

First policy briefing

D7.1





EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND INNOVATION POLICIES IN RELATION TO SUSTAINABLE CULTURAL & CREATIVE TOURISM IN RURAL AND REMOTE AREAS



This policy brief makes policy recommendations based on (a) the findings of a systematic review of existing research on cultural and creative tourism in rural and remote areas across Europe (b) an analysis of four key groups of existing cultural and creative tourism business models (Looking & Listening; Making & Doing; Touring; Buying & Consuming). It highlights research gaps related to place-based cultural and creative tourism development and sustainable business models that include local communities and balance economic growth with heritage preservation and environmental stewardship. It also emphasises the importance of coordination between EU programmes and alignment with Macro Regional Strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

Rural and remote areas across Europe are rich in cultural and natural heritage but many face significant socio-economic challenges, including ageing populations, youth out-migration, limited economic opportunities, and skill shortages. EU policy frameworks, from the Agenda for Tourism 2030 to the Rural Vision 2040, increasingly reflect this by integrating cultural tourism into action plans for sustainability and cohesion. Cultural and creative tourism is seen as an activity that can create value from local heritage, stimulating economic diversification, and enhancing community identity and cohesion. However, there are several research gaps that must be addressed to fully harness the potential of cultural and creative tourism for sustainable rural development.

Firstly, cultural heritage within rural and remote areas is highly varied, making generic development approaches unsuitable. Although numerous business models exist, there is insufficient understanding regarding which models best fit specific types of tangible and intangible heritage across diverse rural contexts.

Secondly, without careful management, the development of cultural and creative tourism could lead to issues related to overtourism, potentially harming heritage conservation efforts and overwhelming local environmental and community capacities. It is unclear which business models offer the greatest potential for achieving balanced, sustainable, and inclusive cultural and creative tourism development.

Thirdly, rural areas often face disadvantages due to their peripheral locations or limited resources compared to urban regions. Cross-border tourism collaboration is promoted as a means of accessing knowledge, pooling resources, and benefiting from shared infrastructure and marketing efforts. Nevertheless, effective and lasting cooperation is frequently challenging. In the European context, cross-border collaboration occurs through initiatives at various scales, including EU-level, macro-regional, national, regional, and local frameworks. However, there remains uncertainty about how public policies and strategic approaches across these different levels can optimally support cross-border and macro-regional cooperation for cultural and creative tourism development in rural areas.

This research policy brief is based on findings from a systematic literature review on cultural and creative tourism in rural and remote areas (D2.1: Richards *et al.*, 2024), and an analysis of existing cultural and creative tourism business models in the case study areas covered by the CROCUS project (D2.2: James *et al.*, 2024).

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

Place-based approaches and creativity

The systematic literature review undertaken by the CROCUS project and published in Deliverable 2.1 (Richards *et al.*, 2024) reveals a primary focus on individual products within rural and remote areas and emphasis on tangible resources in cultural tourism. In terms of tourism development, the lack of economic capital and the thinly spread population means there can be a relatively dispersed set of tangible heritage resources in rural areas. This indicates a need to focus on the intangible aspects of the countryside that can attract people and stimulate economic, social and cultural development. Although interest in intangible heritage resources is growing, there remains limited research on effective strategies for leveraging intangible elements, such as storytelling and interpretive approaches. ***Intangible heritage and creative tourism in rural and remote areas is still under-explored compared to traditional cultural tourism and tangible heritage resources.***

Remote areas receive less attention in existing research, and one key issue is the diversity of rural contexts. Sustainable business models for cultural and creative tourism must be context-specific, carefully aligned with the unique tangible and intangible cultural resources, and socio-economic context associated with each area. This requires innovative, tailored approaches that respect the environmental and cultural carrying capacities of destinations and ensure local community engagement and benefit-sharing. The review identifies recent work on place-based approaches to cultural and creative tourism development in rural areas, which may help to avoid the application of generic models and increase sensitivity to local needs. In the past, for example, the 'creative class' concept has been adopted by policymakers in many different areas in Europe and has also been transferred from urban to rural contexts, usually without any consideration of place-specificity. ***The review shows that more place-sensitive approaches to tourism development are emerging, but there is still relatively little research on this.***

Another significant issue highlighted in the literature review is the peripheral location of many rural regions, which also often suffer from limited resources and weak institutional capacities. Cross-border cooperation can help to mitigate these problems, offering rural regions access to broader markets, shared resources, and knowledge exchange. However, effective cross-border cooperation requires clear policy frameworks, supportive governance structures, and consistent funding streams at local, national, and EU levels. ***There is very little existing research on cross-border tourism***

development, and the review revealed none that focused specifically on the EU macro-regional strategies in relation to tourism.

The review also indicates that research on business models is expanding beyond traditional economic analyses that focus solely on linking businesses through supply chains. It emphasises a broader approach, that investigates networks of stakeholders from different sectors, including businesses, community groups, and public institutions. This research highlights the need for collaboration among various stakeholders to effectively use local cultural resources and connect with external markets. Creativity plays a key role by linking these resources in new ways, enabling communities to create richer, shared meanings beyond simple economic benefits. However, ***there is a lack of research on innovative business models tailored to the unique challenges and opportunities of rural and remote areas.***

Cultural and Creative Tourism Business Models

In D2.2 (James *et al.*, 2024), research on sustainable business model development was reviewed and four main groups of cultural and creative tourism business models were identified based on an analysis of thirteen exemplar cases from the CROCUS partner countries.

Looking & Listening

These models centre around passive tourist engagement with cultural resources. Two common forms revolve around tangible heritage, such as museums, archaeological sites, and historic properties on the one hand, and live performances such as music or traditional sports on the other.

These business models differ in terms of their temporal structure. Tangible resources often have relatively stable public access, for instance through museums, while intangible resources typically involve single or recurring performances tied to local arts venues or festivities. In addition, sustainability concerns differ depending on the type of cultural resource. When tangible resources form the focus of cultural and creative tourism, preservation is paramount, especially when open-air heritage sites are at risk of environmental damage. In contrast, intangible resources often centre on community involvement and inclusivity, particularly when events rely on local participants who have skills in singing, dancing, or other performance arts.

Although 'Looking and Listening' models are frequently considered to be established cultural business frameworks, information technology has opened up new possibilities for experiencing cultural events, including the use of immersive digital tools and virtual environments.

Making & Doing

These business models revolve around interactive cultural experiences, such as learning traditional crafts, tango dancing, or cooking with self-gathered ingredients, and may include local events like historical reenactments. Two key forms can be identified: private professionals who earn income by teaching their skills, and community-run or public cultural events.

In these 'Making & Doing' models, the main cultural resource is found in skilled teachers or role models—potters, historical reenactors, and so on. The revenue structure varies. Formal learning experiences often charge fees (sometimes paired with accommodation), whereas informal, community-based activities may rely on tickets, public funding, or sponsorship.

Sustainability depends on community participation, as members' willingness to share expertise is crucial. This is less of an issue in paid skill-transfer settings, unless local norms are compromised. Meanwhile, ongoing or repeated engagement with these cultural resources can deepen visitors' ties to the destination, occasionally leading to relocation.

Touring

These models focus on organized or self-guided travel centred on cultural and creative assets, whether via thematic tours (e.g., wine or religious routes) or self-directed itineraries. Two main forms exist: one managed by commercial providers (often selling integrated tours with transport and accommodation), and one based on public bodies promoting self-drive routes (like retracing historical boundaries or following composers' trails).

Revenue structures differ markedly. Organized touring typically uses ticket-based collaborations with local businesses, while self-drive routes only identify cultural highlights, with no guaranteed income for promoters beyond potential brand gains. Key sustainability concerns include overcrowding in organized tours and environmental impacts from private cars, as well as limited local benefits when visitors pass through quickly.

Buying & Consuming

These models focus on the acquisition and consumption of cultural heritage, such as buying souvenirs or eating local food. 'Buying and Consuming' business models have long played a crucial role in cultural and creative tourism by offering basic travel services—such as dining, lodging, or transportation—that rely on tangible or intangible heritage. These resources become part of travellers' direct, embodied experience.

This category of business models is generally led by small private entrepreneurs. In the food sector, privately run restaurants are predominant, although there are instances of community-based initiatives. Typical local cuisine is frequently endorsed by destination management organizations (DMOs) to highlight the distinctive cultural identity of a place. Similar patterns emerge in souvenir sales, where small, independent workshops form the backbone, aided by grassroots collaboration and DMO support. Key sustainability questions revolve around the extent of local sourcing and the conditions under which items are produced.

The findings of the literature review emphasise that one-size-fits-all development models are inappropriate in rural and remote areas. This analysis of the main types of existing cultural and creative business models shows that the ownership, revenue models and sustainability issues related to different models varies considerably. **However, we lack knowledge of how best to adapt existing business models and develop innovative and sustainable alternatives that are appropriate for rural and remote areas in different parts of Europe.**

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section presents policy recommendations based on the systematic literature review (D2.1) and the typology of cultural and creative tourism business models in rural and remote areas (D2.2).

Support sustainable Creative and Intangible Heritage Tourism in Rural and Remote Areas

- Develop specific calls under Horizon Europe or related programmes that focus on rural and remote areas, which are currently under-studied.
- Ensure that calls address the sustainability and development issues of the full range of cultural and creative tourism business models, including digitalisation
- Prioritise funding for pilot projects the develop creative and intangible heritage tourism business models in rural and remote areas, enabling communities to test new ideas without excessive financial risk.
- Incentivize the documentation, interpretation, and innovation of intangible cultural resources that could form the basis for new and innovative business models in rural and remote areas

Adopt Place-Based Approaches and Monitoring

- Prioritise “place-sensitive” support in research projects, requiring applicants to demonstrate how they will adapt models to specific rural or remote contexts.
- Invest in local training and mentorship programmes (e.g., digital marketing, cultural interpretation, heritage preservation) that empower rural communities to manage and develop tourism sustainably.
- Support research that develops new indicators and methodologies for impact assessment (beyond economic metrics) and tools for community engagement in tourism development. For example, studies could assess how tourism affects quality of life or the vitality of creative and cultural activities over time, and how different types of business models perform in different types of rural regions. It could also include the development of sustainability KPIs suited to the different business model type (e.g. CO₂ emissions for touring, intangible heritage safeguarding for looking & listening)

Funding Coordination and Macro-Regional Strategies

- Ensure that Work Programmes support pipelines that move from Research and Innovation Actions, which can identify and develop new and sustainable cultural tourism business models, to Innovation Actions that can pilot them.
- Strengthen links between Horizon Europe projects and Cohesion Policy funding to provide additional pathways to finance follow-up implementation. While Horizon Europe funds R&D and pilots, scaling up successful models often requires structural investment in infrastructure, training, or business support. In order to improve the knowledge base for these investments, DG RTD should further strengthen coordination with DG REGIO so that relevant European Regional Development Fund programmes or Interreg cross-border programmes. LEADER is also extremely relevant in the context of rural and remote areas, and therefore further strengthening the coordination with DG AGRI will also be needed.
- Leverage Coordination and Support Actions to build networks between rural and remote areas across Europe and share knowledge, practical guides, tools and prototypes related to cultural and creative tourism.
- Align DG RTD’s work with other relevant EU funding streams that are related to tourism and culture. Creative Europe could help develop creative and cultural assets and support capacity building. Erasmus+ could also be used to develop exchanges for students or young professionals to work in rural and remote areas.
- Incentivise researchers by using calls to signal the prioritisation of proposals that develop synergies with existing projects and initiatives.
- Align calls related to cultural and creative tourism with the Macro Regional Strategies, and support Horizon Europe projects to share their findings with the relevant Macro Regional Strategy Pillar Coordinators and working groups.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

These policy recommendations are based on the findings of a systematic literature review. The aim was to synthesise existing research on cultural and creative tourism, sustainable tourism development in rural and remote areas identifying existing knowledge, gaps and areas for further research. The review covered two main areas. Firstly, it addressed the benefits, needs, and challenges associated with cultural and creative tourism within rural and remote areas. This included how cultural and creative tourism can contribute to economic diversification, cultural preservation, community resilience, and local identity enhancement. It also covered potential challenges such as infrastructural limitations, skills gaps, seasonality of tourism, over-tourism and cultural commodification. Second the review aimed to identify current business models, market trends, and policy frameworks relevant to cultural and creative tourism within the context of the European Union.

The review was conducted using the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) principles. This method is widely used, as it provides a way to ensure a rigorous, transparent, and replicable analysis of the literature. The main literature search was conducted in April 2024 in the Web of Science (WOS) and SCOPUS databases. The inclusion criteria for the search were: 1) research conducted in Europe, 2) research conducted in a rural or remote area, and 3) research conducted between 1989 (the first identified study of rural cultural tourism) and April 2024. The search terms used were "remote region" or "remote area" or "rural area" or "rural region" and "cultural tourism" or "creative tourism". These terms were also translated into the relevant languages by project partners in each of the countries represented in the CROCUS project to ensure a wider coverage of sources. Recognising that databases like WOS and SCOPUS primarily contain English language sources, additional searches were conducted in Google Scholar and relevant national databases. In all, 316 full text documents were recovered. Additionally, the 467 relevant sources identified by the project partners were also analysed.

Finally, thirteen exemplar cases of cultural and creative tourism business models were analysed using the sustainable business model canvas. The exemplar cases were selected by project partners from the case study areas included in the CROCUS as typical business models. Based on the literature review and detailed analysis of the thirteen exemplar business models, four groups of cultural and creative business models were identified and compared on the basis of ownership, cultural resources used, revenue models and sustainability issues.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME	Cross-Border Cultural and Creative Tourism in Rural and Remote Areas (CROCUS)
COORDINATOR	Henrik Halkier, Aalborg University, Denmark, halkier@ikl.aau.dk
CONSORTIUM	Aalborg University – AAU – Aalborg, Denmark Association for Tourism and Leisure Education – ATLAS – Arnhem, The Netherlands Group NAO – GNAO – Copenhagen, Denmark Tallinn University – TLU – Tallinn, Estonia University of Bergamo – UniBg – Bergamo, Italy University of Maribor – UM – Maribor, Slovenia University of Oulu – UOULU – Oulu, Finland University of Pannonia – UP – Veszprém, Hungary University of Rijeka – FMTU – Opatija, Croatia Zangador Research Institute – ZRI – Varna, Bulgaria
FUNDING SCHEME	Horizon Research and Innovation Action, programme 'Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society', call HORIZON-CL2-2023-HERITAGE-01, topic 'Fostering socio-economic development and job creation in rural and remote areas through cultural tourism'
DURATION	April 2024 – March 2027 (36 months).
BUDGET	EU budget contribution € 2 799 733,75
WEBSITE	https://crocuseurope.eu

**FOR MORE
INFORMATION**

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FURTHER READING

Richards, G., James, L. and Halkier, H. (2024) Concepts and Methods – Deliverable 2.1 for the CROCUS Horizon Europe project on Cross-border Cultural and Creative Tourism in Rural and Remote Areas

James, L., Halkier, H., Bradač, B., Ivanov, S., Ivanova, M., Jurdana, D., Lind, A. L., Onderwater, L., Papp, Z., Raffay-Danyi, A., Richards, G., Rudan, E., Saarinen, J., Spoljaric, T., & Zadel, Z. (2024) Creative and Cultural Tourism Business models - Deliverable 2.2 for CROCUS - Cross-border Cultural and Creative Tourism in Rural and Remote Areas