



Strengthening rural-urban cultural connections

Three lessons from ROBUST's Cultural Connections Community of Practice

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Abstract

ROBUST believes that creating strong, mutually supportive linkages between rural and urban areas is key to realising smart, circular and inclusive development for a sustainable Europe. This report shows how culture can be used to create and strengthen synergies between rural and urban areas. 'Culture' is a broad concept that can have several meanings, such as: attitudes, values, heritage, language, ways of life, arts and creativity. Culture matters in all our lives – and for the places where we live. While it can be challenging to practically define culture in regional planning and policy, this broadness offers a wide range of opportunities to incorporate culture into inclusive and sustainable development.

This report defines what cultural connections are, and discusses why cultural connections matter. The report is grounded in real practice and action research from ROBUST's Cultural Connections Community of Practice, a network of four European regions: Tukums (Latvia), Metropolitan Area of Styria (Austria), Lucca (Italy) and Mid Wales (UK). Drawing from practical examples, the report highlights three lessons for strengthening cultural connections:

- ▶ Coordinating cultural life;
- ▶ Enhancing local and regional identities;
- ▶ Valorising rural culture sustainably.

1 Introduction and overview

Rural and urban are interdependent. When they are treated separately in policy and planning, rural areas can be caught in a catch-up game they can never hope to win, while the reasons why cities need the countryside go over-looked. When we treat rural and urban separately, we miss significant opportunities to make our regions stronger, more successful, and better places to live and work. That's why ROBUST believes that **creating strong, mutually supportive linkages between rural and urban areas is key to realising smart, circular and inclusive development for a sustainable Europe**. We call this **rural-urban synergies**.

This report shows how culture can be used to create and strengthen rural-urban synergies. ROBUST's work on **cultural connections** aims to provide guidelines and practical examples that can help regions shape innovative solutions. Our work continues – this report summarises what we have learnt so far. The report:

- ▶ Defines what cultural connections are and discusses why they matter;
- ▶ Presents three key lessons for strengthening cultural connections;
- ▶ Includes examples from ROBUST's network of Living Labs.

1.1 What is culture?

'Culture' is a broad concept that can have several meanings, such as: **attitudes, values, heritage, ways of life, arts and creativity**. Culture could include the activities we enjoy, the food we eat, or even the language we speak. This means that culture can be as locally distinctive as a festival or costume, or as widely shared as national identity or the love of football. **Culture matters in all our lives – and for the places where we live.**

Because culture is such a broad concept, it can sometimes be challenging to practically define culture in regional planning or policy. At the same time, this broadness offers a wide range of opportunities to incorporate culture in inclusive and sustainable development. Some of the ways in which development initiatives engage with culture include, but are not limited to: **cultural heritage, rural community revitalisation, tourism and local economies, creative industries, and regional and local identities.**

1.2 Why do cultural connections matter?

Just as culture matters in our lives and localities, culture has an important role to play in bringing people and places together. When it comes to fostering rural-urban synergies, we can ask: **how can culture connect the rural and urban?** Cultural connections can come in many different forms and reflect different strategies for facilitating the flow of goods, knowledge, and people. This report highlights three lessons that ROBUST has learned for strengthening cultural connections.

ROBUST's three lessons for strengthening cultural connections

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.
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.
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.

In a globalised and urbanised society, cities are often sites for consuming certain types of culture, like museums, concerts, shopping malls, leisure centres, and so on. By contrast, rural areas tend to be associated with other kinds of culture, such as heritage sites, local produce, or temporary festivals. These differing cultural features are valued by residents and visitors alike. Such features also contribute to dynamics like commuting, lifestyle migration, cultural entrepreneurship and the commercialisation of culture. **How can the different cultural offers in rural and urban areas be connected for mutual benefit?**

At the same time, digital technology, mass media and mobility are increasingly blurring the boundaries between rural and urban. These connections make new cultural activities possible, such as growth in the creative industries. **How can cultural connections provide new opportunities for growth?**

However, just as culture can connect, it can segregate, too. There can often be cultural *disconnections* between rural and urban areas. Disconnections may be due to unhelpful stereotypes – for example, regional development strategies can sometimes reinforce perceptions that cities are places of cultural innovation while rural areas are stuck in tradition. Urban interest in rural culture can also cause tensions, especially around gentrification and second home ownership. Since different groups can have divergent visions for culture, dialogue and collaboration are vital. **What are the solutions to cultural *disconnections*?**

Figure 1: Map of ROBUST's Cultural Connections Community of Practice



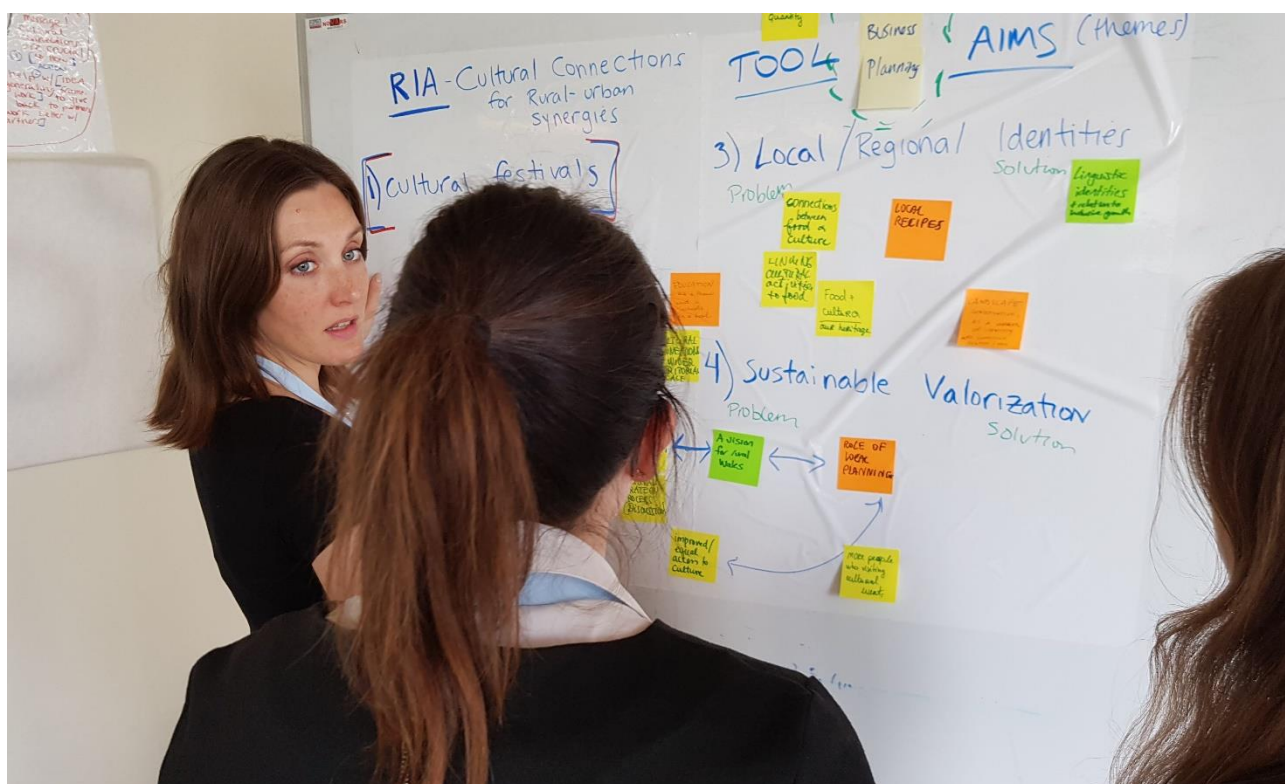
1.3 About the ROBUST Cultural Connections Community of Practice

ROBUST's Communities of Practice are networks of researchers and practitioners from across our network of eleven European regions. Our work in these regions involves multiple stakeholders, including: local and municipal government, development agencies, non-profit institutions, civil society organisations, and businesses. Each CoP comes together to share learning, swap experience, and develop new ideas and solutions. There are five Communities of Practice in ROBUST, each focusing on one key regional challenge.

The Cultural Connections CoP is grounded in real practice and action research from four regions: Tukums (Latvia), Metropolitan Area of Styria (Austria), Lucca (Italy) and Mid Wales (UK). Through the CoP, these regions collaborate to generate ideas and identify tools to strengthen cultural connections. Together, we create:

- ▶ Shared innovation objectives and action plans;
- ▶ A repertoire of practical methods, tools, and frameworks;
- ▶ Good practice examples that can be applied in other regions;
- ▶ Guidance to inform regional, national and European policymaking.

Figure 2 Cultural Connections CoP members working together at a ROBUST General Assembly Meeting



2 Three lessons for cultural connections

2.1 Coordinate cultural life

What do we mean by coordinating cultural life?

Cultural activities, events and attractions – from museums and galleries to events and festivals – can be found in many different places across a region, for both locals and visitors to access. Coordinating cultural life means **connecting activities, events, and the people who enjoy them**. These connections could be as straightforward as a shared events calendar, or as complex as a regional cultural strategy. The aim of coordination is to **reduce duplication, share resources, and work together**.

2.1.1 The challenges

In cities, the cultural offer benefits from an accessible location and plenty of potential visitors. What's on offer in rural areas is much more dispersed. Further, while many urban museums and galleries are well-known, rural attractions may be more 'off the beaten track'. This can make it hard for rural cultural sites to attract visitors from the city or further afield. And, when a local attraction only has local visitors, or when there are two similar events in the same region on the same weekend, real opportunities to grow together get missed. Hence, the fragmentation of cultural life in a region poses a number of challenges:

- ▶ Without coordination, resources, marketing and events, can be needlessly duplicated, which increases costs while often reducing the overall quality of the regional cultural offer.
- ▶ Wider audiences may not be reached, while for potential visitors, events and attractions outside the city remain difficult to access.
- ▶ Because local cultural institutions are accustomed to their own ways of working, efforts to coordinate cultural life can feel like a loss of independence.

2.1.2 Towards solutions

Before planning solutions, it is first important to assess at a regional level how coordinated – or fragmented – cultural life currently is. By identifying where the gaps are, it becomes easier to focus on what needs to be coordinated and how. A tool as simple as a shared calendar may suffice to make events more accessible, while going further and producing a regional cultural strategy is key to enhancing the quality of the cultural offer. 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.

2.1.3 Learning from the Living Labs: Co-ordinating culture in Tukums, Latvia

ROBUST's Living Lab in Tukums is working to preserve the region's rich heritage through a new coordinated strategy for the cultural sector. Lying within commuting distance of Latvia's capital city, Riga, Tukums is a

rural municipality with just over 30,000 residents. Cultural attractions, activities and events are spread around ten parish administrations and several other stakeholders in the region. **Can coordinating culture make connections to help meet development objectives and priorities?**

For some time, cultural institutions and civil parishes in the Tukums region have worked individually. While each institution has focussed on their own events and activities, there has been little coordination between institutions. This has left cultural life in Tukums fragmented, which in turn poses challenges for preserving the region's cultural heritage and making the best use of limited resources. Maintaining diversity requires cooperation.

In response, stakeholders are coming together through the Tukums Living Lab to co-create the first ever cultural strategy for the region, supported by the municipal government. The work began by mapping the institutions and stakeholders from the cultural sector who needed to be involved. After initial consultation meetings, the group is now developing a participatory structure to enable dialogue and share decision-making. With a national administrative boundary reform on the horizon in two years' time, the strategy is likely to provide future opportunities to engage with a much wider range of institutions.

We can learn lessons from Tukums about coordinating 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.

Figure 3: Participating in cultural life in Tukums



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2.2 Enhance local and regional identities

What do we mean by enhancing local and regional identities?

Identity matters for liveable regions. When we identify with where we live, we are able to feel more included in cultural life and make our own contributions. Enhancing local and regional identities means **making positive connections between people and place**. This includes **celebrating and supporting** both **what makes a local area distinctive**, and **what makes cultural life in a region something shared and inclusive**. The aim is to bring people together across the region.

2.2.1 The challenges

Rural and urban areas can often have very different identities – and sometimes identities that conflict. Differences can be difficult to bridge, especially when it comes to cultural connections. Building connections becomes even more challenging when administrative boundaries change and people come to belong to a new region that they do not automatically feel part of. At the same time, some shared identities can be based on parochialism or work to exclude others. Hence, identity poses several challenges for cultural connections:

- ▶ In regions with a large or dominant city, rural areas can be neglected by the cultural offer, and the sense that there is little ‘for them’ may make rural residents less likely to participate in regional life.
- ▶ Both a weak identity and an exclusionary identity can equally discourage people from living in, working in, or visiting a region.
- ▶ Using identity to foster growth and innovation can risk suggesting that some residents need to take up a new identity or not get involved.

2.2.2 Towards solutions

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 a part of the place where they live – and more visitors to appreciate the welcome. 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 as a means 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.

2.2.3 Learning from the Living Labs: Enhancing regional identities in Styria, Austria

ROBUST’s Living Lab in the Metropolitan Area of Styria is using culture to link Austria’s second largest city, Graz, with a wider rural region. Administrative boundaries here were defined just a decade ago, and a strong regional identity is still to come. Graz is a vibrant and growing city of over 270,000 people, with universities, creative jobs, and cultural amenities. By contrast, the surrounding rural areas feature small towns and

villages, often remote, which do not benefit from the same growth as Graz. To truly grow a *regional* identity, Graz cannot simply take the lead – and to grow rural areas, cultural life needs to be attractive. **How can creating complementary cultural offers connect rural and urban areas and foster a shared regional identity?**

Cultural activities enhance community life and connect people to the places where they live. In the same way, cultural activities can be fostered to connect people within a wider region. While cities like Graz have theatres, opera houses and museums, centring culture on urban areas misses what rural areas have to offer, and can make it difficult for rural residents to feel a part of regional cultural life.

Two ways that culture and regional identity connect in Styria are through festivals and the arts. The annual La Strada street art and puppet theatre festival, founded in Graz in 1997, now actively collaborates with rural towns within a 40km radius to host productions. The CULTURE 24 initiative was established through a LEADER Local Action Group and networks artists and creative professionals in rural areas. While La Strada started from the city and spread outwards, CULTURE 24 started from the country and forged links to the city.

We can learn lessons from 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 urban and rural.

Figure 4: Forging cultural connections through the La Strada festival in Styria



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

2.3 Valorise rural culture sustainably

What do we mean by valorising rural culture sustainably?

If rural places are to be attractive to live in, work in, and visit, then rural culture needs to be valorised. That means **celebrating rural culture as something special, valuable – and alive**. It's all too easy to imagine rural culture as part of the past, but **shaping sustainable futures** for our regions starts with **enabling rural culture to be a valuable part of the present**. Food, arts, and festivals are among the many ways in which rural culture can be sustainably given space to shine.

2.3.1 The challenges

There are plenty of stereotypes of rural places as behind the times or lacking interest and opportunity. Often, these stereotypes mean that rural culture gets ignored – or, worse, denigrated. When people do not want to live in rural places, the futures of these places stop being sustainable. But rural culture needs to be sustainable, too. When we try too hard to preserve the past, sometimes we end up smothering the present. So, there are many challenges to overcome:

- ▶ 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.
- ▶ With government often used to viewing rural areas through what they do *not* have (services, population) rather than what they do, celebrating rural culture can easily slip from policy priorities.
- ▶ When rural culture is undervalued, opportunities to market products and events that sustain local livelihoods are lost, too.

2.3.2 Towards solutions

To reverse mis-perceptions of rural culture and foster sustainable futures for rural places, we need to valorise what a living rural culture has to offer. Culture can be celebrated in an event, as part of a regional campaign, or even in something as simple as sharing a recipe for local food. Importantly, the work needs to be ongoing – a celebration on one day will not help if rural culture is forgotten for the other 364! 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 profiles what rural culture has to offer.
- ▶ Improving the quality of the cultural offer, so that visitors gain a positive impression and residents feel valued.

2.3.3 Learning from the Living Labs: Valorising rural culture in Lucca, Italy

ROBUST's Living Lab in the northern Tuscan province of Lucca is investigating connections between local cuisine and rural culture. Lucca's countryside is dotted with important historical villas and rural courts, hillside vineyards and olive groves. Agriculture, local food and cultural heritage are tightly linked – they have shaped Lucca's landscapes. But, in recent decades, urban sprawl has begun to encroach on these landscapes. When agricultural land is abandoned, the local cultural fabric loses some of its threads, too. **Can valorising rural culture through local food help sustain Lucca's landscapes and heritage?**

Local food is both valuable and meaningful. Food production provides livelihoods and contributes to the local economy. Growing local food is especially important for keeping knowledge and traditions alive, and for conserving landscapes and rural architecture. Celebrating local food culture, therefore, does more than raise market demand and bring in tourist spending – it helps to sustain the places that locals and tourists alike value.

One way food and culture is connected in Lucca is through themed trails. The Wine and Olive Oil route runs from the coast to the mountains, linking visitors to a wide range of producers, retailers, museums and cultural venues. Festivals and local events celebrate local gastronomy and share recipes, while food and farmers' markets connect local producers and consumers and show why rural skills and knowledge matter.

We can learn lessons from Lucca 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.

Figure 5: Growing the ingredients for local food culture in Lucca



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3 Putting lessons into practice

3.1 What's next for ROBUST's work on cultural connections?

Over the next year, ROBUST's Cultural Connections community of practice will work together to continue our learning and share our experiences. We'll be exploring three main questions:

- ▶ How do cultural connections shape localities?
- ▶ How do cultural connections stimulate smart regional development?
- ▶ How can cultural connections inspire new governance networks and novel political arrangements?

Across our Living Labs, we'll be experimenting with ways to answer these questions. In **Lucca**, the team will examine how traditional rural knowledge can be recognised as valuable by local dwellers and visitors alike, in order to prevent abandonment and promote sustainable tourist experiences. The **Tukums** team will be actively involved in the creation of a cultural strategy that allows for a cohesive approach to cultural life across the region. In **Mid Wales**, the Living Lab brings language into the mix by looking at the importance of Welsh speaking in identity and economic development. In **Styria**, the team will test ways to foster synergies between urban and rural cultural life, especially through tailoring cultural offers to people living in rural areas.

For updates from the Cultural Connections CoP visit: <http://rural-urban.eu/CoP/cultural-connections>

Figure 6: Celebrating farming culture in a Welsh-speaking area of Mid Wales



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3.2 How can other regions put ROBUST's three lessons into practice?

The lessons from ROBUST's Cultural Connections CoP are meant to be put into practice in other regions in Europe and further afield. By comparing different locations, testing ideas, and identifying best practices, we aim to develop knowledge worth sharing.

The three key lessons from this report present ways to work with rural-urban cultural connections across a variety of places and contexts. The box below suggests some questions that can be used to assess the existing situation in a given region, and to identify new opportunities.

Identifying opportunities to strengthen rural-urban cultural connections	
Coordinating cultural life	Questions for assessing existing coordination: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ 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: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ 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: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ 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: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ 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: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ 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: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ What are the strengths to be celebrated? ▶ What kinds of activities or events can help? ▶ What parts of rural culture offer opportunities to innovate?