Cultural connections can counteract negative socio-economic trends and enable spaces for development. For instance, by **counterbalancing outmigration and mitigating social disparities,** cultural connections can increase overall quality of life in a manner that meets the need of both urban and rural dwellers.

3.2. Common initial themes

How can cultural festivals connect urban and rural areas?

The CoP has discussed issues concerning the commodification of rural culture and the potential downsides of landscape tourism, which are associated with giving precedence to the tastes and gazes of tourists, and turning culture and heritage into a commodity. This was particularly prominent in Lucca. However, we noted the existence of various festivals in Graz and Tukums that contribute to the flow of people and ideas between urban and rural areas, without necessarily leading to cultural or heritage commodification. Consequently, we considered the possibility that festivals could be reframed as means of sustainable valorisation of cultural resources and equitable distribution of costs and benefits. Festivals should not exploit cultural resources solely for the needs and tastes of tourists and visitors, and at the expense of locals. This topic, however, was dropped after the meeting in Helsinki (May 2019) due to a lack of concrete proposals for outputs.

Example from Styria: La Strada

"La Strada" is a nine-day long international street artists and puppet theatre festival in the city of Graz and in surrounding Styrian municipalities, usually organised in summertime (July/August). The festival was founded in 1997 in Graz with the goal to revive the city during the summer break of the traditional cultural institutions. For many years "La Strada" has also hosted productions in rural towns within about 40 km of Graz, like Stainz, Weiz and Leibnitz. The primary intention of "La Strada" is to entertain people and to enhance the exchange between urban, peri-urban and rural citizens as well as to build bridges and overcome differences between people and different spatial units. Since the festival expanded its programme to the countryside, several municipalities have developed as cultural 'hot spots' during the summer season and their attractiveness and quality of life has increased. The rural-urban cooperation is however dependent on two components: First, the capacities of "La Strada" itself and secondly, the cultural initiatives of the communities. This means, that "La Strada" only cooperates with rural municipalities if local stakeholders are interested and willing to develop the endogenous potential. "La Strada" then develops new and innovative concepts together with local groups, like a theatre group, a choir, a group of musicians or the local brass band. The local link is thus crucial in the implementation of cultural events in the countryside.

Figure 4: La Strada Graz / Clemens Nestroy (artist: Pierre Sauvageot/ production: Harmonic Fields)

Coordination of cultural life

The intention was to learn from each other's experiences in managing cultural life. A specific interest was in the application of digital and online tools that would facilitate the coordination of cultural life. In Helsinki, the Mid Wales team talked about the need for new governance arrangements to facilitate this process. For the Metropolitan Area of Styria, it was suggested that coordination could build upon good practices of inter-communal activities and examples in the field of shared economies. Tukums discussed the intention to (i) encourage a participatory process in the planning and governance of regional cultural life and (ii) articulate a joint vision for how coordination could and should happen. This was successfully implemented, and a process of creating a unified calendar

of cultural events was initiated and the municipal cultural strategy was approved by the council in December 2020.

Culture as a marker of regional, local identity

Unsurprisingly, questions concerning identity stimulated fruitful conversations. Each region had an aspect that they highlighted. In the case of Lucca, questions of regional identity were intimately tied to local food. In the case of Mid Wales, questions of identity are tied to the Welsh language, dialects and political identity. For Tukums, the urban-rural dimension permeated all discussion of identity as there is tension between having a regional identity and a non-identity, which was further exacerbated by the redrawing of municipal boundaries that will take effect in June 2021.The Metropolitan Area of Styria is a larger region, that was extended by the district of Voitsberg in 2010. The articulation of a common identity is only just beginning, though there are already synergies between cultural offers in the rural and urban areas of the region.

At the Helsinki consortium meeting, the Mid Wales team emphasised the prominence of linguistic identities in relation to inclusive growth. For Tukums, identity was conceptualised in terms of the connections between food and culture, which were thought to be key aspects of heritage. This meant that there were overlaps with Lucca whose representatives talked about the importance of local recipes and landscape conservation.

Sustainable valorisation of cultural resources

This is a broad topic that concerns different ways of approaching the valorisation of culture and cultural connections, allowing for new interpretations of culture, securing equitable access to culture and enabling widespread participation in cultural life, and contributing to economic growth. Specifically, this topic concerns attempts to create sustainable futures for rural places, especially by highlighting what a living rural culture has to offer to local residents and visitors. In Wales, a coherent vision for rural Wales is necessary.

Example from Mid Wales: LLWYDDO'N LLEOL 2050

Llwyddo'n Lleol 2050 (Local Success 2050) is a scheme operated by the enterprise agency Menter Môn to encourage young people that they can be successful by staying in rural, Welsh-speaking communities in the counties of Gwynedd and Anglesey and don't need to move to large cities to find success. Out-migration by young people is a major challenge across rural Wales, but especially in the majority Welsh-speaking communities of north and west Wales, where it is viewed as contributing to the weakening of Welsh-language culture in everyday life. Llwyddo'n Lleol has focused on mentoring small groups of young people to develop an idea for a business that would allow them to live and work through the Welsh language in rural Wales. Most of the participants live in rural communities, but some are individuals who have moved to cities and are looking to return home. Support through the scheme includes help developing a business plan, mentoring from experts, a £1,000 start-up grant and funding to work on their business for one day a week for six months. Notably, many of the business ideas generated are based on cultural resources or creative practices, including freelance design, embroidery, making festival clothing, and using local food to make smoothies and milkshakes. Participants are encouraged to share their experiences in social media and podcasts to inspire other young people.

Figure 5: LLWYDDO'N LLEOL 2050 logo

In Tukums, the cultural strategy was envisioned as a means to ensure improved and equal access to culture and increase the number of people visiting cultural events. In Lucca, we noted the importance of local planning. In the Metropolitan Area of Styria, the emphasis is on diversifying cultural offers in rural areas in order to reach a broader target group, especially young people and women. Furthermore, knowledge exchange between rural, peri-urban areas and the city of Graz needs to be strengthened. In addition to these public governance tools for sustainable valorisation of culture, there are numerous private initiatives and businesses that regenerate local cultural resources by imbuing them with economic and social value; for instance, food businesses rooted in local food culture, hospitality businesses in historical buildings (Šūmane 2020).

3.3. Preliminary lessons based on initial themes[1]

A mid-term report (published on the ROBUST website) was prepared to summarise the key points that had crystallised in CoP discussions prior to the summer of 2019.

Lesson 1: *Coordinating cultural life means connecting activities, events, and the people who enjoy them. This helps reduce duplication, share resources, and make cultural institutions stronger together.*

The challenge for rural areas is that the cultural offer tends to be much more dispersed and rural attractions are often less well-known and perhaps more niche. This can make it hard for rural cultural sites to attract visitors from the city or further afield, which is only exacerbated by the fragmentation of regional cultural life. Without coordination, effort and resources can be needlessly expended without contributing to the overall quality of the regional cultural offer. Nonetheless, it should be borne in mind that local cultural institutions are accustomed to their own ways of working, and efforts to coordinate cultural life can feel like a loss of independence.

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[1] This section is based on Goodwin-Hawkins (2019), https://rural-urban.eu/sites/default/files/Strengthening_RuralUrban_Cultural_Connections_JULY2019.pdf

Before planning solutions, it is first important to assess how coordinated – or fragmented – cultural life currently is, and where the gaps are. Coordination might not seem innovative in itself, but forging connections takes ideas and energy, and can in turn produce new opportunities for creativity.

Effective cultural coordination requires:

- Identifying which institutions and stakeholders need to be involved, and at what scale.
- Establishing connections between education, business, and planning.
- Choosing an appropriate governance structure, and using participatory processes to find and formulate a shared vision.

Reflections from CoP members

We can learn lessons from the Tukums living lab about attempts to coordinate cultural life:

- A regional cultural strategy works to consolidate cultural life by more efficiently connecting people, resources and ideas.
- Coordination can make cultural institutions, activities and events more accessible, especially across rural and urban areas.
- For institutions and stakeholders to work together effectively, participation is vital – developing a strategy takes collaborative decision-making, not top-down direction (see Annex 7.2).

Lesson 2: *Enhancing local and regional identities means making positive connections between people and place, by supporting what makes a locality distinctive, and what makes cultural life shared.*

Rural and urban areas can often have different identities, and differences can be difficult to bridge, especially when it comes to cultural connections. This is further complicated by changing administrative boundaries, as people do not always identify with the new administrative unit. At the same time, some shared identities can exclude others. For instance, in regions with a large or dominant city, rural areas can be neglected by the cultural offer and this can make rural residents less likely to participate in regional life. Using identity to foster growth and innovation can risk suggesting that some residents need to take up a new identity or not get involved.

Because identity is part of culture, culture is also integral to overcoming challenges around local and regional identities. Culture, in this sense, needs to be framed as shared and inclusive. Shared cultural events, for example, can help build connections between rural and urban areas. Similarly, events that include residents' diversity can help more people to feel like they belong to place where they live.

Ways to make these cultural connections include:

- Building a joint network of local stakeholders to support quality events and activities that bring people together across the region.
- Using education to celebrate local landscapes and cultural heritage as shared assets that can be shaped together into the future.

- Enabling opportunities for regional growth through culture by finding a balance between a distinctive identity and innovative, open outlooks.

Reflections from CoP members

We can learn lessons from the Living Lab Metropolitan Area of Styria about enhancing regional identities through culture:

- Cities can support large cultural attractions that draw in residents and visitors – yet the cultural offer in rural areas should not be overlooked. For regions to be places that people want to live in and identify with, local cultural life needs to be vibrant and attractive.
- To be truly regional, cultural connections need a joint network that moves both ways: from rural to urban, and from urban to rural.
- Bringing together stakeholders like mayors and local cultural professionals helps establish and promote cultural projects that bridge the urban/rural divide.

Lesson 3: *Valorising rural culture sustainably means celebrating what is special and alive, enabling rural culture to be a valuable part of the present – not left behind in the past.*

There are stereotypes of rural places, and often these stereotypes mean that rural culture gets ignored and undervalued. This can lead to outmigration, jeopardising the future of these places. To address this, several challenges must be dealt with. For instance, while rural culture and rural landscapes are historically linked, often only landscapes are celebrated by, and promoted to, urban visitors, leaving the culture that conserves these places undervalued. Likewise, as rural areas are often perceived through what they do not have rather than what they do, celebrating rural culture can easily disappear from policy priorities, jeopardising the future of local livelihoods.

To reverse misperceptions of rural culture and foster sustainable futures for rural places, we need to valorise what a living rural culture has to offer. Importantly, the work needs to be ongoing. Possible tools might include:

- Identifying the aspects of local rural culture that can foster and support innovation, as well as what is attractive to visitors.
- Developing a future vision for the region which highlights what rural culture has to offer.
- Improving the quality of the cultural offer, so that visitors gain a positive impression and residents feel valued.

Reflections from CoP members

We can learn lessons from the Lucca living lab about valorising rural culture sustainably:

- Rural landscapes are cultural landscapes. Sustaining the landscapes that locals and tourists both value means sustaining rural culture.
- Supporting local food through events, markets and tourist trails is an important ingredient for sustaining rural culture.
- By celebrating local food, the knowledge and traditions that go into making it can be valorised, too – and vice versa.

Based on internal discussions, the CoP developed a question toolbox (see below) that was used in the living labs to assess the current state and future opportunities with regard to three main lessons. The table below contains questions that can also be used in other contexts to assess rural-urban cultural connections and identify new opportunities.

Identifying opportunities to strengthen rural-urban cultural connections	
Coordinating cultural life	Questions for assessing existing coordination: ► How do cultural institutions currently work together? ► How do visitors find out about cultural life in the region? ► What are the links between rural and urban cultural life?
	Questions for identifying new connections: ► Which institutions and stakeholders need to be involved? ► Where are the opportunities for rural-urban cultural links? ► What kind of structure is needed?
Enhancing local and regional identities	Questions for assessing local and regional identities: ► How strong is the existing regional identity? ► Are rural and urban identities complementary or divisive? ► Is identity encouraging local/regional participation?
	Questions for identifying ways to enhance identities: ► Which local cultural assets can be shared and celebrated? ► What kinds of events will bring people together? ► Which stakeholders need to be involved?
Valorising rural culture sustainably	Questions for assessing how rural culture is valued: ► How is rural culture currently perceived? ► Is rural culture valued in urban spaces within the region? ► Which negative stereotypes need to be countered?
	Questions for identifying ways to valorise rural culture: ► What are the strengths to be celebrated? ► What kinds of activities or events can help? ► What parts of rural culture offer opportunities to innovate?

3.4. Evolution of issues discussed

Several outputs were agreed upon after the Riga meeting (November 2019), based on issues that had been discussed in previous meetings. While the members reiterated their interest in the topics described above, the decision was made to approach them from a slightly different angle in an attempt to make them practically relevant. Specifically, by combining elements of the topics that

had been explored thus far, the CoP agreed to prepare thematic briefings (see Annex 7.3) that would include recommendations for action that could be useful for practitioners. However, these have either failed to materialise (see below) or are still in the process of being developed.

Figure 6: CoP meeting in Riga (November 2019)

Sustainability of cultural activities

This thematic briefing was to be led by Mid Wales, but It is unlikely that a thematic briefing on the sustainability of cultural activities will be produced in the near future. This short report was an agreed objective with a local authority practice partner. Unfortunately, the collaboration was hampered by severe flooding in the region and the COVID-19 pandemic in the first half of 2020, and the practice partners understandably prioritised crisis management now for much of 2020 and were unable to contribute to lower priority projects. Furthermore, the topicality of this issue itself was perceived as being "pre-crisis". Mid Wales will be looking at culture and the cultural sector as part of the COVID-19 rural recovery planning now being undertaken by the WLGA (the primary practice partner in Mid Wales). That work proceeded according to WLGA deadlines.

Valorisation and proximity

The thematic briefing on valorisation and proximity was to be led by Lucca and Mid Wales. A Scopus search using the keywords *proximity* and *proximity economy* was carried out and got thousands of results about a great variety of related topics. Gradually, it was decided that a greater emphasis on food would be more practicable. Specifically, the combination of proximity and food got results related to alternative food networks, authenticity, etc. These links would not be something intrinsically related to cultural connections, except for the Lucca living lab where food is central to cultural connections between the urban and the rural. These findings will be used in the preparation of a thematic briefing on local food branding in the Sustainable food systems CoP, and there will be thematic overlaps with the Cultural connections CoP.

Governance of cultural connections

The thematic briefing was initially led by Tukums and the Metropolitan Area of Styria. Both living labs were interested in the governance aspects of cultural connections and an initial exchange via email allowed the partners to identify several topics that could be of interest to the group, mainly concerning the planning and coordination of cultural events across the respective regions. However, the report gradually became the responsibility of Tukums as the data gathered in the living lab concerning the development of a cultural strategy proved to be a solid foundation for preparing the report as a case study. Nonetheless, Tukums and the Metropolitan Area of Styria started working on a short report about cultural infrastructure in the Public infrastructure and social services CoP.

Example from Tukums: Cultural strategy

The primary aim of the ROBUST living lab in Tukums was to develop a cultural strategy for the municipality. Prior to ROBUST, the local government had yet to develop and define a coherent policy approach that encompasses different varieties of culture. Despite Tukums municipality being well-known for different cultural events taking place in urban and rural settlements, there are several factors that limit beneficial relations between rural and urban areas via cultural ties and events. (e.g. an unwillingness to coordinate cultural life in the region in a centralised manner). The goal of the strategy was to help preserve the rich cultural and historical heritage of the region by identifying development objectives and priorities in the cultural sector and agreeing on their governance arrangements. The living lab, therefore, was involved in the activities of the municipality to address this topic holistically, potentially contributing to improved territorial cohesion and smart growth.

Figure 7: Workshop in Tukums (February 2020)

Evolution post-April 2020

In April 2020 (just after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic), all living labs involved in the CoP prepared updates about their activities since the last consortium meeting (see Annex 7.4). Several questions were developed by the Tukums team based on these updates, which implicitly built on the

initial scoping exercise. These questions were discussed in a webinar, which was held on 24 April 2020.

Specifically, the CoP discussed:

1. What does rural culture mean for outsiders, people living in urban areas? (Folklore? Tradition? Artefacts? Values?)
2. How are visitors/tourists attracted? (Perceived authenticity? Stereotypes? More "natural" environment? Traditional food?)
3. What kinds of events take place in "rural" areas? (Traditional events, folklore? Contemporary festivals?)
4. What has been the impact of COVID-19 on cultural life in more remote, rural areas?
5. What is the meaning and value of rural culture for rural residents?
6. What are smart and innovative forms of valorisation and commercialisation of rural culture that can benefit local/rural communities?

While the CoP aimed to look at possible synergies between the urban and the rural, most participants unwittingly focused on rural culture. It is likely that this was due to the belief that rural culture and rural areas are more vulnerable, coupled with the assumption that urban culture is thriving and has no trouble developing innovative approaches and attracting an audience and skilled professionals. However, it was recognised that this is not necessarily true in all countries, or even municipalities within the same country.

The discussion reiterated that cultural connections between urban and rural areas were associated with enjoyment and heritage. The idea of enjoying rural space was quite prominent across all four living labs. This could be due to the unique qualities of the natural environment (ecosystem services), heritage sites and the architecture present in rural areas. For instance, representatives of the Austrian living lab noted that rural areas are known as recreation and heritage sites.

Nonetheless, it was also suggested that urban sprawl and urbanisation in general mean that there is a confluence of rural and urban cultures and ways of life, a co-penetration of space by rural and urban inhabitants. Indeed, this may mean that some *traditional* events are targeted at local inhabitants, while others are organised with the idea of attracting outsiders from urban areas. For instance, the living lab of the Metropolitan Area of Styria noted that activities mixing culture and food were particularly attractive for urban residents. Furthermore, there are also tensions between urban and rural residents, as manifested by ideas of rewilding brought by urbanites but opposed by the locals (Mid Wales). Overall, this suggests that the meaning of rural culture depends on the lifestyles of residents (commuters, permanent residents etc.)

Example from Styria: KULTUR 24

KULTUR 24 is a cultural network of artists and creative professionals established through a LEADER Local Action group in the eastern part of the Metropolitan Area of Styria. The main goals of the initiative are to build a basis for active networking amongst cultural and creative professionals, to create an active cultural life in this peri-urban area, to implement common projects and to get to know new project partners within and outside the region. The activities started from a small community of artists within the region but have now evolved to a broad network beyond the borders of the LAG 'Hügel- und Schöcklland'. The network

has expanded to the city of Graz and strengthens cultural exchange on a national and international level. It is active through recurrent meetings in alternating locations of the region. These encounters are professionally guided by the LAG team and external experts, who consult artists, for instance in the field of self-marketing. Besides professional assistance, the artists have the chance for informal exchange among each other. KULTUR 24 has therefore supported the creation of many initiatives and brought cultural professionals together for cooperation. Thus, not only creativity and innovation increased but also a broad cultural programme was established in this rural-urban area.

Figure 8: Maria Puregger, a member of the network produces handmade products from alpaca wool. (source: https://www.huegelland.at/gruppen/produzentengruppe/puregger-maria/)

There are perceived differences between the cultural offers of urban and rural areas. Rural areas tend to be associated with events that are tied to specific local traditions or landscapes (e.g. agricultural festivals). These are organised by cultural houses and countryside associations and municipal governments. The focus varies between the regions, as gastronomic aspects are more pronounced in Lucca, while agricultural festivals and traditional folk celebrations were more prominent in Mid Wales and Tukums respectively.

Local culture is important to inhabitants of rural areas. In Tukums, local culture is a source of pride and people greatly enjoy community gatherings which take place in local cultural houses and open-air spaces. Consequently, the administrative reshaping of municipal boundaries makes some people feel threatened about their local culture and identity. Similarly, newcomers to the countryside are often affluent and entrepreneurial people with business ideas and access to knowledge and finances. They develop new businesses and brand them based on local cultural assets (e.g. ceramics, local guest houses). In Mid Wales, the situation is broadly similar, but the demographic aspect was emphasised - different offers to various age groups, e.g. the elderly. The Austrian living lab noted the social value added of rural culture. Cultural activities are seen as opportunities to meet and communicate among rural residents. What is more, these activities are often organised by local and regional actors invested in the future of the region in question.

However, there is also the problem of overabundance. For example, in the Metropolitan Area of Styria there are many cultural associations in rural areas organising their events. Consequently, there is almost oversupply and overconsumption of events in rural areas. Therefore, the living lab is concerned with finding solutions to this problem. In a stakeholder workshop, the coordination of

event schedules was mentioned, which is already done in some municipalities. Likewise, there is a sense which local culture is packaged for the consumption of outsiders (Lucca).

Based on a synthesis of the living lab updates, webinar discussions and previous conversations at consortium meetings several topics were chosen for further exploration, as most of the initial ideas for thematic briefings were gradually dropped. These new ideas were further discussed in the online consortium meeting in September 2020.

Heritage commodification & the tourist gaze: The initial idea was that a report or article on this topic could tackle issues related to the commodification of heritage and rural culture to meet the (perceived) expectations or (primarily urban) tourists. It was acknowledged that there is a mutual dependence of sorts, as rural businesses rely on the influx of tourists. However, this may not necessarily be a mutually beneficial relationship. Building on this, the output could wrestle with the idea of rural place/spaces as destinations for people living in cities, rather than places with their own everyday routines and rhythms, and how tourism and leisure activities are based on, and contribute to, this idea. This should not disregard the perspective of rural inhabitants (i.e. how they adapt and attempt to benefit from this).

Example from Mid Wales: Rethinking culture and tourism after COVID-19

Tourism is important to the economy of rural Wales, with visitors attracted by the striking landscape and natural environment, but also by the cultural experience of exploring historical sites and local heritage, consuming local food and traditional crafts, and attending festivals and events. Most holidaymakers and day visitors come from cities in south Wales and England. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 however highlighted less positive aspects of tourism. The economic over-dependence of some communities on tourism was exposed during the lockdown, then the reopening of the businesses when international travel was still discouraged brought record numbers of visitors in a short, condensed summer season. The large numbers created problems with congestion, littering, trespass and illegal camping and provoked debate about the social and cultural impact of tourism on rural communities. As such, finding a new approach to tourism was a high priority for stakeholders contributing to the 'Rural Vision for Wales' produced by the Mid Wales Living Lab. Proposals put forward included using smartphone apps to monitor congestion and direct visitors to less crowded sites, promoting less visited areas, developing more culture-based attractions and more strongly liking tourism and local food and drink, regulating numbers of holiday homes and encouraging more serviced accommodation to increase incomes to local residents.

Figure 9: Camping in Mid Wales

The September 2020 consortium meeting allowed the group to refine the topic and add new questions to consider. Overall, it was suggested that a nuanced view of heritage commodification is necessary by questioning a clear-cut difference between insiders and outsiders, and the assumption that commodification is a universally negative phenomenon, despite the positive impact it may have on rural areas (e.g. income, better infrastructure). It was suggested that the publication could further explore what kind of heritage gets commodified, and how the generated revenue is distributed. A more general point concerned the difference between commodification and valorisation, which implicitly questioned the assumption that heritage is viewed only in economic terms. The Tukums team agreed to work on an article based on this topic.

Tensions between different interpretations and experiences of rurality*:* the idea was that an output based on this idea could tackle issues that emerge from the influx (or re-migration) of urban dwellers and result in tensions and negotiations with the people living in putatively rural areas. In our discussions, Mid Wales alluded to disputes over rewilding in Wales, and there are similar experiences in Latvia (though not necessarily Tukums). This also raises questions around identity and being an insider/outsider, local/visitor, which, as Sandra (Tukums), Giovanni and Sabrina (Lucca) suggested, are not straightforward.

While it was acknowledged that this topic would be interesting, further discussions did not lead to the identification of a unique angle that would make a novel contribution to the existing literature.

Contemporary rurality: the intention was to tackle the implicit association of rural areas with nature, folk culture and tradition, and ask what contemporary manifestations of rurality can allow for the valorisation of rural culture in a way that is not reliant upon cultural fossilisation. This would build on the idea of rural modernity. None of the living labs expressed a particular interest in advancing this topic.

Differences in cultural offers: the intention was that a publication on this topic would explore the differences/perceived differences between events organised in cities and events that take place in rural areas, and what this says about urban-rural relationships.

The September 2020 consortium meeting provided additional questions that the report could tackle. A prominent theme was that rural culture is frequently associated with local folk culture and the identities of local inhabitants, while urban culture is perceived to be more global in character. This, however, raised the question of whether niche culture would thrive in an urban context. Another theme was the role of infrastructure in facilitating (and hampering) access to cultural life in rural areas. While the quality of roads is atypical example of infrastructure hampering access, digital solutions may be a way to provide access, while dissolving the difference between urban and rural culture. Finally, it was suggested that rural culture can make use of ecosystem services. The team of the Metropolitan Area of Styria initially agreed to work on a report on this topic, but other commitments took precedence.

The impact of the COVID-19 crisis inspired a further topic: ***Rural culture, smart growth and post-pandemic recovery***, which was advanced by the Mid Wales team. Rural areas with a high dependence on the tourism sector are likely to be amongst the hardest hit by the crisis. Smart growth is part of the ROBUST conceptual framework – but there has been a tendency in rural areas to prioritise tourism as a 'smart specialisation'. However, the pandemic has challenged the viability of this approach**.**

Several potential directions were considered in the September 2020 consortium meeting. One area on which the paper could focus was the potential of the creative economy to counteract negative trends and facilitate smart growth, with projects focusing on the involvement of local artists and cultural professionals. The impact of digitalisation on local culture life could also be explored, as, while it can enable access to different cultural resources, it is not necessarily beneficial to local culture and rural festivals that are embedded in local customs and environments. For instance, the growing role of digital culture as a result of Covid-19 simply underlined the vulnerability of local cultural venues. On a related note, it can further exacerbate the digital divide. Initially, the Mid Wales and Lucca teams agreed to work on a report on this topic. However, the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the workflow in these living labs and other commitments took precedence.

3.5. Summary of the main results for ROBUST

Broadly speaking, the CoP approached culture in two different ways: (i) as specific cultural institutions and cultural activities, and (ii) as an element permeating other sectors and activities. The living labs varied in terms of how and to what extent they operated with these two meanings and manifestations of culture. While Tukums focused on mechanisms for governing cultural practices and institutions, in Lucca culture was not an independent theme. Rather, it was regarded as an element shaping other aspects and activities of rural life and rural-urban relations.

Cultural connections can be imagined in many different ways. The internal discussions revealed that the nature of the *connections* and the *elements* or *entities* connected depends in large part on the frame of reference chosen. In practice, the imagined connections existed, or were to be forged, between the urban and the rural, which were both defined ostensively, rather than conceptually. However, the connections between people and places were an equally prominent topic (e.g. the prevention of outmigration).

Internal discussions largely focused on making rural areas liveable and ensuring the long-term prospects of rural culture, culinary traditions, and livelihoods. The implicit assumption was often that urban areas can take care of themselves, and their long-term prospects were not under threat, while the understanding and conceptualisation of rural areas needs to be reconsidered so that rural

culture and rural life are valorised, rather than purely commodified, frozen in time or forgotten. This, unfortunately, meant that rural culture became the focus of the internal discussions, with urban-rural synergies receiving less attention.

Regarding rural-urban linkages, a key topic of discussion among CoP members was tourism and recreational activities, and the kind of relationship between urban and rural areas this can lead to. For instance, the Mid Wales living lab noted the dependence of rural communities on tourism. On a more optimistic note, we concluded that drawing on the unique characteristics of urban and rural areas can lead to a symbiotic relationship whereby the differences in cultural and recreational offers complement each other. Thus, large-scale open-air festivals can make use of ecosystem services and more open (less congested) spaces characteristic of rural areas.

Nonetheless, **the extent to which the relationship is symbiotic depends on how and whether the interests of locals and visitors are balanced**. We note that this is an especially pressing issue to consider in the case of rural areas. For instance, left unchecked heritage commodification and a drive to preserve tradition can inadvertently lead to the fossilisation of local rural culture as (primarily urban) visitors expect to see certain practices and *ways of life* in rural areas. This can perpetuate the implicit association of rural culture with nature, tradition and folklore, while simultaneously precluding more contemporary expressions from emerging because there is little commercial incentive to innovate. Such a situation can be commercially viable, but it turns rural areas into recreational resources for paying, and likely more well-off, urban dwellers.

While rural inhabitants can benefit commercially from such a situation, the **vitality of rural culture may suffer in the long-term as its value is determined primarily in terms of whether it caters to the needs of urban dwellers**. In view of this, our discussions suggest that rural-urban linkages (in the form of tourism and recreational activities) can lead to mutual dependence, but care must be taken to ensure that they are symbiotic and do not stall the development of contemporary forms of rurality and the needs of local residents. For instance, the Austrian living lab noted the vibrant cultural life in the municipalities of the Metropolitan Area of Styria, which is mainly supported by the local associations. Culture is seen as being important for social cohesion and as a space for the population to share experiences and shape their lives.

Overall, it is important to recognise that **cultural connections between urban and rural areas can shape the emergence of new localities and can be a tool to encourage smart development.** New forms of heritage valorisation can be explored to revitalise cultural activity and develop new business models that are more attuned to contemporary consumption patterns. Cultural connections can stimulate smart development in several ways, e.g. by pooling cultural resources and encouraging stakeholder collaboration, using rural assets in smart development projects, including culture in regional development plans, creating a digital cultural offer highlighting regional assets, and fine-tuning regional cultural specialisation. The challenge, though, is to embed the new (or revitalised) cultural offer in rural and local contexts, avoid negative consequences and ensure spatial justice. Furthermore, rural culture requires greater care (compared to urban culture) as it can be more vulnerable.

Regarding cross-sectoral relations, several possibilities were raised, and numerous connections are possible because culture permeates all aspects of human life. However, the **connections with food, infrastructure and ecosystem services were particularly pronounced** in our CoP, largely due to the interests of CoP members.

In the case of food, we noted **a frequent association of rural areas with traditional recipes and higher quality products**, or at least products that were perceived to be of a higher quality. This indicated an implicit association between rural culture and culinary heritage, which provides food businesses based in rural areas with opportunities to market their goods and build upon a repertoire of regional culinary resources, whilst simultaneously experimenting with new flavours. The challenge once again is finding a balance between preservation and innovation.

The connection between culture and infrastructure was discussed in relation to roads, venues for cultural events and digital services, though this was never the focus of our discussions. For instance, the poor quality or even lack of paved roads is an oft-mentioned issue in Tukums, and this prevents the flow of visitors to more remote areas, while simultaneously hampering the mobility of people who live in these areas. We note that this also impacts the viability of certain cultural attractions and venues, and can determine policy responses vis-à-vis investment. This is especially true if the available infrastructure is susceptible to seasonal damage (e.g. flooding). Likewise, the Austrian living lab noted that convenient premises and venues are a precondition for inviting artists from other, mostly urban, areas. Thus, physical infrastructure and the availability of public transport are important preconditions for developing links between urban centres and remote areas. Alternatively, municipalities can decide to supplement existing physical infrastructural with IT infrastructure, allowing for the provision of services online in a cheaper and less labour-intensive way, which is evidenced by positive examples from Tukums (e.g. e-library services, online broadcasts of cultural events).

### Example from Tukums: Culture online

The online broadcast facility on the website of Tukums municipality allows residents of both urban and rural areas to watch cultural events that are taking place in the city of Tukums. Several locally significant cultural events are also broadcast. This is done to allow more people to watch and experience them online, without having to attend in person. The solution was implemented by two of the municipality's departments - the IT department and the Department of Public Relations, though external help is engaged for important cultural events, as the municipality lacks the necessary equipment. The possibility to view and experience cultural events online is seen as a way to strengthen cultural connections between urban and rural areas in the municipality. What is more, it allows Tukums to share its cultural offer with a wider range of people – including those who have not visited the municipality.

Finally, cultural connections are also intimately tied to the provision of ecosystem services. This is likely due to rural culture being frequently associated with natural environments and active leisure activities.

Imagining the role of cultural connections in territorial development
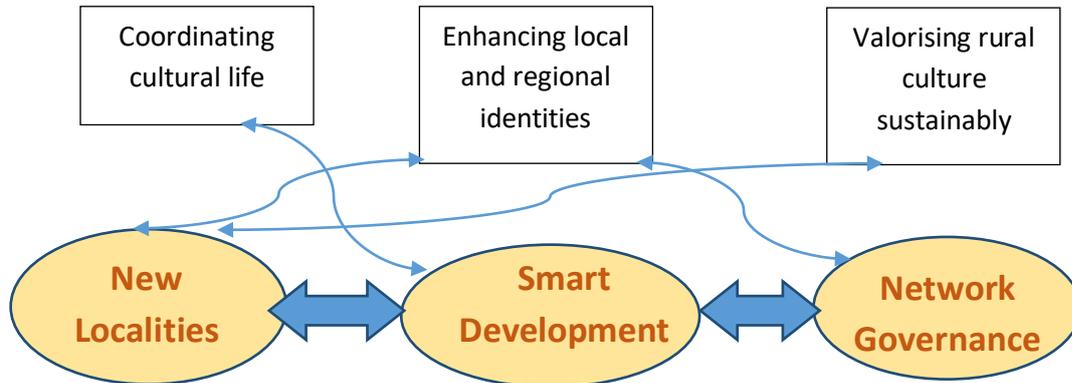
The living labs explored different governance strategies with the involvement of a diverse range of stakeholders. Overall, we note that cultural connections are fuzzy and difficult to govern. Furthermore, the extent to which culture can and should be governed is open to debate, and the particular solution chosen will likely depend on established political traditions and practices. From the perspective of network governance, two modes can be tentatively identified: *explicit* and *implicit*. The explicit governance mode presumes the active involvement of embedded cultural institutions, local authorities and civil society. This was exemplified by Tukums, in which the development of the cultural strategy proceeded in a participatory manner, while still being coordinated by the municipality. The implicit mode is characterised by collaborative arrangements that have not been formalised or, alternatively, are being driven by emerging partnerships. This was exemplified by the *Rural Vision* document in Mid Wales, which was coordinated by a strategic partnership, the WLGA Rural Forum, engaging with various stakeholders, but which it is hoped will be adopted for implementation by relevant government institutions and delivery bodies. Despite these differences, the positive impact of network governance in the cultural sphere is the development of a joint cultural offer at a (wider) territorial level in an inclusive manner.

However, the emergence of novel forms of governance is hampered by institutional inertia. The experience in Tukums in developing the cultural strategy suggests that existing traditions of stakeholder engagement and document preparation are conducive to path dependency. This means that innovation can at best be incremental as it is bound by the particular municipal and legal framework, which gives preference to business-as-usual approaches.

Attempts to govern cultural connections in a centralised manner should bear in mind that **people's self-identification does not always correspond to administrative boundaries**. This clearly shows that people's identities are not tied to an administrative unit, especially if this unit is not based upon historical and cultural boundaries. Indeed, inhabitants can have diverging identities or even non-identities. Constant redrawing of administrative boundaries exacerbates this, as evidenced by Tukums. The municipality came into existence in 2009, and its boundaries will be redrawn once again in 2021. Secondly, attempts to govern and coordinate cultural life must be sensitive to existing patterns of communication and planning at lower administrative levels. By considering the realities of institutional inertia, centralised attempts can avoid encountering resistance from local governments (whether they be municipalities or parishes). Thirdly, it is crucial that implicit assumptions about rural culture be tackled in a policy context to ensure the well-being of rural inhabitants.

Growth and sustainable development models have mainly been discussed in relation tourism and the attraction of visitors by way of a competitive cultural offer. The challenge is finding a balance between making an area attractive to tourists, while simultaneously keeping it liveable and thriving for the locals. Furthermore, the COVD19 pandemic will have clear implications for how different regions approach growth and sustainability, but it is currently too early to tell.

4.Monitoring and evaluation of learning (2-3 pages)

The CoP has not been the primary focus for most of the partners involved. Culture was often part of other topics that the participating living labs worked on, but other aspects of urban-rural linkages took precedence. This is likely because, while culture permeates many aspects of urban-rural interactions, the focus has been on more tangible aspects of the relationship between urban and rural areas. For instance, culture was envisioned as a part of the Sustainable food systems CoP output on place branding and the Public infrastructure and social services CoP report on cultural infrastructure, but these outputs were mainly focused on food and infrastructure respectively, with culture playing a secondary and supplementary role. This issue was also discussed at the final CoP meeting, with members noting that culture and cultural connections were frequently entangled with other aspects of urban-rural linkages, but seldom became the focus of the conversation.

The internal discussions have laid bare several conflicting sentiments regarding cultural connections between the urban and the rural. We have already noted that members implicitly focused on rural culture and the issues associated with the commodification and fossilisation of tradition and heritage, especially in terms of how this can prevent contemporary forms of rural culture from emerging and flourishing. However, protectionist and nativist sentiments that romanticise urban or rural culture can be equally pernicious, as they can prevent synergistic outlooks from emerging.

We note that there has been a gradual reduction in the number of topics which the CoP has explored. While a broad and diverse spectrum of topics was initially proposed, these were later narrowed down to a few themes that could be explored in different outputs. What is more, these topics are of primarily academic interest. This is likely due to the fact that researchers have taken a more prominent role in driving the research agenda of the CoP. Consequently, this meant that the goal of elucidating the policy relevance was only partially achieved.

The experiences of Tukums and the Metropolitan Area of Styria suggest that the goals of the living lab can be achieved if they are clearly defined, fit the municipal agenda and the practice partners take ownership of the process. We note that some of the member living labs achieved more tangible results, while others had less tangible impacts. In Tukums and Styria, the tangible practical outcomes were (i) the adoption of a cultural strategy and (ii) the consolidation of the rural and urban cultural offer respectively. On the other hand, in Mid Wales work on the Rural Vision report influenced the territorial planning dialogue, while In Lucca the recommendations provided by the living lab helped in addressing issues related to the rural landscape.

Given that the living labs are located in different parts of Europe, the CoP has had to rely on online tools to exchange ideas and communicate in between consortium meetings. This has presented few difficulties and webinars and mailing lists have proved to be efficient methods of communication. However, we note that members of the CoP had met in person, which may have been important for building trust.

4.1.Use of the ROBUST toolkit in the living labs

For the Tukums living lab the main focus was culture – the development of the municipal cultural strategy in particular. Consequently, several methods were used in the context of activities related to cultural connections, incl.:

- stakeholder mapping;
- participant observation;
- webinar/on-line forums
- focus groups
- expert interviews,
- stakeholder interviews,
- knowledge café,
- cross-organisational knowledge sharing.

As expected, each of the methods had its strengths and weaknesses, so their added value depended in large part on whether their application was justified. For instance, stakeholder mapping was useful for getting a clear sense of the actors involved in regional cultural life, while participant observation at workshops provided insight into the relationship between different organisations.

5. Conclusion

Culture has many different meanings, which hampers attempts to operationalise it and discuss it dispassionately. Culture is a broad concept and permeates different aspects of our lives. Likewise, cultural connections between urban and rural areas can come in many different forms. However, not all are conducive to mutually beneficial cross-fertilisation (incl. between sectors), smart development and sustainable growth. The challenge is finding a way to talk about culture and cultural connections in a transparent manner that allows for critical reflection and an interrogation of problematic assumptions.

The CoP has explored possibilities of coordinating cultural events and cultural life within municipalities, across urban and rural territories. It has concluded that coordinating cultural life means connecting activities, events, and the people who enjoy them. This helps reduce duplication, share resources and make cultural institutions stronger together. The CoP has looked at culture as a marker of identity and learned that enhancing local and regional identities means making positive connections between people and place, by supporting what makes a locality distinctive, and what makes cultural life shared. Finally, when looking at possibilities for sustainable valorisation of local cultural resources we noted that valorising rural culture sustainably means celebrating what is special and alive, enabling rural culture to be a valuable part of the present.

The interests of local (rural) inhabitants and (urban) visitors must be balanced to ensure that urban-rural interactions lead to mutually beneficial synergies. Unchallenged perceptions of what can and should be expected from rural areas can perpetuate the implicit association of rural culture with nature, tradition, and folklore. Simultaneously, this can preclude innovation and more contemporary expressions or rurality from emerging simply because there is little commercial incentive to innovate. Rural areas can certainly benefit commercially form such stereotypes and heritage commodification more broadly, but this can ultimately turn rural areas into recreational resources for paying outsiders. Conversely, rural culture should not be romanticised and approached from a protectionist perspective. A balance between preservation and innovation must be sought, which does not drain the vitality of rural culture but also encourages a synergistic outlook. In view of this, we suggest that care must be taken to ensure that rural-urban linkages (which the CoP discussed primarily in the form of tourism and recreational activities) are symbiotic and do not stall the development of contemporary forms of urban-rural synergies and allow for the emergence of new, networked localities.

Cultural connections are dependent upon cross-sectoral interaction, be it with culinary traditions or ecosystem services. Our explorations suggest that, in addition cultural practices and the perceptions of a certain way of life, cultural connections between urban and rural areas can be embodied in food products and landscapes. This provides local food businesses opportunities to market their goods and build upon a repertoire of regional culinary resources, whilst simultaneously experimenting with new flavours. Likewise, various ecosystem services (e.g. ecotourism) could be provided. However, this would likely require investments in infrastructure, which could increase the flow of visitors to more remote rural areas, while simultaneously improving the mobility of local residents and providing new labour opportunities.

Successful governance of cultural connections should be sensitive to regional identities and local governance arrangements. People's self-identification does not always correspond to administrative

boundaries, and centralised attempts to govern cultural life must bear this in mind to avoid resistance at local levels.

6.References

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7. Annexes

7.1. Conference paper (May 2019)

Strengthening rural-urban cultural connections in practice: lessons from Living Labs in Europe

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Abstract in Italian: L'articolo descrive - e riflette in merito a - le esperienze di quattro Living Lab regionali accomunati dal tema delle connessioni culturali tra aree urbane e rurali, in particolare: (i) coordinamento dell'attività culturale, (ii) identità locale e regionale, (iii) valorizzazione sostenibile delle risorse culturali. L'articolo si basa sui casi di studio di quattro regioni Europee identificate dal progetto H2020 ROBUST (Rural-Urban Outlooks: Unlocking Synergies), quali: l'area metropolitana della Styria (Austria), la Piana di Lucca (Italia), il Galles Centrale (Regno Unito) e il comune di Tukums (Lettonia).

Abstract in English: This paper describes and reflects on the experiences of four regional living labs working on common themes of cultural connections between urban and rural areas, specifically: (i) coordination of cultural life, (ii) local and regional identities, and (iii) sustainable valorisation of cultural resources. The paper is based on case studies from four European regions participating as

part of the H2020 project ROBUST (Rural-Urban Outlooks: Unlocking Synergies): Metropolitan Area of Styria (Austria), Lucca (Italy), Mid Wales (UK) and Tukums (Latvia)

Introduction: cultural connections and rural-urban synergies

Improved understanding and appreciation of the relations between urban and rural areas is increasingly recognised as one of the cornerstones of inclusive and sustainable development (OECD 2019). Culture clearly has the potential to play a crucial role in strengthening such connections. Rural-Urban cultural connections can come in many different forms and reflect different strategies for facilitating the flow of goods, traditions, knowledge and people. However, culture can also segregate, and there are still cultural *dis*connections between rural and urban areas. Based on four case studies from different regions of the EU: Metropolitan Area of Styria (Austria), Lucca (Italy), Mid Wales (UK) and Tukums (Latvia), participating in the H2020 project ROBUST (Rural-Urban Outlooks: Unlocking Synergies), this paper explores regional strategies for the coordination and rejuvenation of cultural connections between rural and urban areas. Specifically, the analysis considers (1) challenges addressed by the Living Lab (LL) in each region, (2) cultural connections that are activated in response to those challenges, and (3) new localities/relational spaces as developed through cultural connections.

We acknowledge that culture can be framed in different ways – focusing on attitudes, values, heritage, practices, governance, etc. Similarly, cultural connections between urban and rural areas can be examined through various lenses: valorisation of heritage (Bessière, 1998), rural revitalisation (Lysgård, 2016), tourism and local economies (Lane, 1994; MacDonald and Jolliffe, 2007), creative industries and regional and local identities. In ROBUST's research, the aim is to explore and promote cultural connections for integrated territorial development. and the work of the individual Living Labs. The four Living Labs discussed in this paper engage with the thematic of culture through a collaborative Community of Practice (CoP). The CoP is oriented towards practical relevance, bringing together activities of the Living Labs which strengthen rural-urban cultural connections in order to contribute to: (i) regional culture, identity and local economy, (ii) quality of life of the population, (iii) knowledge and innovation capacities, and (iv) improved policy making.

This paper summarises the experiences of the first year of collaborating in the Community of Practice, and establishing individual Living Labs, and indicates future ambitions and potential challenges. In the first section we describe the methodology applied in the ROBUST Living Labs and the Community of Practice. The second section presents the individual agendas and activities in the Living Labs, with regard to cultural connections. The third section is devoted to joint research and innovation issues shared by the four Living Labs, primarily concerning cultural connections. To conclude, we highlight some emerging findings about the role and potential of culture to enhance rural-urban synergies and reflect on our working process.

Methodology: Living Labs and Communities of Practice as collaborative spaces for enhancing rural-urban cultural connections

The ROBUST project uses a Living Lab (LL) approach to envision and experiment with rural-urban linkages. A LL is a joint learning and development platform, which can be implemented in different European regions and at various geographic and political scales. Each ROBUST LL brings together multiple stakeholders (municipalities, development agencies, researchers, non-profit institutions, civil society organisations, businesses etc.) to pursue a common research and innovation agenda. An agenda is set for each LL for a three year period, and includes four phases of action research – envisioning, experimenting, experiencing, and finally evaluating and monitoring. Furthermore, each LL is connected to three of ROBUST's five cross-regional Communities of Practice, following themes that correspond to their regional development priorities. Besides culture, the other possible CoP themes are: public infrastructure and social services, sustainable food systems, ecosystem services, and labour markets and new business models.

The cultural connections CoP is a collaborative enterprise. The CoP collectively formulates shared innovation objectives and action plans, facilitates regular interaction between members, and develops a shared repertoire of methods, tools and frameworks. The overarching question guiding the CoP's work is: How can cultural connections enhance rural-urban synergies and what do these look like? More specifically, we ask: (i) How do cultural connections shape new localities?; (ii) How do cultural connections stimulate smart development?; (iii) How can cultural connections inspire (new) governance networks and novel political arrangements? In addition to posing these broad questions, the CoP pursues practical activities that tap into the needs and agendas of the LLs, in turn seeking to generate concrete actions and outcomes. Hence, the CoP's research and innovation agenda is continually evolving and methodologies remain flexible.

Cultural connections as means to strengthen rural-urban synergies: Living Lab agendas

Each LL focuses on the aspects of cultural connections that are deemed most relevant for their region, and develops individual research and innovation agendas to reflect the particular needs of the region in question. The four LLs constituting the cultural connections CoP are not uniform in their emphasis on cultural connections, but each has culturally oriented ambitions or interests. The LLs are currently in the "envisioning phase", which encompasses identifying stakeholder needs, setting LL goals, designing a research and innovation strategy, and to agreeing on outcomes for evaluation. Below is a short description of the LLs.

Lucca Living Lab

In Lucca, the LL looks at attempts to underline connections between local cuisine, rural identity and the region. Central to the promotion of rural-urban relations in Lucca are the meanings and values attached to local food and regional products, which are also vehicles for the conservation of landscape and traditional knowledge, and for enhancing the tourist experience. The main challenge here is to identify and articulate a framework for the sustainable valorisation of culture

Lucca's envisioning phase has mostly involved coordination and internal consensus building regarding the development the LL research and innovation agenda, building on the outcomes of a previous project (CIRCULARIFOOD), which previously led to the launch of a food policy for the Lucca plain. The LL has therefore evolved as having two distinct, although interconnected, areas of work,

namely the governance of the intermunicipal Food Policy Plan, and the support of local territorial planning processes. Lucca LL has three specific questions: (i) How can food policies strengthen the synergies between rural and urban areas, considering cultural connections and ecosystem services?; (ii) What governance models can be defined and utilised to reinforce these synergies?; (iii) What synergies can be identified as mutually beneficial between territorial planning tools and regional food policy?

Consequently, the three CoPs selected for the Lucca LL (sustainable food systems, ecosystem services and cultural connections) are interrelated and aimed at actualising the potential of reconnecting rural and urban areas. Therefore, if sustainable local food and agriculture are the cornerstones of the Lucca LL, cultural connections represent a productive lens through which to look at rural-urban relations.

Tukums *Living Lab*

Tukums LL deals with issues around the historical cultural identity of the region, and the insufficiently coordinated calendar of cultural events in the municipality. The LL's specific interest is to develop a cultural strategy that would enable a cohesive approach to cultural life and a better use of the available cultural resources and repertoire.

At the outset, the LL set an objective to develop a coherent policy approach focusing on culture and also encompassing two other priorities – sustainable food systems and ecosystem services. Specifically, the LL set an objective to develop a cultural strategy for preserving cultural heritage and organising cultural life in the region. This objective responded to the issue of fragmentation of cultural life in the municipality, as cultural institutions (museums, cultural houses, cultural NGOs) work individually and there is little coordination of cultural activities between rural parishes and the town of Tukums. The LL formulated an objective to develop a strategy in a dialogue with stakeholder groups with the assumption that this would lead to a more coordinated and accessible cultural offer, and improve its overall quality.

The envisioning phase involved different methods, such as: stakeholder mapping, meetings and consultations with stakeholders, spreading information about the LL's aims, identifying participatory structures, and practical steps towards strategy development. The LL received support from the municipal council, and agreed to develop and approve the strategy by the end of 2020. It must be noted that a national administrative-territorial reform has been initiated and will likely be implemented for 2020-2021. This means that the administrative boundaries of the municipality will be redrawn to include parts of neighbouring municipalities. Therefore, a greater range of cultural institutions will be part of the region and possibly be managed by Tukums. This confronts the LL and Tukums municipality with a potential new challenge. However, it also creates the opportunity to include stakeholders from neighbouring territories in strategy development and to jointly design it. Thereby, the LL has a potential role in facilitating governance at a wider territorial scale.

Mid Wales Living Lab

The Mid Wales region lacks a significant urban centre, hence the Mid Wales LL has chosen to focus on the theme of 'polycentric growth without an urban hierarchy'. Notably, this LL also brings the question of language into cultural connections, exploring the role of the Welsh Language as a

cultural resource for smart development connecting rural and urban areas. This includes investigating the link between language and regional economic development strategies in the case of recent endeavours towards a new linguistically-based economic region.

In Mid Wales the envisioning phase involves holding talks with senior officials in the nine local authorities (i.e. municipalities) in Wales that are predominantly rural. The process has been gradual, since scheduling meetings that bring together multiple stakeholders is a complex administrative task because initiating a fruitful discussion, including all relevant Stakeholders, is rather difficult. These continuing discussions focus on: (i) the key challenges for the region and for rural Wales more broadly, and (ii) innovative ideas and initiatives. By identifying common themes and ideas worth sharing, the discussions will be the basis upon which to organise the future work of the Mid Wales LL. To date, a number of shared themes have emerged, including:: links between supporting economic development in rural areas and the Welsh language; connections between cultural amenities and regional viability, both for tourism and to make the area liveable for younger people and professionals; concerns regarding urban culture as the dominant culture; the paucity of considerations of cultural and community life in Welsh rural policy, which is predominantly concerned with the environment and agriculture.

Metropolitan Area of Styria Living Lab

The LL of the Metropolitan Area of Styria covers a larger area compared to other regions and encompasses Graz, the second biggest city in Austria, and the districts Graz-Umgebung (surrounding Graz) and Voitsberg. The Metropolitan Area of Styria was officially defined in 2009 and is thus a comparatively new regional governance unit; hence, there is a need to strengthen regional identity. The LL's aim is to foster synergies between cultural life in the urban area and rural cultural offers that are tailored to the needs, and adapted to the cultural expressions of, people living in rural areas. The LL seeks to identify and analyse possible synergies through complementary cultural offers in rural and urban areas by creating a cultural rural-urban network and increasing cultural offers, especially for locals in more rural areas.

During the envisioning phase, the Austrian LL asked: (i) How intercommunal cooperation and approaches aiming at service provision throughout the region can be enhanced; (ii) How the implementation of such cooperative approaches can contribute to addressing rural-urban synergies. One consequent objective is to visualise the good practice examples of intercommunal and shared economy projects in all three priority areas(cultural connections, new business models and labour markets, public infrastructure and social services). As a result, a permanent online database, which will be part of the Regional Management website, will be implemented. The data collection and presentation will provide information on questions such as: "What are the innovative hot spots?" and "What ideas can be easily adopted in other municipalities and how?". To facilitate data collection, the LL has developed 11 criteria of good practice. Furthermore, the LL has employed the method of stakeholder mapping to identify key regional stakeholders. Two expert interviews have been conducted to date with key representatives from the regional cultural scene. In the field of cultural connections, nine important stakeholders were identified (six of them new stakeholders). The next step will be telephone interviews with mayors of all 52 municipalities in the Metropolitan Area of Styria, in order to further investigate the potential of cultural connections between rural and urban areas, and between rural areas.

Promoting rural-urban cultural connections: common issues and joint work in the Community of Practice

As we have already indicated, the cultural connections CoP is about forming connections across geographic boundaries and through common themes, including working together towards common actions and sharing what has been learned. The CoP is grounded in the realities of the participating LLs we have described above. It links research and practice partners, and stakeholders in the regions. which will be explored further in the CoP's collective research and innovation agenda and form the basis of a shared action plan. These key themes are:

1. Coordination of cultural life: LL Mid -Wales is interested in new governance arrangements. LL Tukums has started a participatory process and joint visioning for how the cultural strategy shall be developed. LL Metropolitan Area of Styria looks at good practices of inter-communal activities and examples in the field of shared economy.

2. Local and regional identities: LL Mid -Wales looks at linguistic identities in relation to inclusive growth. LL Tukums will explore connections between food and culture, and approach local products as markers of heritage. LL Lucca is concerned with local recipes and food culture in relation to landscape conservation. LL Metropolitan Area of Styria looks to improve the offer of cultural activities in rural areas and strengthening their cultural identity.

3. Sustainable valorisation: LL Mid -Wales aims to create a vision for rural Wales. LL Tukums strives for improved and equal access to culture for urban and rural residents. LL Lucca addresses the role of local planning.

If we reflect on the foci of the LLs in the CoP across the three main themes, we can identify some activities linked to problems and others linked to solutions (Table 1). There is still a disconnect between the problems and solutions, which will form part of the upcoming work of the LLs and the CoP.

	Coordination of cultural life	Local and regional identities	Sustainable valorization
Problem	Need to develop a process for a cultural strategy (T) New governance arrangements are needed (W) Examples of inter-communal good practices are needed (S) Examples of shared economy are needed (S)	Lack of connection between food and culture (T) Linguistic identifies in relation to inclusive growth (W)	Lack of clarity on the role of local planning (L) Lack of people visiting cultural events (T) Lack of equal access to culture (T)
Solution	Participatory processes and joint vision (T) Calendar of cultural events (T)	Local recipes (L) Landscape conservation as marker of identity (L)	Develop a vision for rural Wales (W)

	Development of a joint cultural plan (T)	Cultural rural activities (S)	
		Food and cultural heritage (T)	
Cross-cutting	Cultural connections at a wider territorial scale		
	Education as a theme and a tool		
	Quality of cultural offer		
	Interconnections between education, business and planning		

Table 1. Themes, problems and solutions addressed by cultural connections CoP.

T… Tukums; W… Mid Wales; S…Metropolitan Area of Styria; L… Lucca

LL Metropolitan Area of Styria is interested in a wide variety of issues, including intercommunal and cross-sectoral cooperation, and the challenges of dealing with different stakeholders. Representatives of the LL have noted a need to overcome former patterns of territorial thinking – moving towards working together and articulating a regional identity that reflects the new administrative boundaries. The Tukums LL has noted similar concerns, and expressed an interest in exploring issues around cooperation and coordination. The question of changing borders also resonates with the Tukums LL, in view of the upcoming administrative-territorial reform. Although less directly related, the LL in Mid Wales shares an interest in organisational culture and working with different stakeholders who have their own established ways of working.

The LL in Lucca highlights the importance of food in the context of cultural life, and this interest is shared (though to a slightly lesser extent) by the LLs in the Metropolitan Area of Styria and Tukums.

The use of education in the context of strengthening cultural connections has also been discussed, though foci are different. While the LL in Lucca emphasises education about food, the LL in Mid Wales will look at language and regional identity. These interests resonate with broader CoP questions related to the use of culture to communicate values to policy makers (particularly around planning in the case of Tukums, Metropolitan Area of Styria and Mid Wales) and enhancing the valorisation of local food.

These common themes and bilateral issues identified, will be translated into action and output plans for the CoP.

Conclusion and implications for further research and innovation

It is premature to draw conclusions at this early stage of LL and CoP life-cycle. However, there are certain themes and dynamics in the LL activities that suggest possible directions in which cultural connections may enhance rural-urban synergies.

There are methodological and processual challenges associated with working as a CoP, especially since different LLs must necessarily develop at their own pace. While some LLs have already advanced practical tasks (such as setting up a cultural policy planning process), other LLs are still in the process of stakeholder identification and enrolment. Harmonisation of the CoP's research and

innovation agenda with the agendas of separate LLs may also pose future challenges, as the CoP and the LLs operate at different levels and the foci vary – indeed, culture is not the primary priority for all LLs. An additional challenge is sustaining smooth collaboration between research and practice partners, which is a typical concern in multi-actor endeavours (e.g. finding a common understanding, and adjusting expectations).

A different set of issues relate to the planning/policy process and the role of cultural connections within policy-making and in relation to other policy fields of interest to the LLs. Culture is central in Tukums, while food policy and territorial planning is of primary interest in Lucca, meaning that cultural connections are not given the same role in policy deliberations, even though culture permeates them. What is more, the policy process is seen by LLs at presently open-ended territorial scales. In Tukums, work on the cultural strategy will be carried out with the prospect of a possible administrative-territorial reform. Conversely, in Mid Wales, the interest is in fostering inter-municipal cooperation in a region without a clear administrative identity. Meanwhile, in the Metropolitan Area of Styria work is being planned on harmonising the cultural offer in a fairly new and enlarged administrative unit. These attempts at innovation and the governance dynamics may lead to the emergence of new localities and understandings of space and place, in turn redefining rural-urban linkages in those areas.

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7.2. Practice abstract (April 2020)

The importance of honest and inclusive dialogue in developing a cultural strategy for a municipality

Tukums municipality is developing a strategic development plan for cultural life (2020-2025) that aims to outline key development objectives and priorities, and devise governance arrangements to coordinate activities in the cultural sector. The overall goal is to preserve the rich cultural and historical heritage of the region, whilst enhancing cultural life in the municipality and strengthening cultural connections between urban and rural areas. The process of developing the plan has been participatory, and numerous workshops have been organised to jointly work on the main elements. However, these events have highlighted several challenges related to the governance of cultural life, such as practical difficulties related to the maintenance of a joint calendar of events and conflicting interpretations of which events should be included in the calendar. The workshops also revealed (i) different visions of how much the plan should be focused on the attraction of visitors from outside the municipality, and (ii) uncertain outlooks regarding the prospects of Tukums in this regard. Crucially, looming changes in the administrative boundaries of the municipality have hampered the discussion, and participants noted the need to include stakeholders from areas that will likely be absorbed by Tukums municipality. These observations suggest that developing a cohesive vision of regional cultural life in a participatory manner may not be enough. An honest dialogue about the valorisation of certain cultural practices and local identities is important for successful collaboration and coordination of cultural life in both urban and rural areas.

7.3. Cultural connections update template (April 2020)

Cultural Connections

Living Lab Update

[City-Region Name]

1. Introduction

Brief description of the living lab

Brief description of the role of cultural connections in the living lab

2. Activities since consortium meeting in Riga (November 2019)

List main events/activities in the living lab

	Type of event/activity	Target audience	Date
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			

What is their relevance (if any) for cultural connections?

3. Lessons learned so far

What are the main lessons learned regarding cultural connections?

Key insights in relation to the CoP's RIA

4. Outputs so far

Papers

Conference presentations

Other outputs

	Title	Type of output	Date
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			

5. Plans until project meeting in Graz (September 2020)

Planned activities, events, meetings

6. Any issues to discuss with other CoP members

Any issues you would like to address or explore in depth

7.4. Thematic briefing template (April 2020)

[Topic of thematic briefing]

Key words: [up to five]

1. Introduction

What is the briefing about?

How does it relate to rural-urban linkages?

Relevance for the Cultural Connections CoP

2. Examples from member cities/regions

Provide examples of how this topic/issue manifests itself in member cities/regions (use visual material where possible)

3. Challenges and potential for urban-rural linkages

What are the big challenges associated with the topic?

What are the governance arrangements & challenges associated with this topic?

Are there any cross-sectoral interactions/potential for cross-sectoral interactions associated with this topic?

What is the potential for sustainable growth associated with this topic?

4. Lessons learned and practical recommendations

What can the Cultural Connections CoP learn from these examples?

How can the lessons learned be used to support urban-rural synergies?

What are the concrete steps that practitioners should take?

5. References & useful sources