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Abstract: In recent years, the European Commission has actively promoted the concept of rural resilience (European Commission, 2025), but there are still many divergent views on the operationalisation of the concept at EU, national and local levels. Drawing from quantitative and qualitative evidence (e-survey, 18 semi-structured interviews and four focus groups), from studies based in Ireland, Portugal, Slovenia and EU-wide perspective, we analysed the practitioners' understanding of rural resilience; and identified key factors and challenges for implementation in practice. Findings reveal that, while rural resilience is a conceptual construct open to multiple interpretations, a clear distinction can be observed between theoretical and practitioner interpretations. Theoretical perspectives tend to adopt a broader, more systematic view of rural resilience, transformative and "bouncing forward" approaches, whereas practitioner interpretations are typically narrower, focusing on robustness, adaptability, context-specific actions and immediate community needs. Our findings have implications for policy formation, highlighting that resilience is a long-term process rather than a fixed outcome.

Keywords: rural resilience, transformative resilience, adaptation, community resilience, rural development

Highlights

- Perspectives on rural resilience among rural practitioners are analysed.
 - Rural resilience is the capacity of rural communities to balance stability and transformation in the face of socio-economic and environmental shocks.
 - Conceptual misalignments emerged about rural resilience and its key factors in theory and practice.
 - Rural resilience requires continuous adaptation, long-term commitment, and the active involvement of multiple actors and stakeholders.
 - Resilient rural communities are generally well networked/cooperative.
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1. Introduction

Rural resilience has emerged as a key concept in discussions on the future of rural areas (European Commission, 2025). While sustainability traditionally implies balance and ties to the idea of ensuring long-term viability, the concept of resilience introduces a more dynamic understanding and brings attention to dynamic changes, disequilibrium, and unpredictability (Šūmane et al., 2018). Originally rooted in ecology (Holling, 1973), resilience has become an influential framework in disaster risk reduction and environmental management, and is more recently increasingly adopted in geography (Pike et al., 2010; Adam-Hernández & Harteisen, 2020; Lundgren & Nilsson, 2023); psychology (Karami & Keshavarz, 2024); agronomy (dos Santos et al., 2024; Darnhofer et al., 2016); health sciences (Longman et al., 2023; Steiner et al., 2023); social ecology (Flood et al., 2022); and community development (Lendvay, 2021; Currie et al., 2023).

Resilience frameworks vary and are developing through different attempts to encompass context-specific aspects. Two major conceptual frameworks of resilience can be distinguished (Lundgren & Nilsson, 2023). First, the predominant ecological framework emphasises system stability, the capacity to absorb shocks and the maintenance of equilibrium. On the other hand, the social perspective places greater attention on human and non-human agency (Lendvay, 2021; Skerratt, 2013), power relations (Zurek et al., 2022) and the capacity of communities to reorganise and transform in the face of change (Lundgren & Nilsson, 2023). Within rural studies, this duality has opened important debates on whether resilience should be understood as a return to a former state of balance or as a more dynamic, socially embedded process of

adaptation and transformation (Currie et al., 2023). Consequently, rural resilience research increasingly combines these perspectives, recognising both the structural limits imposed by ecological systems and the role of social actors in shaping future pathways within rural development.

According to Roberts et al. (2017) resilience can be approached through three interrelated dimensions. First, it is understood to be multi-scalar, since processes of resilience unfold simultaneously across different governance levels, from local communities to regional, national and European levels. Second, resilience is inherently value-laden, as it involves normative assumptions about what constitutes desirable adaptation or transformation, for instance whether the goal is to preserve traditional structures or to enable new developmental pathways. Third, resilience is place-sensitive, meaning that it cannot be universally defined but is instead embedded in specific geographic contexts. We can conclude that rural resilience is a variable concept. Consequently, there is no consensus in respect of a singular definition in academic research.

However, the lack of a unified definition in academic literature reflects not only the complexity of rural resilience dimensions but also the persistent gap between theoretical frameworks and practical realities. For instance, “resilience in practice remains more complicated and less straight-forward than current academic definitions suggest” (Currie et al., 2023, p. 201). While numerous studies have examined resilience in urban and regional contexts (Cutter et al., 2016; Chelleri & Baravikova, 2021; Baibarac & Petrescu, 2019), less attention has been paid to how rural communities conceptualize and operationalize resilience in practice.

Therefore, it was our objective to carry out applied research within rural communities situated primarily in Ireland, Portugal, Slovenia. The later was facilitated through an ERASMUS+ Knowledge Alliance project whereby different rural stakeholders within selected rural localities were included in the research design.

This article:

- 1) explores how rural stakeholders understand the concept of rural resilience and
- 2) identifies key factors and challenges for the rural resilience implementation in practice.

By analysing both perceptions and practical obstacles, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how resilience can be operationalised in rural contexts and what implications this holds for future rural development pathways.

2. Theoretical Background

In this section, we introduce frameworks for understanding resilience. Two complementary academic debates shape rural resilience (Currie et al., 2023): 1) an emergency perspective focused on short-term damage reduction and 2) an everyday perspective on building long-term adaptive capacities, gradual and cumulative changes in rural communities. Consequently, different frameworks for the assessment of resilience have been developed, ranging from social-ecological systems approaches (Ashkenazy et al., 2018) to community resilience models (Adam Hernández, 2021; Currie et al., 2023). In our paper, we draw on rural resilience as a process of change and apply Meuwissen et al. (2019) rural resilience assessment framework, guided by the key questions: resilience of what, resilience to what, identified resilience capacities, what are the key factors to enhance resilience, and related challenges.

Resilience of What and to What?

In the context of rural studies, resilience refers to the ability of rural communities to engage in ‘capacity building, empowerment, planning and rural development’ initiatives (McAreevey, 2022, p. 229). Rural resilience is an alternative theoretical and policy approach to rural development, emerging of the interplay between the rural area characteristics (place) such as remoteness, infrastructure deficits, natural resources exploitation and rural community (people) dimension such as human, social, cultural, economic and political capital.

Resilient rural communities are continuously striving to develop innovative solutions, with the aim of tackling socio-economic, environmental and / or demographic challenges, thus responding to the question of resilience to what. Prominent examples include: COVID-19 pandemic (McAreavey, 2022); energy crises challenges intensified by the Russia-Ukraine conflict (Timpanaro & Vera Teresa Foti, 2024); economic downturns due to technological evolution or competition on the global market (Darnhofer et al., 2016; Pijet-Migoñ & Migoñ, 2024, Trippl et al., 2024); climate changes and natural disasters (Longman et al., 2023; dos Santos et al., 2024; Chase, 2025); declining and aging population (Cáceres-Feria et al., 2021; Gómez-Ullate et al., 2020); (lack of) supply of basic services and goods (Lundgren & Nilsson, 2023).

Key Factors of Resilience

The key factors to build and foster rural resilience extend beyond the economic, human or infrastructural dimensions. As Glass et al. (2022) emphasised, rural resilience is strongly underpinned by bonding and bridging social capital, which enable communities to mobilise internal resources while also connecting external networks. The leveraging of resources (knowledge, capital, workforce / volunteers) across a network of organisations is pivotal, whereby no single organisation / entity has the capacity to tackle significant challenges within a rural community, especially sparsely populated and /or peripheral locations (McAreavey, 2022). Therefore, a neo-endogenous approach towards development is required.

In addition, adaptable governance plays a crucial role in ensuring that decision-making structures remain flexible and responsive to changes/shocks. Equally important are community infrastructure and the quality of local services, alongside economic performance (Glass et al., 2022). Demographic characteristics as well as health and well-being shape the capacity of rural population for resilience (Gómez-Ullate et al., 2020). Finally, environmental aspect remains central, particularly recently in the context of the green transition and climate related shocks (Glass et al., 2022). Many authors also add a cultural dimension, highlighting its role in strengthening place attachment and fostering shared values (Gocer et al., 2024; Pijet-Migoñ & Migoñ, 2024). Cultural heritage and cultural tourism could act as resilience factors (Gómez-Ullate et al., 2020). Rural resilience has increasingly been used as an analytical lens to understand how rural development processes operate in practice and why policy interventions lead to differentiated outcomes across different rural places and fabrics. From this perspective, rural communities are not homogenous, and the replication of innovative socio-economic initiatives from one (more resilient) rural community to a 'marginalised' community cannot be assumed or guaranteed.

Resilience Capacities

Resilient rural communities have the capacity to respond effectively to a challenge / crisis, whereby solutions can be found to 'bounce back' to the status quo prior to the emergence of the specific challenge (Skerratt, 2013) or to 'bounce forward' with transformative socio-economic and / or environmental solutions. According to McAreavey (2022, p. 229), 'a bounce forward understanding of resilience aims to move beyond what was there before, improving weaknesses in the system as opposed to a bounce back scenario where things return to 'normal'. The ecological interpretation of resilience is closely aligned to a bounce back scenario, with the sole focus of recreating past conditions (Lew, 2014). In contrast, community resilience seeks transformability or transformative change, whereby there is a tangible and measured improvement on previous conditions. From this distinction, different resilience capacities have been identified in the literature: robustness, adaptability and transformability (Meuwissen et al., 2022; Zurek et al., (2022). A robustness or resistance capacity reflects the ability to withstand shocks without significant change, while a recovery or adaptability understanding of resilience emphasises adjustment and learning in response to challenges. Beyond these, a reorientation or transformative resilience capacity highlights the potential for fundamental shifts in socio-economic and environmental structures, aiming not merely to return to or slightly adjust the status quo, but to create improved and more sustainable, desirable conditions for rural communities (Trippl et al., 2024; Partanen, 2022). This transformation usually occurs in the face of various adversities, which can be abrupt, irreversible and radical. The challenges arriving from change in transformative resilience approach implies a continuous process

of development and evolution of rural communities, rather than a static return. Rural communities can often find it difficult to recover from these challenges, especially from external shocks. Hence, transformative resilience involves developing adaptive capacity through flexible learning, innovation, creativity and foresight (Gocer et al., 2024). This capacity enables communities to identify and leverage their own resources and potential, thereby turning crises into opportunities, the major obstacles or challenges into a strength. This may entail a shift towards new, different equilibria (Adam Hernández, 2021; Cáceres-Feria et al., 2021).

While in urban settings, resilience is largely shaped by economic capital and the availability of resources, also digital tools (Baibarac & Petrescu, 2019). Many authors argued that in rural contexts the most important drivers include: community capital (Cutter et al., 2016); grounded in social networks (Rockenbauch & Sakdapolrak, 2017); cultural identity (Partanen, 2022); collective action (Cáceres-Feria et al., 2021); volunteering (Lundgren & Nilsson, 2023) and environmental /ecological capital (Wilson, 2012; Glass et al., 2022).

One of the main critiques of the resilience concept is that they often fail to address issues of power and agency, particularly in earlier or more technocratic applications of the concept (Cutter et al., 2016). However, more recent work in rural studies increasingly foregrounds questions of power, agency and empowerment of rural communities (Glass et al., 2022; McAreavey, 2022). To better understand how rural resilience is interpreted and enacted in practice, this article builds on recent debates concerning agency, power and resource mobilisation in rural contexts. The article examines how rural stakeholders conceptualise rural resilience and identifies the key factors and challenges influencing its practical implementation.

3. Methods

Our research employed a mixed methods design to explore the multifaceted dynamics of rural resilience across Europe. Ireland, Portugal and Slovenia served as case studies for an in-depth examination of rural resilience, complemented by a broader European perspective through the inclusion of stakeholders and data from additional EU Member States.

The initial phase of the research focused on the identification and selection of over 80 stakeholders engaged in various aspects of rural community resilience. These included professionals working for Local Action Groups (LAGs)/ Local Development Companies (LDCs); rural development officers; representatives of community-owned enterprises; voluntary community leaders; public service professionals; academic researchers; commercial sector professionals; freelance consultants; and rural policy experts. In June 2022, an online survey was disseminated to the selected stakeholders. The aim was to examine key challenges, development trajectories, and examples of good practice relevant to rural community resilience. The survey included both closed and open-ended questions to capture quantitative data as well as more nuanced, qualitative insights. A total of 66 stakeholders from sixteen EU Member States participated in the survey. Most respondents came from Ireland (16), Portugal (15), and Slovenia (15), with the remaining 20 spread across 13 other countries. Just over half (55%, n=36) reported that rural community resilience is central to their work. Collectively, respondents identified 228 distinct ways in which they engage with rural resilience through their voluntary or professional activities. These span a wide range of formal and informal roles (Table 1).

Tab 1. Ways in which respondents come across the topic of rural resilience. Source: authors

	N
by working in (local) community groups, associations or clubs	49
by participating in development projects	45
in decision-making	33
leading development projects	32
in education and research	32
in policy-making	30
others	7

To gain deeper qualitative insight into the perspectives of rural stakeholders, eighteen semi-structured interviews were carried out between September and October 2022. The interviews were conducted in Ireland (n = 6); Slovenia (n = 6), Portugal (n = 3); Germany (n = 1), Poland (n = 1); and Latvia (n = 1). Participants were selected from the stakeholder list based on their in-depth knowledge and active engagement in rural development initiatives. The interviews focused on identifying key drivers and barriers to rural resilience; specific good practices; and recommendations for education, training, and capacity-building. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. In November 2022, four additional focus groups were conducted to reflect on and enrich the preliminary findings. Each group consisted of three to seven practitioners and experts in rural resilience, and all discussions were likewise transcribed to support systematic qualitative analysis.

The analysis followed a combined deductive and inductive content analysis approach. An initial framework was developed based on key concepts from the academic literature on rural resilience (deductive approach). Initial framework was then iteratively expanded to incorporate context-specific themes and patterns emerging directly from stakeholder narratives, including open-ended survey responses, interview transcripts and focus group discussions (inductive approach). To support this process, all qualitative data were systematically coded, enabling the identification of recurring themes and meaningful variations across stakeholder perspectives. All responses from the open-question survey were translated and the frequency of individual words was counted. In the subsequent analysis, we focused only on words that appeared at least three times and included these in a chord diagram. In addition, descriptive statistical analysis was applied to selected survey questions in order to provide contextual background and support the qualitative findings. These results are presented using basic graphical representations. In the final stage, a systematic comparison was made to highlight areas of convergence and divergence between the conceptual framework and empirical insights on perceptions and operationalisation of rural resilience in practice.

4. Results

Rural resilience allows for a multitude of interpretations in practice, with rural development practitioners identifying more than 50 distinct terms/components to define the concept (Figure 1). This highlights the conceptual ambiguity and fluidity of rural resilience.

The most used terms include: ability (n = 32); rural community (n = 28); adapt (n = 24); rural area (n = 21); changes (n = 16); challenges (n = 15); and capacity (n = 12). The strongest link was observed between ability and adapt, co-occurring in 19 definitions. A conceptual core is represented by a four-sided polygon: rural area / rural community – ability / capacity – adapt – changes / challenges.

The concept of rural resilience becomes more complex when considering the numerous weak linkages – word pairings that appear only once or twice across definitions. Although individually infrequent, their overall number is high, underscoring both the diversity of interpretations and the fragmented nature of the concept. Not all terms are interlinked, further reflecting the lack of a unified understanding.

Beyond individual terms, we can also observe groups or similar words. The definition of rural resilience is composed of ability or capacity to act (to adapt, to overcome, etc.); what to tackle (e.g., changes, challenges, people, situation, opportunities); relevant issues (e.g., economic, environmental, social); and spatial foci (e.g., rural community, rural area). While some groups are densely connected, others remain isolated. For instance, terms relating to the issues that rural resilience seeks to address – economic, environmental, social, changing, and new – are the most prominent, complementing the core definitional elements: to adapt, to be able/being able, to overcome different changes or challenges.

Taken together, the dominant associations suggest that practitioners understand rural resilience primarily as: "The ability or capacity to adapt to or overcome processes of change and challenges – economic, environmental, social, etc. – within a rural community or rural area." Notably, while the notion of opportunities (n = 6) also appears in the data, it is mentioned far less frequently. This suggests that rural resilience is still predominantly framed as a response to risk or disruption, rather than as a proactive or opportunity-driven process towards transformative change.

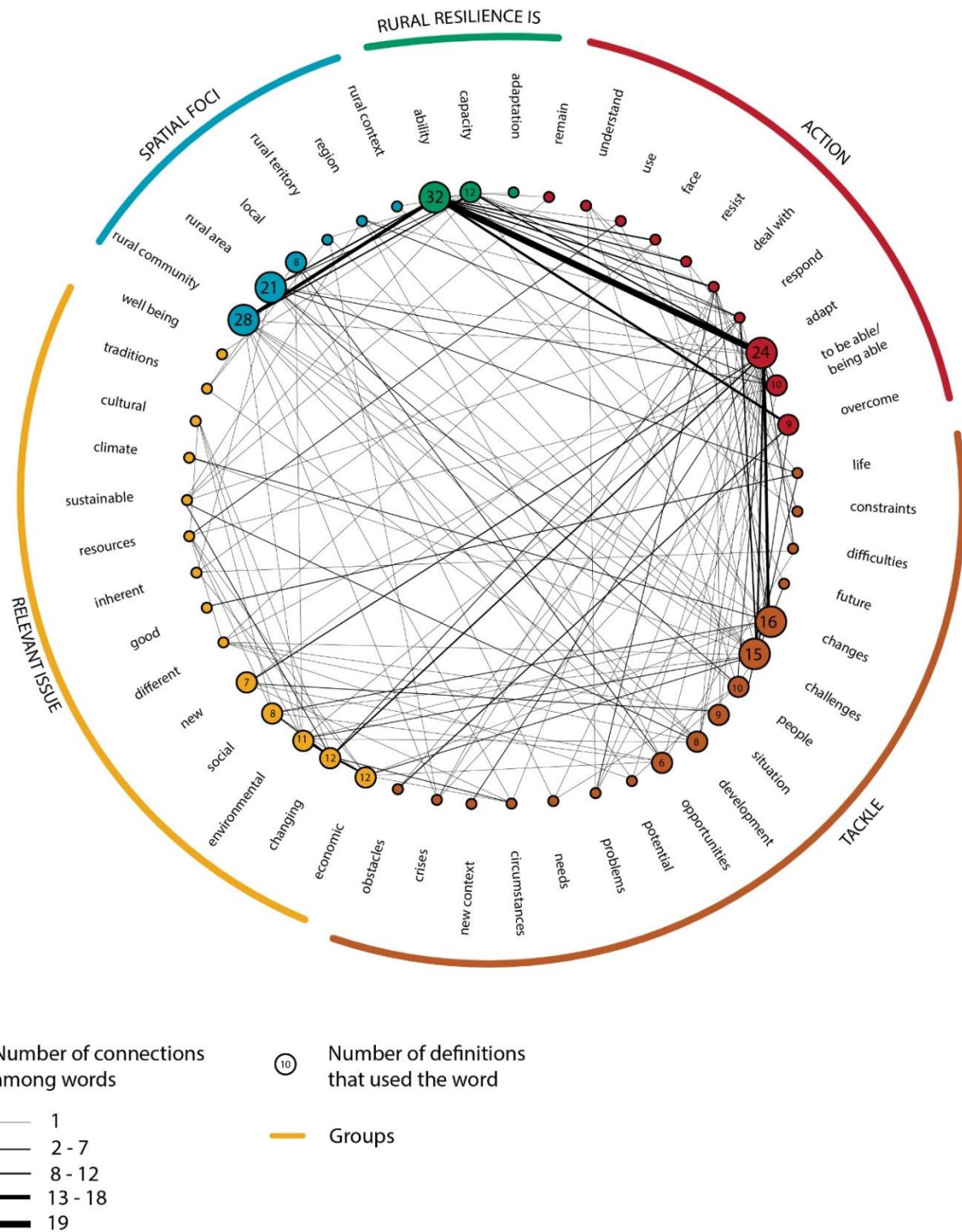


Fig 1. Definition of rural resilience by practitioners. Source: authors

Insights from interviews and focus groups further supported this interpretation, showing that practitioner operationalisation of rural resilience in practice tend to be narrower, focusing on concrete, context-specific actions and immediate community needs, and is often understood mainly as robustness, which refers to the capacity of a rural community or territory to maintain its essential functions and structures in the face of shocks or challenges arriving from change. This suggests that, on the local level, the primary focus is on the ability of communities to withstand pressures and remain largely unchanged in their fundamental character or operations. Such an emphasis on robustness may also lead to negative or toxic resilience, where persistence of existing structures reinforces inequalities (Farrell et al., 2024) or constrains transformative change (Meuwissen et al., 2019).

To some extent, rural resilience is understood as adaptability, and it refers to the capacity of a rural community or territory to continuously adjust and respond to multiple processes of change affecting it. This goes beyond mere robustness or resistance, implying an active process of adjustment or modification. Practitioners frequently use the term *adapt* when defining or describing rural resilience. Examples of adaptability in practice include a community's ability to "*adapt to climate change*" and be "*responsive to changing local needs and demographic vitality*".

Transformability, or transformative resilience, implies a deeper, more fundamental change to a system or community in response to challenges, moving beyond mere recovery or adaptation to a new, potentially improved state. It involves re-imagining or re-structuring elements rather than simply maintaining or adjusting existing ones. Rural resilience in practice was rarely understood this way. However, in several instances, practitioners stated that "*collaborative planning can stimulate pathways towards achieving transformative resilience*" or when "*re-imagining itself as a food campus*" is described as a "*transformative endeavour*". This went beyond simple recovery from economic decline to establishing a new economic identity. Recommendations for promoting rural resilience also touch upon transformative aspects, such as the "*transformation of the economy to take account of planetary concerns and overcome the classic growth paradigm*". It aligns with the idea of communities articulating "*different solutions that create public value*" and are "*developed with and by the community*".

The understanding of rural resilience was further examined in the factors that rural stakeholders identified as most critical for resilience building. Community-related factors were identified as the most significant contributors to rural community resilience (Figure 2). More than three-quarters of respondents perceived community-level action, community networks, and community leadership as contributing to resilience *to a large extent*, highlighting the central role of collective agency and local social organisation. These factors are closely followed by community-level decision-making and access to community development supports, underscoring the importance of local governance capacities and institutional backing. Social capital emerged as another highly influential factor, further reinforcing the centrality of networks, trust, and reciprocity, suggesting that resilience is rooted not only in the existence of social ties but also in their quality and functionality. The results provide strong empirical support for the thesis that resilient rural communities are well networked.

By contrast, factors such as public services and infrastructure, community–agency networks, and social and cultural diversity were perceived as less central to resilience building, while the promotion of diversity received the lowest overall emphasis. This pattern suggests that practitioners primarily conceptualise rural resilience as an internally generated capacity grounded in cohesive social relations and collective agency, rather than as a condition driven by external inputs or diversity-oriented strategies.

Respondents also emphasised the importance of achieving a balance between social, economic, and environmental dimensions of development. In addition, rural community resilience was associated with social inclusion and social coherence, indicating that cohesive and inclusive social relations are key to rural resilience.

While still considered important, good public services and infrastructure, integration of diverse groups, community–agency networks, and social and cultural diversity were rated as having a comparatively lower contribution to rural community resilience. Notably, the promotion of diversity received the lowest emphasis among all factors, suggesting that respondents prioritise internal community cohesion and collective action over diversity-oriented dimensions of resilience.

The qualitative responses further underscore this pattern. Resilience is strongly situated at the community level, where local leadership and community-based action are seen as key drivers of adaptive and transformative capacity. As one respondent observed: "*Community leadership and community-level action are where the resilience will come from.*" A resilient rural community is understood as "*a flexible and cohesive entity in which actors know each other, understand their respective roles, and can distribute tasks effectively*". While practitioners acknowledge the importance of a broad set of factors, "all factors are important to some degree", they also point to the limits of community self-reliance. In particular, they critically reflect on an overreliance on voluntary work, noting that while locally led partnerships form

an essential foundation for action, they do not ensure long-term resilience in the absence of adequate institutional support. In this regard, interviewees stress the responsibility of statutory bodies and public service providers to fulfil their side of the social contract with citizens; *“Locally led partnerships are essential, but it's not resilient to rely on volunteers. Statutory bodies and public service providers need to honour their side of the social contract with citizens.”*

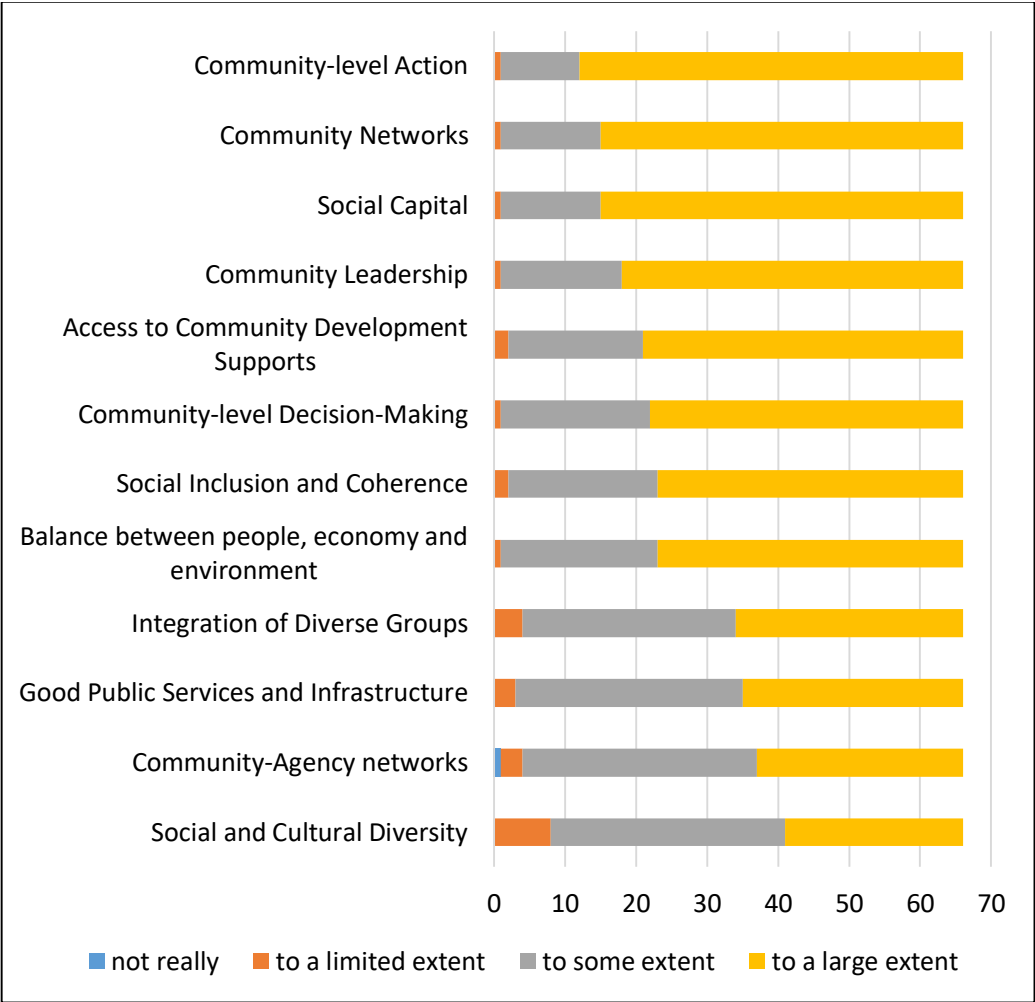


Fig 2. Extent to which respondents perceive given factors contribute to rural community resilience. Source: authors

Rural resilience is practiced across European communities through a variety of community-led initiatives; strategic planning; and the leveraging of supportive policy frameworks, particularly the LEADER/CLLD approach. Practices in rural community resilience are often related to achieving a higher degree of independence or preparedness, increased awareness, engagement, self-organization of citizens in collective affairs, and fostering a strong community spirit. However, resilience building processes are commonly translated in practice into development-oriented outcomes, with rural resilience predominantly interpreted as a means of advancing territorial (area) competitiveness, particularly through tourism, agriculture, rural entrepreneurship, and cultural heritage. In these applications, rural practitioners predominantly understand competitiveness in economic terms, focusing on growth, market performance, and sectoral outputs. More relational, place-based interpretations of competitiveness, emphasising social relations and local capacities, are only sporadically reflected in practical implementation, most notably in projects and activities that are largely volunteer-based and driven by grassroots civic engagement. Examples of such relational practices include Irish environmental volunteer group that *“promotes benefits beyond the environmental realm, producing strong social networks through practices which encourage inclusion and belonging.”* Similarly, in Slovenia volunteer-led initiatives that provide transportation for older residents not only address mobility constraints in rural areas but also

strengthen intergenerational ties, reduce social isolation, and reinforce everyday solidarity within the community.

Rural resilience is hindered by a complex array of challenges operating across various levels, from local dynamics to overarching policy frameworks. Community leaders pointed to blockages and shortcomings in public policy, while professionals tended to identify barriers and obstacles at the community level. Among the barriers most frequently identified is lack of local engagement (Figure 3). A primary impediment is that local people and citizens are often not interested or engaged in community activities that support resilience. This is compounded by a lack of social capital, community networks, or strong community leadership, leading to weak cooperation, mistrust, apathy and difficulty in collective action. In this context, community animation activities are of critical importance, as they can stimulate participation, rebuild trust, and create spaces for interaction and community action.

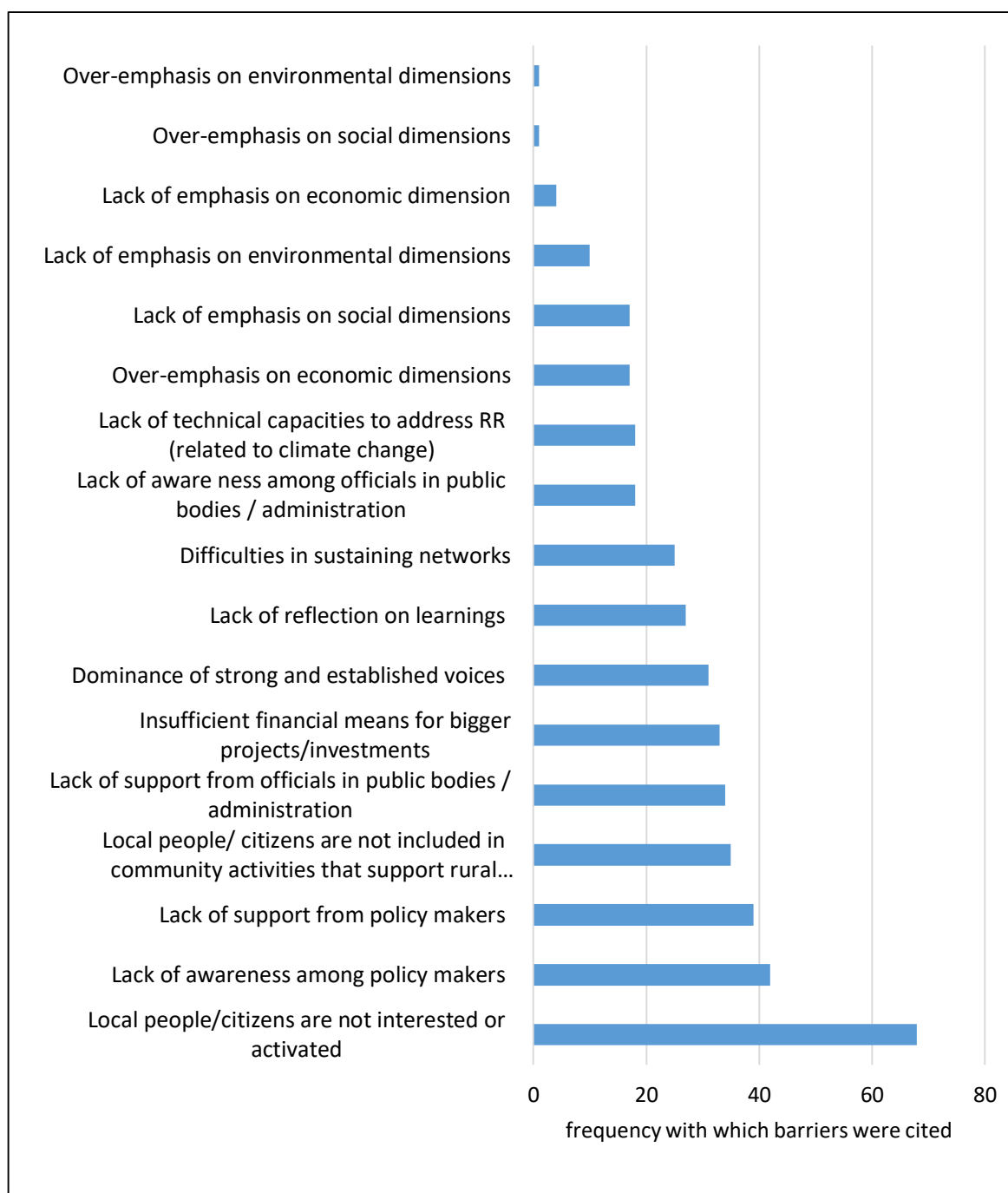


Fig 3. Most significant barriers to rural community resilience. Source: authors

Among the LAG/LDC respondents, the barriers that were most frequently cited include the lack of a coordinated effort or a strategic approach at the local level. These challenges are further compounded by *“scepticism and an unwillingness to change and adapt”*, which further constrains communities’ capacity to respond to emerging challenges. Addressing these barriers requires explicitly acknowledging the need for change and investing in ongoing capacity building, including education, awareness raising, the sharing of experiences, and the development of skills that enable local actors to engage more effectively in collective action and adaptive governance.

Bureaucracy and excessive paperwork are frequently identified as significant barrier, particularly in the implementation of rural development programmes (LEADER/CLLD; EIP), which despite its merits, faces issues due to its financial limitations and administrative burden, including what stakeholders described as *“toxic management rituals”* and a lack of accountability among public administration officials. Moreover, the dominance of strong and well-established voices can limit inclusivity, hinder the co-creation of solutions, and reduce the adaptive capacity of rural communities. Addressing these challenges requires the strengthening of good governance arrangements characterised by participatory structures with clearly defined decision-making competences, ideally with umbrella bodies that support community development.

Rural practitioners highlighted a lack of financial resources for large-scale projects and investments, with rural communities struggling to find funding sources adapted to their needs. As a result, rural communities are heavily reliant on short-term programs, leading to a “programme-driven” rather than strategic approach to development. At the regional level, this is further reinforced by urban bias. Financial resources are frequently concentrated in large urban centres, while funding instruments, eligibility criteria, and support measures are insufficiently adapted to the specific needs and capacities of (especially peripheral) rural communities. This highlights the need for an enabling policy environment that recognises place-based specificities and strengthens community-level capacities, rather than relying on uniform development frameworks.

In addition, rural resilience is constrained by structural demographic challenges, notably population ageing and the out-migration of young people. These trends reduce human and social capital, weaken innovation and intergenerational renewal, and place increasing pressure on a shrinking pool of active community members.

5. Conclusion and discussion

This study explored how rural resilience is understood and implemented in practice. As an emerging and still evolving concept and policy paradigm, the operationalisation of rural resilience in practice remains provisional, exploratory, and context-dependent, reflecting ongoing processes of learning, interpretation, and translation into action.

Findings show that practitioners primarily conceptualise rural resilience as an internally generated capacity, grounded in cohesive social relations and collective agency (Cofré-Bravo et al., 2019), rather than as a condition driven by external inputs or resources. In this sense, rural resilience is understood as emerging from within communities through cooperation, shared responsibility, and local engagement. The strength, density, and effectiveness of community networks are crucial. Resilient rural communities are, above all, well networked and cooperative, both internally and externally. At the same time, practitioners explicitly recognise the limits of community self-reliance. In particular, they critically reflect on an overreliance on voluntary work (Lundgren, 2023), which risks overburdening already engaged individuals and undermining the long-term sustainability of collective action. While internal capacities are essential, they are insufficient in the absence of supportive institutional and policy frameworks.

Low levels of engagement and social capital (Karami & Keshavarz, 2024) were identified as one of the main obstacles to strengthening rural resilience. As a result, animation activities, aimed at mobilising local actors, fostering participation, and sustaining collective co-creation processes, are crucial for rural community resilience. Such activities play a central role in activating collective potential and translating abstract resilience concepts into everyday practice.

In theoretical terms, rural resilience is commonly defined as the capacity of rural communities to balance stability (equilibrium) and transformation (evolution) in the face of socio-economic and environmental shocks. In practice, however, resilience-building efforts remain predominantly focused on robustness, the ability to withstand pressures and maintain essential functions and, to a lesser extent, adaptability, understood as incremental adjustment to change. Transformability, involving more fundamental reconfiguration of structures, practices, and “bouncing forward” development pathways, is only rarely articulated.

Overall, these findings suggest that rural resilience is still a learning concept in practice, with understandings and implementations evolving gradually over time. The dominance of robustness and adaptability reflects an ongoing transition, in which the concept has been widely adopted discursively, while its transformative potential has yet to be fully realised. This gap points to the need for on-going education, raising awareness, sharing experiences, and skills development (O'Sullivan et al., 2023).

Our findings offer insights that are relevant for rural policy development and governance practices. The process of resilience is not something that can be easily pinned down, nor completed within a specific timeframe (McAreavey, 2022). Rather, it should be understood as a dynamic and context-dependent process that requires continuous adaptation, long-term commitment, and the active involvement of multiple actors and stakeholders, shaped by exogenous, endogenous, and neo-endogeneous elements (Qu & Zollet, 2023). An enabling environment and policy context that supports the specificity of place (Roberts et al., 2017), local service provision, and community structures is essential, underpinned by good governance arrangements, local ownership and ideally with umbrella organisations (McAreavey, 2022) that are able to provide coordination and sustained support for community development. Rural policy measures should move beyond short-term interventions and instead support long-term, place-sensitive processes of collective resilience.

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