

CO-CONSTRUCTIVE PARTICIPATION IN ARTS AND CULTURAL HERITAGE AS A KEY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL AREAS? A SCOPING REVIEW

Jessica Fittkau, Lisa Birnbaum,
Stephan Kröner¹



¹ Jessica Fittkau, ORCID: 0009-0008-0998-7020, e-mail: jessica.jf.fittkau@fau.de; Lisa Birnbaum, ORCID: 0000-0002-1676-0819, e-mail: lisa.birnbaum@fau.de; Stephan Kröner, ORCID: 0000-0001-9396-9168, e-mail: stephan.kroener@fau.de; Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany

Abstract: Opportunities to participate in the arts and cultural heritage may drive sustainable rural regional development – particularly in social terms by strengthening foster health, well-being, and social cohesion. We explore patterns in research on rural participation in arts and heritage. A search of two databases yielded $n = 49$ relevant studies. These were categorized by the role of co-constructive participation, the facets of arts and cultural heritage covered, and research designs. Results show studies address receptive, active, and various co-constructive forms of participation. Four patterns related to research on co-constructive participation in the arts and cultural heritage emerged: (1) local participation in preserving heritage, (2) promoting social bonds through arts, (3) arts-based approaches tackling social issues, and (4) hosting as co-constructive participation. While these patterns highlight the potential of arts and heritage for sustainable social and cultural rural development, most studies are qualitative; further research should focus on quantitative evidence to complement findings on the potential benefits of co-constructive participation for rural communities.

Keywords: scoping review, rural areas, culture, arts and cultural heritage, participation, co-constructive

Zusammenfassung: Möglichkeiten zur Partizipation an Kunst und Kulturerbe können nachhaltige ländliche Regionalentwicklung vorantreiben – vor allem in sozialer Hinsicht durch die Förderung von Gesundheit, Wohlbefinden sowie sozialen Zusammenhalt. Wir untersuchen Muster in der Forschung zur Partizipation an Kunst und Kulturerbe in ländlichen Räumen. Eine Suche in zwei Datenbanken ergab $n = 49$ relevante Studien. Diese wurden nach der Rolle ko-konstruktiver Partizipation, den untersuchten Facetten von Kunst und Kulturerbe und den Forschungsdesigns kategorisiert. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass sich die Studien mit rezeptiven, aktiven und verschiedenen ko-konstruktiven Formen der Partizipation befassen. Hinsichtlich der Forschung zur ko-konstruktiven Partizipation an Kunst und Kulturerbe haben sich vier Muster herauskristallisiert: (1) lokale Partizipation an der Erhaltung des Kulturerbes, (2) Förderung sozialer Bindungen durch Künste, (3) kunstbasierte Ansätze zur Bewältigung sozialer Probleme und (4) Moderation als ko-konstruktive Partizipation. Während diese Muster das Potenzial von Kunst und Kulturerbe für eine nachhaltige soziale und kulturelle ländliche Entwicklung hervorheben, sind die meisten Studien qualitativ; weitere Forschung sollte sich auf solide Belege für potenzielle Vorteile der ko-konstruktiven Partizipation für ländliche Gemeinden konzentrieren.

Schlüsselwörter: Scoping Review, ländliche Räume, Kultur, Kunst und Kulturerbe, Partizipation, ko-konstruktiv

Highlights

- Participation in the arts and cultural heritage includes receptive, active participation and co-constructive forms
 - Especially co-constructive participation may foster sustainable social and cultural development
 - Robust evidence on determinants of successful co-construction is lacking
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1. Introduction

The cultural and creative economies are experiencing rapid growth, and the arts as well as cultural heritage are regarded as well-suited fields for addressing social and economic challenges (Duxbury & Campbell, 2011; OECD, 2022). However, unlike many urban areas, rural regions often suffer from cultural undersupply (Sievers, 2018). This is further exacerbated by the financial and structural

weaknesses of non-profit cultural organizations (Gallagher, 2021). Thus, the question arises as how the potential of cultural participation in rural areas may be unlocked. Here, it may be helpful to go beyond individual participation in existing cultural opportunities may it be receptive, e.g., by attending a musical concert, or active, e.g., painting in a private or predetermined setting. Rather, it might be informative to scrutinize various aspects of co-construction of cultural supply. It is promising to dive deeper into how local individuals and communities self-organize, co-design or self-initiate opportunities for cultural participation. This may complement receptive and active participation in the arts and cultural heritage and bear potential for the sustainable development of rural areas. To give an overview of the extant literature related to these issues, our scoping review analyses how co-construction has been dealt with in research on participation in the arts and cultural heritage in rural areas. This includes examining the potential of co-constructive participation in the arts and cultural heritage to promote both cultural sustainability (within the framework of *culture in sustainable development*) and social sustainability (within the framework of *culture for sustainable development*); and exploring forms, conditions, and design aspects that support its successful implementation.

The paper is structured as follows: Subsequent to this introduction, Section 2 deals with the theoretical background presenting the relationship between culture and sustainable development, cultural participation and its values, as well as conceptual foundations of co-construction. Section 3 describes the methodological approach, including the development of search terms, database selection, screening procedures, and categorization of studies. Section 4 presents the patterns of participation in arts and cultural heritage in rural areas emerging from the literature and illustrates them with examples. Section 5 discusses these patterns regarding the role of culture in sustainable development. Finally, section 6 highlights the limitations of the study and outlines directions for future research.

2. Culture and sustainable development

While culture may be broadly defined as a "complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor, 1920, p. 1), for the purpose of this study, we apply a somewhat more focused definition that focuses (a) on the arts, including visual arts, performing arts, music, and literature (Kristeller, 1951; Kröner et al., 2021) and (b) on cultural heritage, including intangible heritage (traditions, customs and expressions), tangible heritage (monuments, buildings and works of art) and cultural landscapes resulting from the enduring interaction of human and natural systems (UNESCO, 1972, 2022).

The concept of culture gained relevance in the context of sustainable development (Gerber, 2018), which is often defined by the Brundtland Report (1987): "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". This definition is usually operationalized through the three pillars model, which considers environmental, social and economic sustainability as equal dimensions (Strange & Bayley, 2008). For a long time, cultural aspects of sustainable development were presented either as part of social pillar or in combination with it (socio-cultural). In recent decades, the role of culture in the context of sustainable development has received increasing attention. A recent study conducted within the framework of the COST Action IS1007 "Investigating Cultural Sustainability" differentiates three meanings of the role of culture in the context of sustainable development: *culture in, for, and as sustainable development* (Dessein et al., 2015; see figure 1).

First, culture is provided as a fundamental basis for sustainable development (*culture as sustainable development*), shaping ethical and moral decisions. In this view, culture serves as an overarching structure supporting the other pillars (Dessein et al., 2015; Nurse, 2006). Schneider and Feld (2021) describe culture as a horizontal dimension on which the ecological, social and economic pillars build vertically. The fundamental role of culture emphasized in this perspective follows a broader understanding of culture than that which is employed in this study, rendering it less relevant for the present review.

Second, culture is understood as a self-standing, fourth pillar alongside the environment, economy, and social pillars (*culture in sustainable development*). This view, strongly influenced by Hawkes (2001), appears in political documents such as the EU Goal 11.4 of the 2030 Agenda, which emphasizes

the protection of cultural and natural heritage (United Nation, 2015), and in Action 11 of the draft UN “Pact for the Future”, which explicitly classifies culture as a component of sustainable development (United Nation, 2024). Dessein et al. (2015) also emphasize the relevance of this approach. While it was critically noted that this perspective often reduces culture to the arts and creativity, this is nevertheless one of the perspectives that are relevant for our paper, as it is exactly this aspect of culture that may be useful starting point for local co-construction of cultural life.

Third, culture is understood as a connecting element between the three classic pillars (*culture for sustainable development*). It is conceived as a mediating force linking social, ecological, and economic sustainability goals. Culture Action Europe (2019) even calls for integrating culture into all areas for the implementation of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. This view is also relevant to our work, as we investigate how cultural participation can contribute to social sustainability in rural areas.

The present review focuses on participation in the arts and cultural heritage – understood in a narrow sense of culture. This narrowing sense of culture allows for a clear and measurable framework for analysis. Thus, we avoid conceptual ambiguities associated with the broader discourse of *culture as sustainable development*, while still acknowledging the fundamental importance of culture in fostering sustainable, inclusive, and resilient societies. To sum up, the present article examines the extent to which the latter two perspectives of culture (*culture in/for sustainable development*) are reflected in empirical analyses in the context of sustainable development.



Fig 1. Culture in, for, and as sustainable development. Source: adapted from Dessein et al. 2015, p. 29

2.1 Cultural participation in the arts and cultural heritage – between intrinsic value and social value

In the context of arts and cultural heritage, research on participation often hinges on receptive forms, such as attending cultural events or exhibitions, and active forms, like performing or creating arts (Marrone, 2006; Sacco, 2011). Beyond this, so-called co-constructive participation may also encompass the collective co-design, organization, and initiation of cultural processes, thus creating participation opportunities for oneself and others. This is addressed in discussions on cultural democratization (Blake, 2007; Booth, 2014; Fietz, 2009) and participatory cultural work (Büdel & Kolleck, 2023).

From the perspective of *culture in sustainable development*, where culture is understood as a self-standing fourth pillar, participation in the arts and cultural heritage also holds potential to promote – cultural diversity, vitality, and heritage preservation (Hawkes, 2001; Soini & Birkeland, 2014). In addition, it may foster cross-cultural exchange, mutual understanding (Chen, 2022), protection of local heritage (Li et al., 2020; Spiridon & Sandu, 2015), local identity (Lowe, 2000) and sense of belonging (Bitušíková, 2020).

From the perspective of *culture for sustainable development*, participation in the arts and cultural heritage can represent significant potential for the further development of the social pillar in particular (Sacco, 2011). By acting as a mediator, cultural participation may be relevant for addressing issues like health, social justice, and overall quality of life within well-being (Axelsson et al., 2013; Colantonio, 2007) and help strengthening social cohesion (Jagodzińska et al., 2015).

Participation in the arts and cultural heritage, particularly the more established receptive and active forms, is frequently associated with improved health (e.g., Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Sheppard & Broughton, 2020; Viola et al., 2024), as widely discussed related to the COVID-19 lockdowns (Ascolani et al., 2020; Razai et al., 2020). Further evidence suggests that participation in various arts – including music (Daykin et al., 2018; Yi & Kim, 2023), visual arts (Golding et al., 2018,) and performing arts (Haiting & Na, 2024; Lewandowska & Węziak-Białowolska, 2023) – may positively increase well-being. Along the same lines, participation in arts and heritage may foster well-being, especially in rural areas with sparse cultural resources (Anwar McHenry, 2011).

Participation in the arts and cultural heritage is also considered to enhance social skills (Rivas, 2016) and to promote social capital, networks, trust, and cooperation — key elements of social cohesion. This may in turn improve health (Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Plikynas et al., 2022; Sonke et al., 2024) and prevent loneliness and social isolation (Poscia et al., 2018), issues particularly relevant in rural areas (Anwar McHenry, 2011; MacLeod et al., 2016; Willekens & Lievens, 2014). Furthermore, it has been claimed that it reduces social inequalities and marginalization (Brownnett, 2018).

2.2 Forms and conditions of co-constructive participation in the arts and cultural heritage

As already mentioned, the broader understanding of participation extends beyond individuals attending or actively engaging in cultural activities and encompasses **co-constructive participation**, which can be categorized into four distinct forms based on Simon (2010): (a) contribution, where participants provide feedback that is incorporated into development processes driven by others; (b) collaboration, in which residents are involved in the co-design or organization of cultural processes lead by others, (c) co-creation, which allows for even deeper participation: it shares responsibility for development with the residents and thus takes into account the needs and opinions of those involved; and (d) hosting, where places and resources are provided, granting local communities the autonomy to independently develop and implement own projects. Co-constructive participation can be linked to educational theories, particularly those emphasizing the dynamic and collaborative construction (Cummings, 2001; Yang, 2023). Co-creation is also pivotal to arts-based participatory methods, often used to promote social justice and empower marginalized groups (Doucet et al., 2022; Nunn, 2022). In contexts like urban planning and tourism, co-creation is used to create socially equitable spaces and to enhance migrants' confidence (Carpenter & Horvath, 2022; Rydzik et al., 2013). In smaller cities and rural areas, participatory methods may help to activate local cultural resources for sustainable development (Duxbury et al., 2023). Particularly hosting may offer a way to empower communities in rural areas with limited cultural venues, by providing access to venues and resources for cultural initiatives (Bäßler & Hartmann, 2024). A substantial body of research examines the conditions for successful co-construction (Forneck & Springer, 2005; Fullan, 2015; Lehnert, 2021; Palincsar, 1998; Slavin, 1996). However, research has mainly focused on educational contexts, the exploration of conditions for co-constructive participation in the arts and cultural heritage is limited.

While co-construction may help to unlock the aforementioned potential of participation in the arts and cultural heritage, much of the extant research has focused on receptive and active participation in existing cultural offers, neglecting the potential of co-constructive participation (Holden, 2006). Thus, co-constructive participation is at the heart of the present scoping review. While reviewing the role of co-construction in extant empirical and theoretical studies related to participation in arts and cultural heritage, the aim of this paper is as follows: (1) to identify key patterns in studies in rural areas on particularly co-constructive participation in the arts and cultural heritage; (2) to explore the potential of participation to promote cultural sustainability within the perspective of *culture in sustainable development*, as well as social sustainability within the perspective of *culture for sustainable development*, and (3) to examine the forms of co-constructive participation and the conditions and design aspects of its successful implementation. Through a systematic analysis of the included literature, this review provides a comprehensive overview of the research on the role of co-constructive participation in the arts and cultural heritage.

3. Methods

The methodological process is presented systematically below: First, the development of the search term and the database used are described. Then the process of identifying relevant studies based on defined inclusion criteria is explained. Finally, bibliographical, methodological and contend-related aspects according to which the included articles are categorized are explained.

3.1 Development of the search command

The search string was systematically derived and organized into three thematic areas: rurality, arts or cultural heritage, and participation (Table 1). First, as the central focus of this study, rurality was specified by the search terms rural and peripher*. Second, regarding the arts and cultural heritage, 55 terms were defined, covering different facets of arts or cultural heritage (e.g., dance, museum, theatre). Third, regarding participation common synonyms such as involvement, engagement, empowerment, or encouragement were added. In addition, the term social innovations were added. While the three dimensions of the search term were linked using Boolean AND operators, OR operators were used within the dimensions. The search was restricted to the following academic disciplines: social sciences, arts and humanities, and psychology, and to the document type article.

Tab 1. Search String With "or" Linking Between the Search Terms and "and" Linking Between the Dimensions. Source: own elaboration

Dimension	Search terms
Rural Areas	rural, peripher*
Culture (Arts and Cultural Heritage)	cultur*, heritage, camera*, photograph*, selfie*, photo, craft*, paint*, art, arts, artist*, ballet, dance*, dancing, drama, theatre, theater, choreograph*, cinema*, film*, picture*, video, avatar, book*, letter, lyric*, poet*, read*, writ*, storybook*, storytel*, ebook*, exhibition, gallery, galleries, museum*, music*, orchestra, choir*, singing, song*, melod*, song*, choir*, band, rap, "hip hop", jazz, comedy, "community events", festival, "creative activit*"
Participation	participation, engagement, empowerment, encouragement, involvement, "social innovation*"

3.2 Search in the databases and screening

The search string was applied in the internationally recognized databases Scopus and ERIC API (Educational Resources Information Center). As the world's largest scientific abstract and citation database, Scopus supports a wide range of research fields. ERIC API complements the search in the field of educational sciences, which are of particular importance because educational institutions and programs often serve as key drivers of cultural participation. The application of the search term yielded $n = 1243$ relevant entries in Scopus and $n = 148$ in ERIC API. The entries were exported with the requisite bibliographic data and abstracts and merged into a CSV file. After the removal of duplicates ($n = 66$), a total of $n = 1325$ database entries remained.

To refine this set of entries, a multi-stage screening process was conducted based on predefined inclusion criteria (Figure 1). The following inclusion criteria were addressed: First, the spatial focus of the studies had to be exclusively or at least partially in rural or peripheral areas. Second, the articles' content had to focus on the arts (visual, performing or literary arts or music) or cultural heritage (tangible, intangible and cultural landscapes) issue. Third, it was required that the articles specifically address issues of participation. In addition, the articles should involve the participation of local community members or individual who are not be working in government or as professionals in the arts and cultural sector. In other words, the article must focus on participation of local communities in rural areas. Lastly, we included journal articles regardless of language if their full-texts were available. In addition, no limitations were imposed with regard to the target groups, thereby ensuring that all age groups and genders were considered.

Using these criteria, the remaining $n = 1325$ entries were screened in sequential steps (Figure 1). At each stage, articles that clearly did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded. Initially, the titles of all articles were reviewed, resulting in the exclusion of $n = 422$ articles that did not meet the criteria. The remaining $n = 823$ articles were then assessed based on their abstracts, leading to the exclusion of $n = 562$ articles due to insufficient relevance. This left $n = 261$ abstracts for full-text screening. In the final stage, the full texts of the $n = 261$ entries were thoroughly examined. During this process, $n = 212$ studies were excluded. Ultimately, $n = 49$ articles met all the inclusion criteria and were selected for further analysis. The search term development and screening process lasted from November 2023 to May 2024.

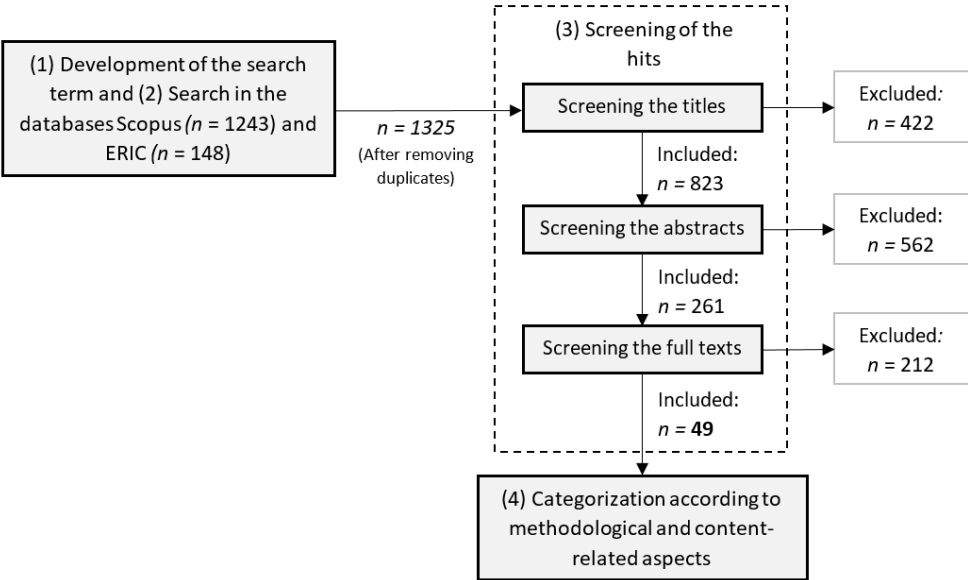


Fig 2. Diagram of the research-, screening- and evaluation process. Source: own elaboration

3.3 Categorization according to bibliographic, methodological and content-related aspects

We categorized the included articles using the qualitative content analysis method (Mayring, 2014) with MAXQDA Analytics Pro (24.4.0). The coded categories that were used to investigate the included studies are presented below. They relate either to their bibliographic and methodological characteristics or to their content focus.

First, the variables year of publication, study region (country) and journal were considered as descriptive characteristics of the included articles. These characteristics were systematically collected to obtain an overview of the geographical and temporal distribution as well as the publication contexts of the research papers.

No limitations were applied regarding the **year of publication**. The first article relevant to this scoping review was published in 1987. However, up to 2010, only four studies met the inclusion criteria and additional three up to 2015. From 2016 onwards, the number of publications increased significantly: 19 studies were published between 2016 and 2020, and $n = 22$ studies between 2021 and 2024. This is in line with the general upward trend in publications in the social sciences and psychology (Lin & Lu, 2025).

The **geographical focus** of the articles examined in this study was extremely diverse, reflecting the global relevance of the research topic. The majority of articles dealt with rural regions in Europe ($n = 14$). Rural regions in western countries such as England, Ireland, the Netherlands and Germany were strongly represented ($n = 7$). Rural regions in Northern Europe were also well represented, with countries such as Finland, Norway and Denmark. Eastern European rural regions, including Poland, Latvia, and the Czech Republic, contributed to the analysis, as did Southern European regions from countries such as Portugal, Spain, Greece, and Italy. Beyond Europe, rural regions in the Americas were addressed ($n = 12$), with the majority of studies focusing on North America ($n = 11$) and only one on South America. Asia was represented by $n = 11$ studies, followed by Africa with $n = 8$. Finally, rural areas in Australia (Oceania) were

covered in $n = 4$ articles. This geographical distribution shows a wide range of interest in the research topic across different continents.

The articles examined in this study were drawn from a variety of $n = 43$ different **academic journals**. The Journal of Rural Studies was the most frequently featured with $n = 5$ publications, followed by Sociologia Ruralis with $n = 3$ publications. The remaining articles were distributed across a variety of other journals, with each appearing only once, thereby reflecting the breadth of the topic. Depending on the search term, many of the journals can be assigned to the area of arts and cultural heritage (e.g., Museums and Social Issues). Some journals can also be located in the areas of social development (e.g., Gender and Development) and education (e.g., Research in Drama Education).

With regard to the **methodological approach**, a differentiated categorization of the included articles was made, including both empirical ($n = 40$) and non-empirical ($n = 9$) contributions. Empirical studies were divided into three categories based on their design. Quantitative studies ($n = 7$) were subdivided according to their design (cross-sectional, longitudinal, or intervention studies) and analytical method (descriptive, inferential, or modeling) (Kröner et al., 2021). Qualitative studies ($n = 27$) were differentiated between those based on coding methods (grounded theory, qualitative content analysis, thematic analysis) and those based on reconstructive methods (discourse analysis, narrative analysis) (Jeong et al., 2014; Kröner et al., 2021). Studies providing insufficient information regarding the qualitative analyses applied were labeled as free interpretation (Gläser & Laudel, 2009). Mixed-methods studies ($n = 6$) were coded twice (both for qualitative and quantitative analysis). Non-empirical articles were divided into theoretical analyses ($n = 3$), those with practical implications ($n = 5$), and one research synthesis.

Second, the context-related analysis is based on a categorization of the included studies according to their focus on culture, participation, and sustainable development. The aim of this approach is to systematically capture the content focus or foci of each of the included studies and evaluate them with regard to the research aims. Table 2 provides a differentiated overview of the categories used and clearly indicates which facets of culture, forms of participation in art and cultural heritage, and aspects of sustainability are addressed in the respective studies. Please note that articles can be coded in multiple categories at the lowest level (e.g., involving community development, social justice and empowerment and education). On higher levels (italicized) the sum represents the number of articles addressing at least one of the lowest-level codes.

With regard to **culture**, on the top level of the system, the included articles were categorized as involving one or both of the facets of arts ($n = 39$) or cultural heritage ($n = 15$). The arts were further subdivided into the subfacets of visual arts ($n = 16$), performing arts ($n = 13$), music ($n = 8$) or literature ($n = 6$) (Kristeller, 1951). When no specific category was addressed or references were made, these were classified as arts in general ($n = 6$). Cultural heritage was categorized into intangible heritage ($n = 4$), tangible heritage ($n = 4$) or cultural landscapes ($n = 2$) (UNESCO, 1972, 2022). References to cultural heritage that did not specify a particular category of cultural heritage were also categorized as cultural heritage in general ($n = 7$).

For the purposes of this study, **participation** was categorized according to the form and extent of engagement, distinguishing between receptive ($n = 15$) and active participation ($n = 39$), as well as co-constructive participation in the arts and cultural heritage ($n = 29$). Receptive participation involves engaging as an audience, such as attending an exhibition, while active participation refers to direct involvement in cultural activities, such as playing an instrument or painting (Marrone, 2006). Co-constructive participation in the arts and cultural heritage goes further and includes four forms (Simon, 2010): contribution, collaboration, co-creation and hosting. Contribution ($n = 5$) refers to participants providing feedback, for example on an exhibition and this is used for its improvements. Collaboration ($n = 7$) means that participants work together (in phases) with professionals to achieve a common goal, but the main responsibility lies with professionals. Co-creation ($n = 12$) occurs when participants and professionals collaborate from start to finish, with both parties sharing equal responsibility throughout the process. Hosting ($n = 3$) refers to contexts where local actors assume a leadership role by providing spaces or resources and organize, manage or perform cultural activities themselves. Additionally, studies employing participatory arts-based approaches were specifically coded. These involved participants in

the creative process, using artistic expression as both a participatory method and a form of inquiry. Concerning the areas of culture and participation, three different types of articles emerged from the $n = 49$ included articles. $n = 19$ articles dealing with primarily receptive or active cultural participation, $n = 14$ articles focused on co-constructive participation (e.g., case studies of festivals which were co-created or initiated by local community), and $n = 16$ articles focused on participatory arts-based approaches in research (e.g., participatory theatre).

Tab 2. Elements of the sets of categories explaining participation in the arts and cultural heritage and its addressing aspects of sustainable development. Source: own elaboration

Elements of the set of categories	Number of coded articles
1. Culture	
1.1 Arts	39
1.1.1 Arts in general	6
1.1.2 Visual arts	16
1.1.3 Performing arts	13
1.1.4 Literature	6
1.1.5 Music	8
1.2 Cultural heritage	15
1.2.1 Cultural heritage in general	7
1.2.2 Tangible heritage	4
1.2.3 Intangible heritage	4
1.2.4 Cultural landscapes	2
2. Participation	
2.1 Receptive participation	14
2.2 Active participation	40
2.3 Co-constructive participation	29
2.3.1 Contribution	5
2.3.2 Collaboration	9
2.3.3 Co-creation	12
2.3.4 Hosting (+ self-initiated)	3(+3)
2.4 Participatory arts-based approaches	15
3. Sustainable development	
3.1 <i>Culture in sustainable development</i>	24
3.1.1 Cross-cultural exchange and respect	2
3.1.2 Cultural education and awareness	9
3.1.3 Conversation of cultural heritage	19
3.2 <i>Culture for sustainable development</i>	49
3.2.1 Social aspects	40
3.2.1.1 Community development	39
3.2.1.2 Social justice and empowerment	13
3.2.1.3 Education	11
3.2.1.4 Health and well-being	10
3.2.1 Others	10
3.2.1.1 Environmental aspects	4
3.2.1.2 Economic aspects	6
3.3 None	3

Finally, the extent to which participation addresses either social or cultural dimensions of **sustainable development** in particular was examined. Following the perspective of *culture in sustainable development* ($n = 24$), which positions culture as a self-standing fourth pillar, aspects such as the preservation of cultural traditions, the maintenance of cultural landscapes and buildings, and the conservation of artifacts were considered. In contrast, social sustainability was examined from the perspective of *culture for sustainable development* ($n = 49$), which views culture as a mediator to achieve broader sustainability goals. This perspective includes aspects such as promoting social justice and strengthening social cohesion (Colantonio 2007, 2011). Social aspects addressing aspects such as health and well-being through participation in the arts and cultural heritage were coded most frequently ($n = 40$). From this viewpoint,

cultural participation can also contribute to ecological or economic sustainability ($n = 10$) – such as by raising environmental awareness or fostering local economies. However, the ecological and economic pillars were grouped under the category "Other," as the primary analytical focus of this study lies on the social and cultural aspects. There were also $n = 3$ studies that did not address any of these pillars, focusing on aspects such as youth participation networks across rural and non-rural communities (Oosterhoff et al., 2020), national identity through media (Puijk, 2024), and description of youth cultural production in rural areas (Chau, 2006). They were coded as "none".

4. Key findings: Patterns of studies on participation in the arts and cultural heritage in rural areas

In this section we report the four patterns that emerged from the recent studies in rural areas on participation in the arts and cultural heritage included in our review. **Table 3** provides an overview of the studies related to these patterns by region. It focuses on research topics recurring across several studies, such as local participation in cultural heritage (Pattern 1), the social impacts of participation in the arts (Pattern 2), arts-based participatory approaches for social issues (Pattern 3), and the role of hosting in community-led cultural activities (Pattern 4). These patterns are presented in detail below using prototypical studies.

Tab 3. Overview of studies in the patterns. Source: own elaboration

	Europe	(North) America	Australia	Asia	Africa	In total
Pattern 1	Paula & Kaufmane, 2020 (Latvia); Martin et al., 2021 (Europe); Flood et al., 2022 (Ireland); Lewis et al., 2022 (Czech Republic, Netherlands, Poland)	Prest, 2020 (Canada)	0	Lai, 2019 (Taiwan); Qu & Cheer, 2021 (Japan); Ren & Woudstra, 2022 (China); Lu & Qian, 2023 (China)	Onyenankeya & Salawu, 2021 (South Africa)	10
Pattern 2	Martins & Canhoto, 2016 (Portugal); Mahon & Hyyryläinen, 2019 (Ireland & Finland); Otte, 2019 (Netherlands); Ubillos-Landa et al., 2020 (Spain)	Flood, 2021 (USA); Kosurko et al., 2022 (Canada)	Anwar McHenry, 2011 ; (Gibson & Gordon, 2018)	Xie et al., 2019 (China); Leung & Thorsten, 2022 (Japan); Qu & Cheer, 2021 (Japan); Lu & Qian, 2023 (China); Luo & Guan, 2023 (China)	0	13
Pattern 3	Antoniou et al., 2019 (Greece); (Martin et al., 2021) (Europe); Lewis et al., 2022 (Czech Republic, Netherlands, Poland)	Markus, 2012 (USA); Bryanton et al., 2019 (Canada); Frank et al., 2022 (USA); Steiner et al., 2023 (USA)	Hazenbosch et al., 2022	0	Malamah-Thomas, 1987 (Sierra Leone); Kalipeni & Kamlongera, 1996 (Malawi); Betiang, 2010 (Nigeria); Harris et al., 2016; Richardson-Ngwenya et al., 2019 (Tanzania, Kenya); Rouhani, 2019 (Benin); Ghoshal & Manna, 2020 (Bengal); Mkwanzanji et al., 2021 (Zimbabwe)	15

	Europe	(North) America	Australia	Asia	Africa	In total
Pattern 4	Martins & Canhoto, 2016 (Portugal); Paula & Kaufmane, 2020 (Latvia)	0	0	Qu & Cheer, 2021 (Japan)	0	3

4.1 Pattern 1: Cultural sustainable development through local participatory heritage initiatives

Description: Projects, festivals and events in rural areas, supported or even initiated by local populations, can play a pivotal role in preserving cultural heritage. Intangible aspects in particular – such as traditions, local narratives, or cultural practices – are kept alive mainly through community-based activities. The local participation of the population is considered as a crucial factor for the sustainability of these cultural projects. In line with our aim of exploring co-constructive participation, this pattern underscores the significance of participation in local heritage initiatives to foster cultural sustainable development within the perspective of *culture in sustainable development*. Nevertheless, the specific conditions for success and the design characteristics of such initiatives have so far hardly been systematically investigated in existing research. This pattern reflects the growing attention given to local heritage initiatives, particularly in European ($n = 4$) and Asian studies ($n = 4$).

Examples: Paula and Kaufmane's (2020) study focuses on the "Night of Legends" in rural Latvia, an annual event established in 2012, where the local community offers historical tours, creative workshops, and exhibitions in historic buildings to engage both residents and visitors. Based on semi-structured interviews and participant observation, the authors highlight the importance of cooperation between local groups, associations, companies, artists, and volunteers. Local participation is mentioned as an important element of the cooperation, but not explored as an independent research focus.

Lai (2019) reports on the TOGO Rural Art Museum in Taiwan, which uses the entire village as a platform for site-specific art installations to preserve cultural heritage. While not featuring empirical research methods, the report highlights challenges such as financial constraints, which led the museum to rely on cooperation with local companies. While the focus in this report is on the design of participation, more precisely on the co-creation between the artists and the villagers; it does not involve results of original empirical research on this topic.

4.2 Pattern 2: Participation in the arts as a mediator for social bonds and inclusion

Description: This pattern highlights the potential of the arts to act as a mediator for overarching goals—particularly concerning social sustainable development within the perspective of *culture for sustainable development*. Participation in the arts, whether through organized programs or self-initiated activities, may be crucial for promoting individual well-being and social cohesion, particularly in rural areas. While receptive and active forms of participation have often been studied using quantitative methods, co-constructive participation has so far primarily been the subject of qualitative research. Studies addressing this pattern are from Europe ($n = 4$), Asia ($n = 5$), America ($n = 2$) and Australia ($n = 2$).

Examples: As Ubillos-Landa et al. (2020) stated, participation in organized cultural activities may provide opportunities to strengthen individual well-being and community bonds. Their study evaluated the Community Animation Program (CAP) in Spain, which encompassed a range of cultural activities aimed at enhancing participants' quality of life and well-being. Based on a quasi-experimental design and structured interviews, the authors conclude that participants in the experimental group benefited regarding psychological health, social relations, and environmental satisfaction, whereas the control group did not exhibit comparable outcomes.

There are hints that not only organized programs but also self-initiated activities may be beneficial for social bonds and inclusion. In an interview study, Gibson and Gordon (2018) examined how community music programs in rural Bega Valley, Australia, promote cultural vitality and resilience. The iterative

coding process of semi-structured interviews and observations revealed how music may foster social bonds, create a space for communal music-making and supported the integration of “in-migrants”.

4.3 Pattern 3: Participatory arts-based approaches as an impulse for shaping co-constructive frameworks

Description: This pattern addresses the potential of participatory arts-based approaches to function as co-constructive methods from research for addressing social challenges in rural areas. These approaches combine creative practice with community participation and research, often aiming to foster empowerment, inclusion, and local problem-solving. By involving participants in processes like digital storytelling or photovoice, they help to articulate lived experiences and stimulate dialogue or policy reflection. This pattern aligns with our aim of examining co-constructive forms of participation, illustrating how these approaches can enhance empowerment and social transformation – which is a part of social sustainable development. Despite the potential of these methodologies, studies often lack systematic evaluation of their impact, and the aesthetic dimension is rarely central. Almost half of the studies underlining this pattern come from African regions ($n = 7$). While Asian studies could be assigned to all other patterns, we could not identify any for this pattern. The remaining studies in this pattern stem from Europe ($n = 3$), North America ($n = 4$) and Australia ($n = 1$).

Examples: Digital storytelling, as illustrated in Rouhani’s (2019) study with rural women in Benin, is **a participatory visual method that combines traditional storytelling with digital media tools to produce short, personal video narratives**. In this study, members of local Mothers’ Associations created digital stories to highlight structural gender inequalities as well as to raise awareness among policymakers about the need for women's participation in the political and educational spheres. This initiative promoted community dialogue on women's roles and access to education; however, the data were not empirically analyzed.

Photovoice was, for instance, used by Bryanton et al. (2019) with older women in rural Canada. Participants are trained in the use of digital cameras to document daily lives, following by reflection on the resulting photographs in interviews and focus groups. Through coding and categorization of photographs and narratives, they identified key issues such as mobility support and family assistance, leading to policy recommendations tailored to the needs of older people in rural areas.

4.4 Pattern 4: Hosting – a blind spot in research

Description: Among the included studies, collaboration and co-creation are primarily examined. A less researched form of participation is hosting ($n = 3$; Europe: $n = 2$, Asia: $n = 1$)., which shows how places such as libraries or historic buildings can function as a basis for community-led cultural activities. Its defining feature is that laypeople as individuals or communities take the lead in developing, organizing and implementing offers within established locations. Infrastructural limitations in rural regions render such models particularly pertinent. This pattern supports our aim of investigating forms of co-constructive participation by drawing attention to hosting as an underrepresented mode in current research. The existing literature lacks empirical evidence regarding the factors that facilitate or hinders its success.

Examples: Qu and Cheer (2021) describe how during the Shiosai Festival in Japan, historical buildings are used as hosting places for art exhibitions, where locals as well as local artists present their works and offer art workshops. Based on semi-structured interviews and questionnaires it may be concluded that these activities may strengthen participation in cultural heritage and contribute to social revitalization of rural areas.

Martins and Canhoto (2016) examined how rural libraries can be established as knowledge centers and social networks in rural Portuguese communities. This study goes beyond describing physical places and scrutinizes the factors that enable successful hosting. By analyzing narrative reports of rural libraries, the authors identified four key “relational capabilities” that enable libraries to acquire and integrate new knowledge from the community: connecting with and supporting organizations committed to civic engagement; facilitating discussions about challenging issues through strategic partnerships; convening

community conversations to identify shared concerns and solutions; embracing local culture to foster endogenous development.

5. Discussion

From reviewing the extant literature on co-constructive participation in the arts and cultural heritage in rural areas, four patterns emerged that show how such participation can play a key role in social and cultural sustainable development: (1) a pattern on the role of local participation for the protection of cultural heritage, (2) a pattern on the promotion of social bonds and inclusion through participation in the arts, (3) a pattern on co-constructive, participatory arts-based approaches to address social problems, and (4) a pattern on the role of hosting as a form of co-constructive participation in rural areas.

5.1 Cultural participation as a bridge between the three perspectives of culture and sustainable development

Pattern 1 indicates that local participation in cultural heritage plays a key role in promoting culturally sustainable development in rural areas, aligning with the perspective of *culture in sustainable development*. Community-oriented festivals, events, and site-specific art projects not only preserve intangible heritage but also strengthen place-based identities and promote intergenerational knowledge transfer (Anwar McHenry, 2011; Prest, 2020; Qu & Cheer, 2021). These findings are also consistent with the concept of *culture as sustainable development* (Dessein et al., 2015), which understands culture not exclusively as a creative field but as an independent dimension of human life with symbolic and anthropological significance (Sabatini, 2019). For example, Paula and Kaufman's (2020) study of the "Night of Legends" festival highlights how cultural heritage is not only preserved but also reactivated through contemporary use, creative interpretation, and communal experience. The event revives historical sites, integrates local traditions, rituals, and crafts, and simultaneously strengthens the cultural identity. In these studies, culture appears not as an isolated artistic expression, but rather as an identity-forming element. Through local identity, a central dimension of sense of place (Dameria et al., 2020), can in turn promote social sustainability (Hawke, 2011; Stedman, 1999) and environmental awareness (McCullough & Kellison, 2016). Cultural participation in the arts and heritage brings together all three perspectives of culture and sustainable development: It shows that cultural participation can contribute to preserving cultural heritage (*culture in sustainable development*), act as a driving force for social cohesion and ecological awareness (*culture for sustainable development*), and can strengthen local identity (*culture as sustainable development*). Future research could provide insights into the interactions between these three cultural perspectives in sustainable development through cultural participation, particularly how these perspectives reinforce each other and contribute to promoting holistic sustainable development in rural areas.

5.2 Deepening one perspective: Cultural participation as a mediator for social sustainable development

Building on the previous pattern, which illustrated how cultural participation can integrate all three perspectives of culture and sustainable development, the second pattern takes a closer look at culture for sustainable development. It highlights the importance of artistic participation as a key to socially sustainable development, especially in rural regions faced with social isolation and limited cultural offerings. The arts are understood here as a mediating force that can promote long-term structures of social cohesion and inclusion (Dessein et al., 2015; UNESCO, 2019). In rural areas without adequate cultural infrastructure, co-constructive forms of participation offer an important solution. Gibson and Gordon (2018) show that self-initiated activities strengthen social resilience and community integration. However, such activities often depend on voluntary engagement and are threatened by a lack of financial support (Flood, 2021). Rural regions could address social challenges such as aging and out-migration through low-threshold, arts-based formats (digital or local). Increased intersectoral cooperation and the integration of culture into sustainability policies are necessary to unleash the full potential of the arts as a driver of rural (social) development (Kosurko et al., 2022). Further research is needed to understand

how co-constructive forms of participation can generate (long-term) impacts in the context of socially sustainable development.

5.3 Aesthetic level in participatory arts-based approaches: Danger of neglect or potential for expansion in research?

The third pattern in our synthesis shows that participatory arts-based research approaches in rural areas may support sustainable development, especially in social aspects. These approaches involve communities in creative processes to address social exclusion, tackle local challenges, and strengthen collective action. Approaches like participatory photography, video or theatre may not only boost participants' confidence in expressing their perspectives and engaging in decision-making but also enhance their problem-solving abilities (Bryanton et al., 2019; Richardson-Ngwenya et al., 2019). In this way, participatory arts-based approaches are instrumental in driving social innovation that may contribute to rural sustainable development. Many of the studies in this pattern were conducted in non-EU countries. European regional developers can learn from these approaches, particularly in rural communities where social exclusion and challenges to participation are widespread. But while participatory arts-based studies may be effective regarding the promotion of social goals via research processes, they do seldom provide robust evidence regarding the impacts of participation. Nonetheless, it may be an interesting approach to combine the exploration of research questions on participation in the arts and cultural heritage with social goals as reducing marginalization or promoting social justice dominate e.g., Rouhani (2019). Along these lines, an increased emphasis on aesthetics and culture within participatory arts-based approaches could result in outcomes that are not only socially relevant but also artistically valuable, providing additional layers of meaning (e.g., Kárpáti et al., 2023). Further research in Europe and elsewhere is needed to answer important questions about which contexts and settings are most conducive to specific forms of participation and which participatory approaches are most effective for reaching different target groups. Moreover, it is required to scrutinize the potential of participatory approaches across diverse contexts for various groups, both in rural-focused research and practice.

5.4 Hosting as a facilitator of participation in the arts and cultural heritage

From the last pattern in our synthesis, it is evident that the concept of hosting may play a central role to enable participation in rural areas with their often limited cultural infrastructure and initiatives organized by community members for community members (Sievers, 2018). Locations in rural areas that may be suited as platforms for hosting, such as libraries e.g., Martins and Canhoto (2016) or historic buildings e.g., Qu and Cheer (2021), enable the local population to independently organize and initiate cultural activities. In some studies, it is pointed out that cooperation with **non-governmental organizations** (NGOs) may be crucial to the success of cultural projects and offerings, as they provide important resources and organizational support (Tjarve & Zemite, 2016). In addition, sometimes exogenous actors are involved, bringing know-how and networks with them that can help communities realize larger cultural events and overcome organizational challenges (Birnbaum et al., 2021). However, cultural initiatives, particularly music projects, can be particularly empowering for local communities when they are initiated and implemented without the involvement of external actors (Smolarczyk et al., 2024). Based on these findings, political funding programs such as the German federal program on “Dritte Orte – Häuser für Kultur und Begegnungen in ländlichen Räumen (third places – halls for culture and living in rural areas)” (Ministerium für Kultur und Wissenschaft Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2023) might be expanded with a targeted focus on hosting, to strengthen local self-organization and cultural participation in rural areas. This requires further research to determine the specific conditions under which hosting can be most effective and how it contributes to sustainable development in rural areas. Such research is crucial not only to identify the factors that promote long-term local participation but also to explore how hosting can be structured to enhance social cohesion and cultural sustainability in these communities.

6. Limitations and future directions

This review aimed at synthesizing the literature on particularly co-constructive participation in the arts and cultural heritage in rural areas, providing an overview of existing research. However, limitations arise both from the scope and methodology of this review itself as well as from the characteristics of the included studies, which must be considered when interpreting the findings. Furthermore, limitations must be viewed in the context of conceptual debates surrounding participation and rurality.

6.1 Methodological considerations and limitations in the included studies

Regarding the selection and consideration of the studies included in the synthesis, a comprehensive literature search was attempted. However, to keep raw result numbers at a reasonable level, the selection was restricted by specific search terms. We focused on studies explicitly mentioning rural or peripheral areas in the title to ensure that unique challenges in these regions were adequately addressed. Similarly, we took a focused approach to the concept of participation; to limit the scope to studies directly addressing participation, only nouns related to participation were used as search terms. Adjectives often broadened the results to include studies in different contexts where participation was not the focus. This focus enabled a more precise and coherent synthesis of the literature specifically addressing participation in the arts and cultural heritage in rural areas.

Regarding the included studies, while some of the included studies highlight the potential of participation in the arts and cultural heritage to promote heritage conservation and social cohesion in rural areas, many of them do not provide particularly strong evidence on the specific conditions or design elements required for effective participation in the arts and cultural heritage. Along the same lines, there is limited quantitative empirical evidence on the long-term impact of participation on social bonds and inclusion. This is especially the case for research on arts-based participatory approaches. Thus, future research should implement stronger research designs to gain reliable and valid results.

6.2 Conceptual debates: Participation and rurality

Beyond the empirical findings, the review also highlights broader theoretical and conceptual debates on participation. Some authors have drawn attention to the limitations and ideological functions of participatory discourse. Miessen (2010) argues that participation can become a mechanism of pseudo-democracy, sustaining consensus-oriented stagnation while avoiding genuine redistribution of power. Bishop (2012) similarly critiques the ethical overdetermination of participatory art, particularly in community or socially engaged projects, where aesthetic complexity is often sacrificed for moral legitimacy. This critique also extends to participatory theatre, where the audiences are often forced into a pre-scripted role of ethical correctness. These concerns are also echoed in the museum sector, where co-creative approaches – especially when they affect collection and interpretation – have raised concerns about expertise and authority (Bishop 2006; Sitzia 2019). Nonetheless, counterarguments emphasize the transformative potential of well-designed participatory practices. Shannon Jackson (2011), for example, argues that aesthetic quality and participation are not mutually exclusive but can be meaningfully integrated. Participatory approaches, when embedded in local contexts and designed with reflexivity, may thus offer both cultural value and democratic agency – particularly in rural areas, where other forms of cultural infrastructure may be limited. Addressing the conceptual and methodological blind spots identified here will be essential to deepening our understanding of co-constructive participation in the arts and cultural heritage.

Moreover, the concept of rurality remains contested and highly context-dependent. What constitutes a rural or peripheral area varies across countries and even within national contexts (Vaishar, 2006; Kühne, 2015). In Germany, for example, so-called rural areas often maintain infrastructural and cultural links to urban centers and thus differ fundamentally from the structural peripheries observed in countries like Australia. This variation challenges the assumption that findings from one rural context can be transferred to another and highlights the need for more nuanced, regionally contextualized research. Future research should therefore acknowledge the heterogeneity of ruralities.

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Appendix

Explanation of the search string composition for the databases:

The search string for Scopus and ERIC API is conceptually the same but has been adapted to the syntax and requirements of each database to ensure proper functionality. In Scopus, Boolean operators (AND, OR) and field codes (e.g., TITLE, TITLE-ABS-KEY) are used along with wildcards (*) to include variations of search terms. In ERIC, the search is structured using field-specific syntax (e.g., title, description) without wildcards, as the API automatically selects terms.

Search string in Scopus:

(TITLE (rural OR peripher*) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (cultur* OR heritage) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (camera* OR photograph* OR selfie* OR photo OR craft* OR paint* OR art OR arts OR artist* OR ballet OR dance* OR dancing OR drama OR theatre OR theater OR choreograph* OR cinema* OR film* OR picture* OR video OR avatar OR book* OR letter OR lyric* OR poet* OR read* OR writ* OR storybook* OR storytel* OR ebook* OR exhibition OR gallery OR galleries OR museum* OR music* OR orchestra OR choir* OR singing OR song* OR melod* OR song* OR choir* OR band OR rap OR "hip hop" OR jazz OR comedy OR "community events" OR festival OR "creative activit*") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (participation OR engagement OR empowerment OR involvement OR encouragement OR "social innovation*")) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "SOCI") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "ARTS") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "PSYC")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar"))

Search string in ERIC API:

(title:"rural" OR title:"peripher") AND (description:"cultural" OR description:"culture" OR description:"heritage" OR description:"camera" OR description:"photograph" OR description:"selfie" OR description:"photo" OR description:"craft" OR description:"paint" OR description:"art" OR description:"arts" OR description:"artist" OR description:"ballet" OR description:"dance" OR description:"drama" OR description:"theatre" OR description:"theater" OR description:"choreograph" OR description:"cinema" OR description:"film" OR description:"picture" OR description:"video" OR description:"avatar" OR description:"book" OR description:"letter" OR description:"lyric" OR description:"poet" OR description:"read" OR description:"write" OR description:"storybook" OR description:"storytelling" OR description:"ebook" OR description:"exhibition" OR description:"gallery" OR description:"galleries" OR description:"museum" OR description:"music" OR description:"orchestra" OR description:"choir" OR description:"singing" OR description:"song" OR description:"melody" OR description:"band" OR description:"rap" OR description:"hiphop" OR description:"jazz" OR description:"comedy" OR description:"community events" OR description:"festival" OR description:"creative activit") AND (description:"participation" OR description:"engagement" OR description:"empowerment" OR description:"involvement" OR description:"encouragement" OR description:"social innovation")