

A young man and woman are riding bicycles through a field of tall, golden grass at sunset. The woman in the foreground is smiling broadly, wearing a brown jacket and a grey patterned sweater. The man behind her is also smiling, wearing a blue jacket and a yellow shirt. The sky is filled with soft, golden light from the setting sun, and the overall atmosphere is warm and joyful.

R YOU CULT

Youth culture in rural areas



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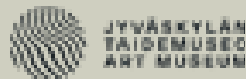
Youth culture in rural areas

This publication is a project result of the R YOU CULT Erasmus+ project. The regional partners from Finland (Jyväskylä), Portugal (Alentejo) and Denmark (Region of Southern Denmark) have made policy recommendations at the end of the project with the objective of supporting cultural workers in rural areas in the EU in having improved competences for reaching out to young people in rural areas.

These policy recommendations draw on knowledge from:

- a) The preliminary desk research on municipal and regional strategies and policies on culture, youth and rural areas in the three participating regions.
- b) The R YOU CULT handbook and learnings from the university partners in the project.
- c) The final impact evaluation with the organizations that tested the training courses from the university partners.

We hope you will be inspired!



Baseline and structural conditions

The geographical basis of the three participating regions differ quite a bit, indicated by the difference in the municipalities' sizes, population and the geographical distances within the municipalities. Furthermore, there is a difference in the local organization of the area of culture in-between the three countries.

However, in the three partner regions there are also several similarities. For instance, the cultural activities in the rural areas are challenged by a pattern of diminishing numbers of young people and a tendency to a longer distance to urban areas. Local volunteers run a significant proportion of the cultural activities in rural areas, with typically the older generation being the ones involved in local engagement.

The baseline desk research showed that public strategies and policies do not often deal specifically with the subject of how to handle cultural activities for young people in rural areas.

In particular, only few of the written cultural policies, if such a policy exists, explain directly and precisely how young people themselves can have a voice and how to get them to speak in relation to clarifying their needs and wishes. However, especially in Denmark, cultural activities for young people in general are on the agenda in a majority of the municipalities and many of the cultural strategies describe the work with culture for young people as a high priority.



Method

The policy recommendations are based on knowledge from the handbook made by the university partners and a desk research and impact evaluation made by the regional partners.

The handbook from the university partners includes five themes for five seminars, which are cross-national. The five cross-national themes include suggested literature, typically in the shape of a research article or an extract in an academic publication as well as notes from the pilot project, and questions for the future participants.

The desk research was a study of the current situation of cultural, rural and youth strategies in primarily the municipalities in the three participating regions in order to make a baseline for the impact evaluation. This baseline research was carried out during 2023.

The impact evaluation of the provided training courses consisted of interviews with the R YOU CULT learners and/or their leader. The interviews were conducted during spring of 2024. All partnering regions had the same questions in their impact evaluation interviews.



The impact evaluation of the training courses

10-12 cultural workers in each of the three regions participated as learners in the teaching course for facilitating rural youth culture. Because of the very different organizational structure in the area of culture in the three regions, the learners came from different types of organizations or were self-employed, e.g. municipal consultants, performing artists and young cultural entrepreneurs. The learners and/or their leaders were interviewed after participating in the training courses in order to assess the expected effect in the participating organizations of the courses and in order to establish their views on having an including dialogue with young people about culture in rural areas.

The main conclusions from the impact evaluation and the dialogue with the participating organizations in the three participating regions are described below.

There seems to be a growing political aspiration in the municipalities for a higher level of involvement of young people in general, including in the area of culture. At the same time, there is an acknowledgment, that it is often difficult to reach and have a dialogue with the target group of young people, and especially young people in rural areas. Furthermore, when involvement of young people take place it is often "the usual suspects" who get involved – mainly the most resourceful in the target group.

Another important issue is also the recognition of involving young people instead of just including them in cultural activities. Engaging, empowering and activating young people instead of just listening to them and by this also creating "their own space" seems to be an important learning point for the learners in the training courses.

In addition to this, the course has contributed to "a new set of lenses" and thereby new perspectives on how to start the dialogue, how to be precise with the target group etc. Several of the learners have had new concrete ideas on how to include young people in a different and more including way, e.g. in a committed and binding dialogue with politicians. An important skill achieved in the course is the awareness of asking the right questions when making new activities as well as using the different lenses. Furthermore, municipalities to a further extend employ youth coordinators, who typically are younger employees that help facilitating activities in youth houses etc.



Many of the interviews touch upon the fact that young people in general are more volatile compared to other age groups. Ideas and activities arise – and they might disappear again just as fast. Therefore, many of the interview persons find it difficult to involve young people in projects with a long time horizon. For example, in LAG projects and in the municipal administrations that often have procedures that can persist even the most patient youngster's attention span. However, this must be considered as a premise to overcome with new local solutions if you aspire to better the inclusion of young people in cultural activities. In rural areas, this challenge might be even bigger than in urban areas, since it can be more difficult to establish and maintain youth environments for a smaller and more diverse group.

On the other hand, young people in rural areas might be more flexible, have other personal resources and be very open-minded since they are more used to engage in changing arenas and relations in regards to school, leisure activities etc. than their fellow youngsters in urban areas are. Furthermore, many are used to having broader relations in their local community, e.g. intergenerational relations. Therefore, making cultural activities possible for young people can be different in several ways when you are looking at rural areas, and therefore it is important that cultural workers hold a broad view on rural youth culture but with an explicit reminder on not to forget what makes rural youth culture unique.

Furthermore, young people in rural areas often face practical barriers in participating in cultural activities, which are different from urban areas. For example, they might not have access to transportation to cultural activities at the relevant time of the day. This calls for new solutions and ideas in the field.

Young people's families and local community can also be essential to whether a young person takes part in various cultural activities or not. Young people in rural areas who don't get support from their families or local community to participate in cultural activities can be left out. Therefore, it can be considered whether to target measures to support families and local communities in addition to young people.

Network among the learners is articulated as one of the most important effects gained from participating in the course. Furthermore, it is important for many of the interview persons that the course is practical in its educational approach, so the learnings can be applied directly and shared with colleagues. This calls for establishing networks and knowledge sharing across relevant actors working with youth and culture in rural areas. This need can be partially addressed through participation in educational courses, but it can also be addressed in other ways.

Overall, the interviews with the learners reflect a proactive attitude towards cultural and youth issues in rural areas, a commitment to cooperation and continuous improvement. The key skills highlighted are understanding young people and effectively navigating the challenges of a rural environment. The importance of sustainable financing and the development of practical skills is emphasized to varying degrees in the three participating regions.






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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

9 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the R YOU CULT project we have formulated nine policy recommendations that can be seen as our recommended attention points to other European regions and municipalities wanting to engage young people in rural areas in cultural activities. Some are formulated more general but it is important to consider in the context of rural life for young people.

<p>1 Youth-centred approaches</p> <p>Prioritize actively and invest in the involvement and empowerment of young people in cultural activities and policymaking processes. It is important to understand their needs, empower them, and give them a voice.</p> 	<p>2 Skills development</p> <p>Promote practical and academic skills and training to professionals who work with youth culture in rural areas. Promote training programs that emphasize practical experience, the advantage of networking and of best practices' exchange and theoretical frameworks in order to improve the capabilities of individuals and organizations.</p> 	<p>3 Knowledge sharing and networking</p> <p>Facilitate networking and knowledge sharing among stakeholders involved in youth and culture initiatives in rural areas. Collaboration and sharing best practices are essential for positive outcomes, especially in small municipalities with few resources.</p> 	<p>4 Flexibility and adaptability</p> <p>It is essential to be flexible and open to new methods and approaches. Minimize bureaucracy and barriers to action and be receptive to changing circumstances and emerging ideas from young people.</p> 	<p>5 Inclusion and diversity</p> <p>Consider young people as a heterogeneous group with diverse needs and back-grounds. There is a need for inclusive policies that meet different target groups within the youth population, including marginalized individuals.</p> 
<p>6 Accessibility</p> <p>Make cultural activities accessible and affordable, not least for young people in rural areas. For instance consider creating platforms for participation and new mobility solutions to facilitate access to cultural events and activities. Also consider supporting rural events, i.e. free transportation to join, and acknowledge the importance of family and local community.</p> 	<p>7 Sustainable funding and allocation of resources</p> <p>Ensure sustainable funding and strategic allocation of resources – namely human resources – to support cultural initiatives and youth empowerment projects.</p> 	<p>8 Digital engagement and innovation</p> <p>Leverage digital platforms and social media for rural youth engagement, while also using the digital technologies to promote physical accessibility and mobility solutions, such as carpooling.</p> 	<p>9 Innovation in the educational system</p> <p>Consider promoting art and cultural activities in secondary schools in order to increase the integration of young people in cultural life.</p> 	



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