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BUILDING STAKEHOLDER NETWORKS FOR SUSTAINABLE CULTURAL TOURISM IN RURAL AND REMOTE AREAS: METHODOLOGY AND LESSONS FROM CULTURALITY

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Abstract

Stakeholder engagement is essential for sustainable cultural tourism in rural areas, yet its operationalisation remains challenging. This article presents the stakeholder engagement methodology developed within the Horizon Europe project CULTURALITY, tested across thirteen European pilot sites. Grounded in stakeholder theory and participatory typologies, the methodology follows a four-phase process to build a robust, ethically compliant stakeholder database through identification, categorisation, multilingual outreach, and GDPR-compliant registration. RuralSpots were operationalised as participatory tools to translate the database into active engagement. Fifteen RuralSpots across five countries enabled horizontal exchange and collaboration among stakeholders. The approach mapped 4,572 potential stakeholders and engaged over 472 participants, providing a replicable framework for participatory network building in rural cultural tourism that places local communities at the centre of sustainable development.

Keywords: stakeholder engagement; cultural tourism; rural development; participatory methodology; network building.

INTRODUCTION: WHY CULTURAL TOURISM AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT MATTER IN RURAL AREAS

As Greg Richards, the leading figure in cultural tourism research, has highlighted in his work on cultural tourism since the 1990s, stakeholder collaboration and networks are central to creating meaningful and sustainable tourism experiences.[1] [2] [3] Thirty years later, recent literature continues to underscore the integration of stakeholders in cultural tourism policies as a crucial factor in achieving sustainable and inclusive development, fostering innovation, enhancing cultural authenticity, and ensuring equitable benefits for all involved parties. In this vein, as the field continues to evolve, understanding stakeholder

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dynamics seems essential for navigating the complexities of cultural tourism and maximizing its positive impacts on local communities and cultural heritage.[4]

As rural areas have traditionally been closely linked to the primary sector, they have been particularly affected by its long-term decline and the broader structural shift towards service-based economies. This transformation has contributed to a range of interrelated challenges, including depopulation and population aging, limited economic diversification and the outmigration of younger generations, among others, resulting in the progressive disappearance of economic activities, essential services and infrastructure.[5 6]

In this context, sustainable cultural tourism emerges as a viable strategy to counteract these trends by leveraging unique local cultural assets and fostering community engagement to create new economic opportunities and preserve heritage;[7] especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which acted as a catalyst in reshaping tourist preferences and highlighting these territories as emerging alternatives to more saturated urban centres, providing new opportunities for productive diversification, population retention, and the valorisation of local heritage in rural areas.[8 9] However, these benefits are neither automatic nor inherent to the mere influx of visitors, since for tourism to effectively contribute to sustainable development—across economic, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions—its planning and management must be explicitly aligned with sustainability principles.[10 11]

In fact, this alignment with sustainability is particularly crucial when dealing with cultural heritage—both tangible and intangible—as it constitutes not only a valuable resource but also one that is highly vulnerable to multiple dynamics, especially tourism, which relies on it as a primary driver of attraction. This dependence may lead to processes such as commodification, loss of authenticity, and, particularly in the case of immovable heritage, the exceeding of carrying capacity, among others.[12] Intangible cultural heritage, particularly in rural areas, aligns with contemporary tourism trends emphasizing "off-the-beaten-path" destinations and Memorable Tourist Experiences.[13] By employing approaches such as storytelling, immersive cultural experiences, and participatory initiatives,[14] communities can enhance the visibility and perceived value of their traditions while simultaneously promoting economic, social, and cultural benefits.

In this regard, and particularly in rural and depopulated contexts, the success of sustainable tourism critically depends on the active involvement of local communities and other stakeholders in both planning and management processes.[15] Such engagement not only ensures social acceptance but also fosters shared responsibility in the use of local resources and promotes the equitable distribution of economic, social, and cultural benefits.[16] Recent literature consistently emphasizes that stakeholder participation—including community members, private sector actors, NGOs, and governmental authorities—is a necessary condition for sustainability, as it facilitates collaborative decision-making, strengthens local governance, and aligns tourism development with the long-term needs and capacities of the host territory.[17 18]

In conclusion, cultural tourism can play a significant role in supporting the sustainable development of rural areas, but its success depends on more than the

mere promotion of local heritage assets. As both a resource and a living expression of community identity, cultural heritage requires careful management to ensure its preservation while generating social and economic value. In this context, stakeholder engagement emerges as a fundamental prerequisite for achieving sustainable outcomes, as it enables collaborative governance, strengthens local ownership, and helps balance tourism development with the needs, capacities, and aspirations of rural communities. Therefore, the long-term contribution of cultural tourism to rural resilience and well-being heavily relies on inclusive and participatory approaches that place local stakeholders and communities at the centre of planning and decision-making processes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK, STATE OF THE ART, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR CULTURALITY

Although the concept of "stakeholder engagement" is examined here from a tourism perspective, its intellectual origins lie in stakeholder theory, which emerged in the 1980s within business studies as an alternative to the traditional, economically centred shareholder view of the firm. Its foundational milestone is widely identified as Freeman's *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach* (1984).[19] Freeman proposed that organizations should be understood as networks of relationships encompassing all groups or individuals who can affect, or are affected by, the achievement of organizational objectives—a definition that has become canonical in subsequent literature. In contrast to the shareholder primacy paradigm, stakeholder theory posits that management's role is to cultivate cooperative relationships and balance multiple interests, thereby recognizing both the economic and ethical dimensions of organizational interactions with their broader environments.[20]

From the 1990s onward, stakeholder theory became a central framework in business ethics and organizational management. Subsequently, the concept evolved in scope and complexity, extending its application to diverse fields such as sustainability, tourism, heritage studies, and climate change, among others.[21] [22] To unpack the complexities of collaborative governance within these domains, numerous complementary approaches, trends, and integrative frameworks have emerged. However, rather than converging toward a unified paradigm, this theoretical expansion has resulted in profound conceptual fragmentation and a distinct lack of consensus. The literature reveals a multiplicity of epistemologically divergent lenses that isolate specific dimensions of stakeholder engagement without achieving overarching integration. While frameworks like Social Network Analysis (SNA)[23] and Actor-Network Theory (ANT)[24] dissect structural and ontological actor configurations, Social Capital and Community Empowerment[25] approaches isolate relational trust and power asymmetries. Furthermore, recent attempts to synthesize these perspectives through integrative models—such as "tourismscapes"[26] for systemic complexity, Regenerative Tourism[27] for socio-ecological restoration, and Smart Governance[28] for technocratic optimization—have merely introduced competing normative priorities to the debate. Ultimately, the simultaneous proliferation of these structural, relational, ecological, and digital frameworks underscores a persistent theoretical pluralism, demonstrating

that stakeholder engagement in tourism remains a highly contested construct devoid of a cohesive, universally accepted foundational model.

Consequently, the current state of the art remains heavily dominated by localized case studies and governance papers, with a notable scarcity of comprehensive systematic reviews to synthesize this fragmented body of knowledge. Currently, the most significant conceptual anchor in the literature may be Liangco et al.'s (2024)[29] systematic review on agro-rural tourism. This work synthesizes research on stakeholder empowerment, policy support, integrated rural and community-led tourism, sustainability, and government-community collaboration. Beyond this seminal review, the literature predominantly fractures into place-based empirical studies, which illustrate multi-stakeholder models within specific heritage-route and rural development settings.[30] [31]

Nevertheless, despite this fragmentation, several recurrent thematic threads can be identified across the literature. For instance, McComb et al. (2017)[32], one of the most frequently cited works on rural tourism collaboration, effectively encapsulates these core themes, emphasizing that collaboration is only effective when the process is fundamentally built upon trust and its supporting structural components. The recurring mechanism across these empirical sources is highly consistent: stakeholder engagement yields the most significant outcomes when it is intrinsically tied to tangible decision-making structures, trust, leadership, and coordination capacity, rather than being reduced to generic "participation" rhetoric.

However, even when theoretical frameworks converge on the fundamental premise of "participation," the concept itself remains profoundly multidimensional, encompassing a broad continuum that ranges from passive, one-way communication and mere consultation to genuine co-design,[33] co-production,[34] and co-management.[35] While participation typologies offer essential analytical clarity by mapping these varying degrees of agency and power-sharing, they also reveal that engagement is far from a neutral mechanism; its actual outcomes are deeply contingent on underlying power dynamics, epistemological hierarchies, and institutional contexts. Consequently, a critical risk in both research and practice is the prevalence of "tokenism," where initiatives nominally labelled as participatory merely reproduce existing asymmetries through superficial consultation rather than fostering authentic deliberation[36]. Therefore, to avoid reducing participation to an empty procedural label, it is imperative to look beyond formal levels of involvement and critically assess whether these processes facilitate a substantive redistribution of power and the equitable integration of diverse knowledge systems in decision-making.

Amidst this theoretical proliferation and the persistent risk of tokenism, the literature review revealed the absence of a single, universally accepted model to guide stakeholder engagement in CULTURALITY and, specifically, in the rural cultural tourism context. Consequently, rather than forcing alignment with a fragmented paradigm, the CULTURALITY methodology was constructed inductively by extracting the core conceptual pillars where the literature *did* reach a consensus. To transcend participation as a mere procedural formality, we anchored our approach in three interdependent conditions: substantive inclusivity

and power redistribution to dismantle "box-ticking" exercises; robust institutional anchoring to embed participatory mechanisms within actual decision-making centres; and the cultivation of relational social capital to integrate scientific and local knowledge equitably.[37]

Building upon this theoretical consensus, the practical design of the framework required navigating a complex set of operational constraints. The methodology had to be rigorously aligned with the legal and administrative requirements of the Horizon Europe programme—particularly concerning strict GDPR compliance and data protection—while remaining sufficiently flexible to accommodate the distinct socio-cultural, economic, and institutional particularities of the nine participating countries. By harmonizing these theoretical imperatives with practical and legal realities, the project aimed to construct the most effective, context-sensitive engagement model possible. Ultimately, the commitment to fostering genuine, non-tokenistic community participation was operationalised through the design of the *RuralSpots*. These participatory spaces were conceived as the direct translation of our theoretical blueprint into practice, ensuring that stakeholder engagement functions not as an isolated, ritualistic event, but as a structurally embedded, empowering, and transformative governance tool on the ground.

THE CULTURALITY CASE STUDY

CULTURALITY: CULTUral heritage in RurAL remote areas for creative tourism and sustainability

The Horizon Europe project CULTURALITY is situated within the previously outlined context of rural depopulation, loss of cultural identity, and increasing tourism pressure on heritage. It is conceived as a research and innovation initiative funded under the European Union's "Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society" cluster, running from April 2024 to March 2028. The project is coordinated by the Universidad de Oviedo and brings together a transnational consortium of 13 organizations from nine European countries, including universities, research centres, cultural institutions, and small and medium-sized enterprises. These partners contribute to an interdisciplinary and collaborative framework that integrates expertise in cultural heritage, digital technologies, tourism, and rural development.

In this context, CULTURALITY is grounded in the recognition that many rural and remote regions across Europe face structural challenges, including demographic decline, economic fragility, and a strong dependence on seasonal tourism. In response, the project seeks to unlock the potential of cultural heritage—both tangible and intangible—as a strategic resource for fostering sustainable territorial development. More specifically, it aims to promote cultural and creative tourism as a driver of economic diversification, job creation, and long-term population retention in peripheral areas.

A key feature of the project, and central to the focus of this study, is its emphasis on inclusivity and community engagement. The project prioritises the involvement of local populations, particularly groups at risk of social exclusion, such as women, youth, and older adults. Through participatory approaches,

capacity-building activities, and peer-to-peer learning, it seeks to empower local stakeholders as active agents in the co-creation of sustainable cultural tourism ecosystems. Digitalisation also plays a central role in this process, enhancing visibility, accessibility, and innovation in cultural heritage management and tourism experiences.

Ultimately, CULTURALITY aims to generate scalable and transferable solutions that demonstrate how cultural heritage can act as a catalyst for sustainable development in rural Europe. By fostering cross-sectoral collaboration and knowledge exchange at the European level, the project contributes to broader EU policy objectives related to cohesion, resilience, and the green and digital transitions.

CULTURALITY's approach to stakeholder engagement

Within the CULTURALITY project, a key priority has been the identification and development of an appropriate methodology to effectively engage local communities and diverse stakeholders in the co-design and implementation of shared cultural tourism strategies, conceived as a potential instrument for the regeneration of rural and remote areas across the participating European countries as pilot sites.

The outcome of this task is the project approach to community-based cultural tourism management in remote rural areas in Europe, which seeks to provide an operational and replicable framework for the co-development of cultural tourism–led regeneration strategies in such contexts. This approach is grounded in a sound and interdisciplinary theoretical foundation—extending beyond culture and tourism research alone—which has been previously outlined in this study. More specifically, the CULTURALITY methodology for stakeholder engagement establishes a series of key phases and participatory activities designed to support the effective co-creation of rural regeneration proposals for policy development, based on the sustainable valorisation and promotion of local cultural identity.

The project stakeholder engagement strategy can be structured into two main components. The first encompasses the preparatory phase, which includes the identification, mapping, and initial outreach to potential stakeholders. This stage is essential for establishing a comprehensive understanding of the local ecosystem and ensuring the inclusion of a diverse range of actors relevant to cultural heritage and rural development.

The second component focuses on the activation of participatory tools aimed at fostering dialogue, collaboration, and co-creation. Central to this phase are the *RuralSpots* and the *LivingLabs*. *RuralSpots* function as meeting spaces for participatory group dynamics, oriented towards the exchange of knowledge and experiences across economic, social, and environmental dimensions for diagnostic purposes. In contrast, *LivingLabs* operate as open, real-life laboratories designed to support the collaborative development and testing of tools and strategies through processes of open innovation, as potential co-created solutions. For the purposes of this analysis, the focus will be placed on the *RuralSpots* methodology, as the *LivingLabs* are still in progress and have not yet been sufficiently analysed to allow for the extraction of conclusions.

A third tool, referred to as *RuralEvents*, is also envisaged within the CULTURALITY framework. However, it falls outside the scope of this analysis, as it is conceived primarily as a public-facing cultural tourism event. Rather than serving as a space for stakeholder engagement or co-creation, it functions as a form of validation or demonstration, testing in practice the outcomes generated through the previous participatory phases.

In addition to these in-person components, the strategy incorporates a digital dimension. Stakeholders—particularly artisans—who consent to data protection regulations in accordance with European standards may be included in the project's technological tools, notably the VERA Platform (Virtual European Rural Artisans Platform). This platform is designed to connect artisans across Europe, enhancing visibility, networking opportunities, and knowledge exchange.

The CULTURALITY methodological approach was mixed, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The construction of the stakeholder database was primarily quantitative and filtering participants for formal registration. However, the registration forms included open fields that allowed the collection of qualitative information on local specificities, multi-role functions, and contextual nuances. This qualitative data provides the basis for more in-depth analysis with stakeholders participating in *RuralSpots*, *LivingLabs*, and any subsequent clustering events conducted throughout the project's duration.

Ultimately, the objective is for this network to evolve as a dynamic and living ecosystem, capable of continuous growth throughout the project's duration and sustaining its activity beyond its formal completion.

Building the CULTURALITY stakeholder network: A four-phase approach

The methodological framework for establishing the CULTURALITY stakeholder network was designed as a sequential, four-phase process, integrating principles from stakeholder theory, participatory governance within the partners, and strategic marketing communication. This structured approach was adopted to ensure replicability, transparency, and systematic engagement across a transnational, multi-partner consortium. The workflow was developed collaboratively, with the Task Leader proposing the framework, which was then iteratively refined through feedback from all consortium partners during in-person meetings and structured digital consultations, in order for the project's overarching common goals in the diverse regional contexts of the participating partners.

Phase 1: Identification and Categorisation of Potential Stakeholders

The initial phase focused on establishing a comprehensive and systematic mapping of the stakeholder landscape. A theoretical foundation was established through a literature review on cultural tourism stakeholders and a review of methodologies from previous European projects (RESTART,[38] RURITAGE[39]). This informed the development of a bespoke categorisation framework comprising ten distinct Stakeholder Groups (SGs), grouped into three overarching

categories: *Cultural Tourism Ecosystem* (SG1: Creative, Artisan and Gastronomic Entrepreneurs & SMEs; SG2: Cultural Tourism Service Providers; SG3: Artisan, Cultural & Tourism Media and Communication Agents); *Institutions & Associations* (SG4: Cultural Institutions & Organisations; SG5: Academia, Education & Research Organisations; SG6: Artisan Cultural & Tourism Networks, Associations and Clusters); and *Civil Society & Policy Makers* (SG7: Civil Society, Local Action Groups & NGOs; SG8: Government Bodies & Policy agents; SG9: Funding Agents), with a tenth category (SG10) for 'Other' stakeholders.

In this sense, the three categories are not hierarchical but interdependent. At the core of this conceptual framework lies the *Cultural Tourism Ecosystem*, which constitutes the central axis of CULTURALITY's intervention. This category brings together the essential actors—creative practitioners (SG1), cultural tourism service providers (SG2), and communication agents (SG3)—whose direct collaboration is necessary to co-create and deliver high-quality, experience-based cultural tourism offerings. Surrounding this nucleus are the *Institutions and Associations*, which function as support structures. These actors—cultural institutions (SG4), academia and research organisations (SG5), and professional networks (SG6)—do not merely operate in the background; rather, they form a knowledge loop and an associative infrastructure that nurtures, documents, and amplifies the work of creatives. They provide critical resources such as training, research tools, dissemination channels, and collective representation, thereby serving as key intermediaries and enablers for accessing and collaborating with grassroots practitioners. Finally, this entire constellation is embedded within a broader *Civil Society and Policy Making* environment. Governments (SG8), funding agents (SG9), and grassroots civil society organisations (SG7) collectively define the political, economic, and social boundaries within which cultural tourism initiatives must operate. Their decisions—ranging from regulatory frameworks to financial support mechanisms—directly shape the opportunities and constraints faced by those targeted under the *Cultural Tourism Ecosystem* category, making them indispensable actors to consider for any sustainable and scalable intervention.

Once the stakeholders were categorised, a standardised data collection template was developed and distributed to all partners, who were tasked with identifying stakeholders within their designated geographical scopes (regional, national, and EU) using a predefined set of keywords (e.g., culture, rural, tourism, heritage, craft, gastronomy), previous contacts and publicly available online sources, including general search engines, social media platforms, public databases, and records from other EU-funded projects. Each stakeholder entry was recorded with a structured set of parameters, including basic identification, contact information, regional scope, and a qualitative assessment of their relevance to the project. Each stakeholder group was further defined by a set of specific characterization parameters tailored to their profile. For example, artisans were classified according to their particular craft or field of expertise. These profile-specific parameters allowed for a more precise understanding of stakeholder diversity and inform targeted engagement strategies. This phase resulted in the

mapping of 4,572 potential stakeholders, serving as the foundation for the subsequent outreach strategy.

Phase 2: Design and Implementation of the Outreach Strategy

This phase operationalised the stakeholder list through a structured, multilingual communication campaign, with the aim of transforming the initially identified potential stakeholders into active participants of the project. Stakeholders were invited to confirm their interest and level of engagement via a structured form, and their participation was formalised only after obtaining consent in accordance with data protection regulations. The strategy was underpinned by principles from B2B marketing and relationship marketing, prioritising trust-building and value-based engagement over purely transactional communication. As mentioned, the core components were:

(1) A Modular, Semi-Personalised Email Invitation: A master email template was created with a modular structure to allow for semi-personalisation. This structure included fixed sections (project introduction, call to action, data privacy reassurance) and variable sections tailored to each of the ten stakeholder groups. The variable sections highlighted specific benefits relevant to each group (e.g., co-creation workshops for creatives, policy dialogue for government bodies). The outreach emails also referenced the partner who recommended the stakeholder, adding a layer of credibility and mitigating the "cold contact" effect. The legal basis for this outbound communication was 'legitimate interest' under GDPR, as emails were sent to publicly available professional addresses with content demonstrably relevant to the recipients' roles.

(2) A Multi-Lingual Registration Form: A user-friendly, GDPR-compliant registration form was developed and embedded within the official project website using WordPress and the Fluent Forms plugin. The form was translated into the national languages of all consortium partners to reduce language barriers and enhance accessibility. The form was designed for simplicity and speed, collecting only essential information (name, organisation, country, self-selected stakeholder groups) and explicit consent for data use across the project. More detailed survey questions were intentionally excluded to maximise initial sign-up rates.

Phase 3: Population and Iterative Refinement of the Stakeholder Database

Phase 3 involved the execution of the outreach strategy and the active population of the database. The process was iterative, with the Task Leader managing the centralised outbound communication campaign and the resulting registrations. The flow was designed for efficiency: invited stakeholders clicked the link in the email, completed the registration form, and their data was automatically recorded in the WordPress backend, later exported for analysis. At this stage, an initial analysis of the first 85 registrations (as of September 2025) was conducted to identify trends in participant composition, geographic distribution, and the prevalence of multi-role stakeholders. This analysis served to

validate the effectiveness of the engagement strategy and to highlight areas for future focus during the *LivingLabs* and *RuralEvents*.

Phase 4: Ensuring Long-Term Sustainability and Cross-Work Package Integration

The final phase focused on establishing a framework for the database's sustained growth and integration beyond the active outreach period. Recognising that the initial outbound marketing strategy was resource-intensive, a dual-path strategy was developed to foster organic, continuous stakeholder registration:

(1) Online Strategy: A permanent "Join Us!" campaign was designed, integrating the registration link and/or QR code across all project touchpoints. This includes a dedicated tab on the project website, a recurring call-to-action in the project newsletter, inclusion in partner websites and email signatures, and a systematic social media campaign featuring quarterly registration-focused posts.

(2) Offline Strategy: Physical materials were developed to facilitate recruitment at in-person events. These include branded business cards with QR codes, event slides, and posters that can be displayed in partner spaces, such as museums and cultural centres.

From stakeholder mapping to active engagement: The *RuralSpots*

Having successfully identified and categorised a broad network of potential stakeholders through the four-phase methodology and having converted a significant portion of those initially mapped into active project collaborators, the CULTURALITY project now progressed toward the implementation of collaborative tools to strengthen engagement with its stakeholders. This transition is initially operationalised through *RuralSpots*, a participatory methodology designed to facilitate diagnostic activities, knowledge exchange, and network building among rural cultural actors.

In this vein, the *RuralSpot* serves three interconnected purposes:

(1) Diagnosis: To obtain a realistic, context-sensitive assessment of the challenges and opportunities faced by cultural and creative practitioners in rural and remote areas, with particular attention to tangible and intangible heritage, crafts, and local entrepreneurship.

(2) Synergy detection: To identify existing and potential complementarities among stakeholders across different sectors—creative, tourism, institutional, and policy—that can be activated for mutual benefit.

(3) Network building: To initiate or strengthen territorial networks by fostering direct relationships, shared understanding, and a sense of collective purpose among the previously identified stakeholder groups.

A fundamental consideration in the organisation of a *RuralSpot* is the choice of a participatory format that corresponds to the thematic focus, the profile of the participants, and the physical setting, among others. This alignment is necessary to ensure the effective exchange of knowledge and to meet the event's overarching goals. For the purposes of CULTURALITY, the following methodological approaches were employed:

- **Working groups**: Structured around key thematic questions, these groups bring together participants from different stakeholder categories to collaboratively diagnose problems and propose solutions.
- **Individual or collective project talks**: Short presentations by local practitioners and organisations serve as catalysts for discussion, offering concrete examples of successes, challenges, and innovative practices.
- **Roundtable discussions**: Facilitated conversations with invited experts and stakeholders around a specific territorial theme, allowing for in-depth exploration of complex issues such as sustainability, market access, or heritage preservation.

When organising a *RuralSpot*, it was also recommended to include at least one cultural leisure activity—such as a craft workshop or musical performance—alongside the more structured sessions. While working groups, project talks, and roundtables are essential for achieving the event's diagnostic and knowledge-exchange objectives, it is often during informal moments that deeper networking occurs. These relaxed settings provide participants with the opportunity to engage in spontaneous conversation, build trust, and establish personal connections that are less likely to emerge in formal contexts. Furthermore, such activities offer a valuable opportunity to showcase and valorise local rural cultural and artistic expressions within an academic setting.

In order to systematically record outcomes and enable their subsequent analysis for the *LivingLabs* phase, a reporting document was developed to be completed after each *RuralSpot*. This document was designed to capture both the scientific knowledge generated and shared during the sessions, as well as organisational aspects such as attendance, stakeholder participation, and overall performance; in order to assess the effectiveness of each *RuralSpot* in contributing to the consolidation of the CULTURALITY network.

In this regard, within the scope of the project, fifteen *RuralSpots* were conducted between 2024 and 2025 across five countries (Spain, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Norway, and Romania). As a result, more than 472 stakeholders from the identified sectors and local communities participated in these activities (80 in the United Kingdom, 212 in Spain, 128 in Romania, and 52 in Norway). The outcomes of these participatory processes highlighted several cross-cutting themes, including the structural fragility of rural cultural sectors, the endangerment and transformation of traditional knowledge, the untapped potential of cultural heritage for sustainable development, existing tensions surrounding tourism models, and the need for more integrated, collaborative, and knowledge-based approaches to rural regeneration.

LESSONS LEARNT AND RECOMMENDATIONS WHEN BUILDING A STAKEHOLDER NETWORK IN RURAL CULTURAL TOURISM

The following recommendations are drawn directly from the practical experience of implementing the CULTURALITY stakeholder engagement methodology. Rather than deriving solely from the academic literature, these lessons reflect the challenges encountered, the adaptations made, and the insights

gained through the iterative, collaborative process undertaken by the consortium partners. They are intended to serve as actionable guidance for future projects seeking to establish participatory networks in cultural tourism, particularly in rural and remote contexts.

- **Standardise with flexibility:** Attempting to apply a homogeneous stakeholder mapping framework across diverse European regions revealed the inherent limitations of rigid categorisation. Stakeholder configurations in rural cultural tourism are shaped by varying governance structures, institutional trajectories, and degrees of formalisation, which differ significantly from one country to another. In CULTURALITY, this challenge was addressed by establishing a common core of ten Stakeholder Groups (SGs) to enable cross-country comparison, while complementing this structure with open fields that allowed partners to capture atypical actors and local specificities. Furthermore, the collective negotiation of these categories—rather than their unilateral imposition—proved essential in strengthening methodological ownership among partners and enhancing the analytical quality of the resulting dataset.
- **Recognise and capture the multi-functionality of actors:** A recurrent challenge encountered during the stakeholder identification and categorisation process was the prevalence of multi-role actors—individuals or organisations performing several functions simultaneously. In rural contexts, for example, it is common for a single artisan to also act as a tourism service provider, a cultural mediator, and a communicator, reflecting the economic necessity of combining multiple income streams. This multi-functionality complicates classification within rigid typologies. In CULTURALITY, the adopted solution was to assign a primary role for analytical purposes while explicitly recording secondary roles through the registration form, allowing stakeholders to self-identify their additional functions.
- **Address the digital divide through hybrid communication strategies:** A significant limitation encountered during the outreach phase was the limited digital presence of many rural stakeholders, particularly individual artisans and small-scale practitioners. While digitalisation is increasingly central to project communication, it coexists with persistent gaps in digital infrastructure and digital literacy across rural Europe. Many potential stakeholders lacked functional email addresses, websites, or active social media profiles, relying instead on word-of-mouth and direct personal contact. It is therefore recommended to incorporate multiple contact channels from the initial mapping phase and, where appropriate, to link participation to digital capacity-building initiatives that can help bridge the digital divide over time. Such hybrid approaches are more likely to foster resilient and inclusive networks.
- **Address the specificities of engagement in rural contexts**: The organisation of *RuralSpots* demonstrated that participation in rural areas is strongly influenced by structural factors beyond the thematic appeal of

the events. Seasonal labour patterns, limited mobility, long travel distances, family responsibilities, and resource availability all affected attendance and engagement. Moreover, participation in formal events alone did not fully capture the extent of stakeholder involvement; contributions also took the form of survey responses, informal collaborations, and engagement in smaller-scale local activities. In light of this, future initiatives should: (i) design low-threshold engagement activities that minimize travel and time commitments, such as local meetings or remote participation options; (ii) schedule events with sensitivity to agricultural and tourism cycles; and (iii) employ engagement indicators that account for multiple forms of participation, beyond mere event attendance.

- **Build on local credibility and offer tangible incentives**: A key success factor in the outreach strategy was the decision to anchor invitations through local partners and trusted actors. By referencing the partner who had recommended each stakeholder, the initial email communication gained credibility and reduced the perception of a "cold contact." Additionally, the modular email structure included a variable section tailored to each stakeholder group, clearly articulating the specific benefits of participation. This combination of local credibility and tangible value propositions is believed to have contributed to higher response rates, and this model is therefore recommended for future initiatives.
- **Prioritise collaborative governance and network consolidation**: The CULTURALITY experience confirmed that the mere creation of a stakeholder network does not guarantee its effectiveness. Opportunities for horizontal knowledge sharing and peer-to-peer encounters are essential for transforming a simple contact list into a functioning community of practice. In CULTURALITY, *RuralSpots* served as the initial spaces for deliberation and mutual learning; however, consolidating the network into a lasting collaborative structure requires sustained investment of time and resources. Future initiatives should create spaces for genuine exchanges and seek strategies to maintain the network actively, fostering trust, shared ownership, and ongoing engagement.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

This study acknowledges several limitations that contextualize the scope, transferability, and generalizability of its findings, primarily stemming from the theoretical complexities and practical constraints inherent to the CULTURALITY project.

*(a) Theoretical fragmentation and project-specific foundations***:** As established in the theoretical framework, the absence of a unified paradigm or international consensus on stakeholder engagement precluded the construction of this methodology upon an established, standardized baseline. Consequently, the CULTURALITY approach is inherently inductive and context-dependent, emerging directly from the specific operational needs, empirical realities, and practical constraints of this single project. While this allowed for a highly tailored and pragmatic framework, it also means the methodology reflects a specific project

perspective rather than a universally validated model. This limits the ability to directly compare findings with other studies or to accumulate standardized evidence on "what works, where, and for whom."

(b) Geographic scope and contextual boundaries: The empirical scope of this study is exclusively confined to the European contexts of the nine project partner countries. Because stakeholder ecosystems, governance structures, and participatory cultures are deeply embedded in specific institutional and socio-economic environments, the transferability of this methodology to non-European or Global South settings—where digital infrastructures, community dynamics, and institutional frameworks may differ substantially—remains untested.

(c) Temporal constraints and ongoing project status: The findings presented are based on a cross-sectional snapshot of the project's initial phases, encompassing stakeholder mapping, outreach, and the first implementation of *RuralSpots*. Because CULTURALITY is an ongoing initiative, this design cannot capture the longitudinal dynamics of stakeholder engagement. The long-term sustainability of the established networks, the evolution of collaborative practices within the *LivingLabs*, and the ultimate socio-economic impacts of the co-created initiatives remain to be evaluated upon the project's completion.

(d) Methodological constraints in data collection: The initial stakeholder mapping relied heavily on publicly available digital sources and self-reported registration data. While this ensured transparency and replicability across partners, it introduces potential biases. Stakeholders with limited digital visibility (e.g., individual artisans in remote areas) may have been underrepresented. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, as the study did not independently verify the self-classified roles, capacities, and interests of the participants.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has presented the stakeholder engagement methodology developed within the CULTURALITY project, addressing the practical challenges of fostering sustainable cultural tourism in rural and remote areas. Operating within a theoretically fragmented landscape where no universal consensus on stakeholder engagement exists, this study did not seek to validate overarching theoretical models. Instead, it offered a pragmatic, inductive, and replicable framework tailored to the specific complexities of rural cultural ecosystems. Through a structured four-phase approach, the methodology successfully mapped over 4,500 potential stakeholders and actively engaged hundreds of participants across fifteen *RuralSpots* in five European countries, demonstrating the viability of translating theoretical participatory principles into actionable network-building practices.

The transition from initial stakeholder mapping to active engagement yielded critical practical lessons for future initiatives. As the CULTURALITY experience demonstrates, building effective stakeholder networks in rural contexts requires moving beyond rigid categorisations and tokenistic participation. It demands flexible standardisation, the recognition of actors' multi-functionality, and hybrid communication strategies to bridge the rural digital divide.

Furthermore, genuine engagement relies on leveraging local credibility, offering tangible value propositions, and creating horizontal spaces—such as the *RuralSpots*—where trust, peer-to-peer learning, and collaborative governance can organically take root.

While this study provides a robust foundational blueprint for participatory network building, it is inherently bounded by its European geographic scope, its reliance on initial cross-sectional data, and the ongoing status of the project. The true test of this methodology will lie in its longitudinal application. Future research should focus on evaluating the sustained impact of these networks as the project transitions into the *LivingLabs* phase, assessing how these initial participatory structures evolve into enduring, co-created solutions for rural regeneration, if so. Ultimately, this work contributes a scalable, context-sensitive tool for practitioners and policymakers aiming to place local communities and diverse actors at the heart of sustainable cultural tourism development.

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