European Countryside | volume 18 | No. 3 | p. 533-563 | DOI: 10.2478/euco-2026-0025

FROM INDIVIDUAL INITIATIVES TO NETWORKED ACTIONS: NETWORKING AS A SOLUTION FOR SUSTAINING RURAL COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES IN LITHUANIA

Živilė GEDMINAITĖ-RAUDONĖ, Rita LANKAUSKIENĖ, Vitalija SIMONAITYTĖ[1]



[1] Živilė Gedminaitė-Raudonė, PhD., corresponding author, ORCID: 0000-0001-8437-5368, e-mail: zivile.gedminaite@ekvi.lt; Rita Lankauskienė, PhD., ORCID: 0000-0003-3112-5415, e-mail: rita.lankauskiene@ekvi.lt; Vitalija Simonaitytė, PhD., ORCID: 0000-003-2360-2234, e-mail: vitalija.simonaityte@ekvi.lt; Lithuanian Centre for Social Sciences, Institute for Economic and Rural Development, Vilnius, Lithuania

Received 16 March 2026, Evaluated 16 June 2026, Revised 3 July 2026, Accepted 24 July 2026

Abstract: Despite long-standing EU support for regional development and rural revitalisation, many rural community initiatives struggle to sustain their activities once project-based funding ends. While instruments such as the LEADER programme have been effective in mobilising local actors, building capacity, and initiating community-led projects, they have been less successful in ensuring long-term continuity and coordination of supported initiatives. This paper examines networking as a means to overcome fragmentation and ensure the continuity of rural community activities that contribute to local economic development. The analysis combines a review of European rural policy developments since 2000 with an in-depth case study from Lithuania. The case focuses on the evolution of the public organisation *Salty Winds*, which emerged from LEADER-supported initiatives in 2014, initiated by the Druskininkai Local Action Group and later transitioned into a network-oriented organisation. This research was conducted within the framework of ESIRA (Enhancing Social Innovation in Rural Areas), a Horizon Europe project funded by the European Union, which supported living-lab collaboration in the study region. Using a design thinking approach as the main analytical framework, the paper examines how rural actors reframed their challenges, developed new organisational arrangements, and strengthened cooperation among community groups, businesses, and public authorities. The findings demonstrate that networking can enhance the sustainability of rural community initiatives by improving coordination, enabling joint marketing and branding, and embedding initiatives within broader governance structures. The paper contributes to debates on post-LEADER rural development by highlighting the importance of network-based governance and adaptive innovation tools for sustaining local economic activities in rural regions.

Keywords: rural development; networking; rural communities; LEADER programme; design thinking approach

---

Santrauka: Nepaisant ilgalaikės ES paramos regioninei plėtrai ir kaimo atgaivinimui, daugelis kaimo bendruomenių iniciatyvų susiduria su sunkumais siekdamos užtikrinti savo veiklos tęstinumą pasibaigus projektiniam finansavimui. Nors LEADER programa ir jos metu įgyvendinami projektai padėjo mobilizuoti vietos veikėjus, stiprinant jų gebėjimus, žinias, kuriant fizinę infrastruktūrą ir inicijuojant bendruomenių vadovaujamus projektus, jos dažnu atveju neužtikrina ilgalaikio šių iniciatyvų tęstinumo ir bendradarbiavimo tarpusavyje. Šiame straipsnyje analizuojama tinklaveika kaip priemonė, padedanti ieškoti sprendimų veiklų tęstinumui užtikrinti, bendradarbiavimo skatinimui ir pačių kaimo bendruomenių veiklos tvarumą. Straipsnyje pateikiama Europos kaimo politikos raidos nuo 2000 m. analizė ir išsami

Lietuvos atvejo studija, paremta viešosios įstaigos „Sūrus vėjai“, įkurtos 2014 m. Druskininkų vietos veiklos grupės iniciatyva, veiklos analize. Šis tyrimas atliktas įgyvendinant Europos horizonto projektą ESIRA, kurio veiklos Druskininkų regione yra įgyvendinamos taikant gyvosios laboratorijos bendradarbiavimo principus. Taikant dizaino mąstymo metodą, nagrinėjama, kaip kaimo veikėjai ieškojo naujų organizacinių sprendimų ir stiprino bendradarbiavimą tarp bendruomenės narių, ūkininkų ir kitų verslo subjektų bei viešųjų institucijų. Tyrimo rezultatai rodo, kad tinklaveika gali reikšmingai prisidėti prie kaimo bendruomenių iniciatyvų tvarumo, gerinant veiklų koordinavimą, sudarant sąlygas bendrai rinkodarai ir prekės ženklo kūrimui bei integruojant iniciatyvas į vietos savivaldos įgyvendinamas programas ir strategines plėtros iniciatyvas. Straipsnis prisideda prie diskusijų apie veiklų tvarumą po LEADER programos remiamų projektų įgyvendinimo, pabrėždamas tinklaveika grindžiamo bendradarbiavimo svarbą užtikrinant vietos ekonominės veiklos kaimo regionuose tvarumą.

Raktiniai žodžiai: kaimo vystymas; tinklaveika; kaimo bendruomenės; LEADER programa; vietos ekonomika; dizaino mąstymo metodika

---

Highlights

- LEADER remains a key but increasingly debated response for place-based rural revitalisation.
- LEADER-supported initiatives need post-project coordination.
- Design thinking helps trace network learning and adaptation.
- Cost-sharing and coordination support network continuity.
- Digital tools and service renewal strengthen rural tourism networks.

---

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, rural and regional development in the EU has been shaped by profound socio-economic, demographic, technological, and environmental transformations. Regions across Europe face persistent and interrelated challenges that significantly influence their development trajectories and overall socio-economic resilience (Koźmiński et al., 2020, Lankauskiene & Gedminaite-Raudone, 2024). Among the most pressing structural problems are demographic decline and depopulation, particularly in rural areas (Chartier et al., 2021; Lutz et al., 2019; Syssner, 2020; De Zordo et al., 2022; Kusio et al., 2022), combined with economic fragility, limited diversification, and the fragmentation of local initiatives (Lankauskiene & Gedminaite-Raudone, 2024). These challenges are further intensified by rapid digitalisation and technological change, climate change and sustainability pressures (Vasylieva et al., 2019; Hysa et al., 2020), and broader global economic instability, where women,

people with disabilities, and marginalized communities continue to face systemic disadvantages as highlighted in the most recent *Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025* calling for action in six priority areas as food systems, energy access, digital transformation, education, jobs and social protection, and climate and biodiversity (United Nations, 2026).

In response, the EU has progressively reoriented its rural and regional policy framework since 2000, moving away from narrowly sectoral and infrastructure-based approaches towards more integrated, place-based, and community-oriented development paradigms (Vidickiene et al., 2018a; Vilke & Gedminaite-Raudone, 2018). EU rural policy has increasingly emphasised rural revitalisation by strengthening rural communities, local economies, and social capital, alongside promoting innovation, digital and smart growth, and green technologies. This policy evolution is articulated through strategic initiatives such as the Long-Term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas, which aims to create "stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous" rural territories by 2030 and beyond (Chartier et al., 2021). Within this framework, rural areas are no longer viewed merely as spaces of agricultural production, but as complex socio-territorial systems requiring coordinated governance, innovation, and collective action.

A central instrument in this policy landscape has been the LEADER programme, which, since its mainstreaming in the early 2000s, has served as a cornerstone of the EU rural development policy (Johansson & Holmquist, 2024). LEADER introduced a governance innovation based on bottom-up, area-based development, multi-sectoral integration, and partnership through Local Action Groups (Biczkowski, 2020). Its tools have been widely credited with mobilising rural communities, strengthening local capacities, fostering social capital, and supporting diverse community-led initiatives across local services, tourism, cultural heritage, and small-scale entrepreneurship. In many regions, LEADER has played a crucial role in activating rural communities and creating the institutional foundations for local development (Johansson & Holmquist, 2024; Biczkowski, 2020).

Nevertheless, despite these achievements, a growing number of research points to a critical limitation of LEADER and similar project-based rural development instruments: the challenge of sustainability and continuity once public funding ends (European Court of Auditors, 2022; Johansson & Holmquist, 2024). While LEADER has been effective in initiating local action, many supported initiatives struggle to scale, institutionalise, or maintain their activities beyond the project lifecycle (Lankauskiene & Gedminaite-Raudone, 2024). Fragmentation of initiatives, weak coordination mechanisms, limited organisational capacity, and dependence on successive funding calls often result in stalled development trajectories or the dissolution of previously successful projects. This gap between project success and long-term impact raises important questions about the adequacy of existing rural policy tools in addressing structural challenges of rural revitalisation.

In this context, networking is a central concept in contemporary rural development theory and practice. Networking reflects broader transformations associated with knowledge-based economies and place-based development paradigms (Vidickienė et al., 2018a). It can be

understood as structured and unstructured patterns of interaction among actors that facilitate knowledge sharing, coordination of decisions, mobilisation of resources, and trust-building to achieve outcomes that individual actors cannot secure alone (Vilke et al., 2018; Cooke & Morgan, 1993). In rural contexts, networking integrates internal territorial resources such as local knowledge, social capital, and community agency with external linkages to markets, institutions, and policy frameworks, thereby creating conditions for innovation and revitalisation. Importantly, rural revitalisation challenges, such as population loss, service decline, fragmented markets, and limited organisational capacity, are rarely solvable by single organisations; they require collective action across community, business, and municipal actors (Gedminaite-Raudone & Vilke, 2020; Chartier et al., 2021).

Recent governance-oriented rural development research further emphasises that socially innovative rural development depends on horizontal collaboration, interregional linkages, and stable organisational arrangements capable of embedding new practices over time (Chatzichristos & Hennebry, 2023; Lankauskienė & Gedminaitė-Raudonė, 2024). Strengthening the science–society–policy interface is therefore increasingly recognised as a prerequisite for effective rural transformation, enabling reflective research and adaptive policy responses tailored to region-specific contexts (Lankauskienė & Gedminaitė-Raudonė, 2024).

This paper situates itself within the framework of the ESIRA project, a Horizon Europe–funded initiative aimed at improving socio-economic conditions in rural areas by empowering rural communities and strengthening local social networks, particularly among marginalised groups (ESIRA, 2026). ESIRA brings together academic and practical expertise from eight European countries to design and test innovative socio-economic initiatives that address unemployment, poverty risks, and labour market exclusion in rural contexts. By focusing on networking, co-creation, and innovation, ESIRA provides an empirical and methodological lens for examining how project-based rural development initiatives can transition into more durable, network-based governance arrangements.

The objective of this research is to examine networking as a governance and organisational tool for enhancing the sustainability and continuity of rural community initiatives beyond project-based funding, with particular attention to initiatives supported by the LEADER programme. By analysing EU rural policy developments since 2000 and an in-depth Lithuanian case study using a design thinking approach, the study seeks to identify how network-based approaches can support the transition from individual, project-led activities to durable, coordinated rural development networks.

The aim of this paper is to analyse networking as a tool to overcome the sustainability gap of LEADER-supported initiatives and to strengthen long-term rural revitalisation. To analyse this process, the study uses design thinking method as an analytical framework for tracing how rural actors move from problem recognition to solution development, prototyping, testing, and adaptation. This choice is justified by the empirical trajectory of the *Salty Winds* network, which evolved through successive stages: identifying fragmented local initiatives, defining coordination

problems, developing shared tools and governance arrangements, and subsequently revising them in practice and through feedback. In this sense, design thinking provides a useful heuristic lens for documenting how network governance practices are gradually established and refined over time. Specifically, the paper addresses the following *research questions*:

1. How do community-led initiatives in rural areas evolve into a coordinated network and a more formalised governance arrangement?
2. Which network governance practices (e.g., roles, rules, routines, coordination mechanisms, and shared tools) enable cooperation and shared value creation among heterogeneous rural actors?
3. How does the iterative design thinking process (empathise–define–ideate–prototype–test) help explain learning, adaptation, and the refinement of network practices over time?

By addressing these questions, the paper contributes to ongoing debates on post-LEADER rural development and offers insights into how networking-oriented approaches, supported by innovative methodologies, can enhance the long-term impact of EU rural policy interventions.

2. Theoretical and Policy Background

2.1 The policy context: EU strategies and LEADER programme for rural revitalisation

During the late twentieth century and the early decades of the twenty-first century, European rural and agricultural policies were predominantly shaped by sectoral and infrastructure-oriented paradigms, emphasising productivity, physical investments, and service provision (Vidickienė & Gedminaitė-Raudonė, 2018). While these approaches contributed to economic modernisation, they proved increasingly inadequate in addressing structural rural challenges such as demographic decline, socio-economic marginalisation, the erosion of local identities, and the weakening of social capital (Shucksmith, 2010; Navarro et al., 2016). Traditional policy instruments were therefore criticised for their limited capacity to sustain rural livelihoods and foster long-term territorial resilience.

Over the past two decades, both academic debate and policy frameworks have undergone a significant conceptual shift, recognising rural areas as complex socio-territorial systems rather than merely spaces of production. This shift has foregrounded community networking, participatory governance, and innovative local development models as central mechanisms for rural revitalisation (Lee et al., 2005; Esparcia et al., 2015). In this context, increasing attention has been paid to the role of local communities, municipalities, and multi-actor partnerships in mobilising endogenous resources, fostering innovation, and integrating economic, cultural, and environmental dimensions of development. Such dynamics are particularly evident in initiatives that combine ethical local food systems, rural and cultural tourism, and nature-based resource management, among others (Vilkė & Gedminaitė-Raudonė, 2018; Lankauskienė et al., 2025).

Reflecting these conceptual developments, the European Union's rural development policy has progressively evolved from fragmented, sectoral interventions towards more integrated, place-

based, and governance-oriented approaches. Since the mid-2000s, instruments such as LEADER and Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) have institutionalised bottom-up development and local networking as core principles of rural policy, strengthening local partnerships, social capital, and community engagement across rural territories.

Initiated in 1991 and progressively institutionalised within European Union rural policy, the LEADER programme is based on a distinct development method emphasising bottom-up action, local partnerships, networking, and entrepreneurship within territorially defined areas (European Commission, 2006; Ray, 2000). Implemented through Local Action Groups, LEADER has been widely recognised for its contribution to capacity-building and local innovation. However, a growing body of research suggests that LEADER's longer-term impacts are uneven and context-dependent. A systematic review across EU contexts shows substantial variation in effectiveness linked to differences in governance capacity and funding structures, indicating limits in delivering sustained outcomes across rural territories (Paschalidou et al., 2025). In addition, critics emphasise that bureaucratic requirements and internal administrative logics can constrain the realisation of long-term impacts, despite strong initial mobilisation and engagement (Johansson & Holmquist, 2024). This concern is reinforced by the European Court of Auditors, which found limited evidence that LEADER consistently delivers sustained additional benefits beyond project cycles, raising questions about long-term sustainability (European Court of Auditors, 2022). These debates have informed more recent policy frameworks, including the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas and the Smart Villages agenda, which further expand the understanding of rural development by emphasising social, digital, and institutional infrastructures alongside governance innovation (European Commission, 2021; Zavratnik et al., 2018; Emerllahu & Bogataj, 2024).

Four key phases in the evolution of EU policies relevant to community networking and rural revitalisation can be identified since 2007 (see Table 1). *The first phase* of the EU rural development policy, starting *from 2007 to 2013,* can be described as community-led local development and networking. The 2007–2013 programming period consolidated EU rural policy under the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), with a four-axis structure (see Table 1). While physical infrastructure and service access were central to Axis 1 and Axis 3, the LEADER approach (Axis 4) introduced *community-led local development* (further – CLLD) as a governance innovation, empowering Local Action Groups (LAGs) to mobilise local stakeholders, integrate public–private action, and tailor development to territorial needs (European Commission, 2006). This phase laid the foundation for multi-actor and place-based governance, later reflected in smart rural paradigms (European Commission, EU CAP Network, 2024).

The second phase (2014–2020) of EU policies can be described as a strategic, place-based framework and an integrated development approach. During 2014–2020, rural development was governed by Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013, which aligned LEADER with the broader Community-Led Local Development (European Union, 2013). This period marked a more strategic and integrative policy logic, reinforcing partnerships across sectors and governance levels and enabling rural areas to engage with social, environmental, and economic challenges through local

strategies (European Commission, 2023). Academic research emphasizes that this period consolidated recognition of the essential role of local governance, social innovation, and territorial partnerships in rural development systems (Zavratnik et al., 2018).

The third phase (2021–2022) of EU policies focuses on resilience-oriented rural policies and the Long-Term Vision. The post-2020 period of policy reflection and transition coincided with the publication of the EU Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (2021), which shifted rural policy discourse toward resilience, connectivity, inclusiveness, and empowerment. The Vision explicitly frames "connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas" as a goal of multi-level governance interventions (Gedminaite-Raudone & Vilke, 2021; Chartier et al., 2021). Contemporary academic research suggests that this shift reflects an expanded understanding of rural infrastructure to include institutional, social, and digital architectures that support community networking and innovation ecosystems (e.g., smart rurality frameworks within EU policy and research institutions) (Chartier et al., 2021).

Table 1. Evolutionary Pathway of European Union Policy towards Rural Revitalisation and Community Networking (2007–2026). Source: created by authors

Periods	**EU policies**	**Main features of EU policies**	**Funding mechanisms**
2007–2013	- EAFRD (axes-based programming); - LEADER approach; - early Community-Led Local Development (CLLD)	- Emphasis on rural infrastructure, basic services, and diversification; - Institutionalisation of bottom-up local partnerships and local governance.	EAFRD via Rural Development Programmes; European Cohesion Policy Instruments
2014–2020	- Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 on rural development support; - Community-Led Local Development	- Place-based and integrated local development strategies; - Strengthened innovation orientation and multi-actor governance.	EAFRD (RDPs); Multi-fund Community-Led Local Development frameworks
2021–2022	Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (2021)	- Increased focus on rural resilience, connectivity, and citizen empowerment; - Preparation of a new governance framework.	Transitional CAP funding; Strategic planning and preparatory support
2023–2026	- CAP Strategic Plans; - Smart Villages	- Promotion of smart villages; - Digital and social innovation; - Community-municipality governance models.	CAP Strategic Plans (EAFRD/EAGF); Smart Villages interventions (policy integration)

The fourth phase of EU policies, starting in 2023, focuses on Smart Villages, governance innovation, and multi-actor networking. From 2023 onwards, the CAP Strategic Plans introduced under Regulation (EU) 2021/2115 have emphasised place-based governance and community empowerment as key mechanisms for rural development (European Commission, 2021). Within this milieu, the Smart Villages agenda has emerged as a significant concept linking rural revitalisation with digital and social innovation, multi-actor governance, and participatory processes (e.g., community and municipal engagement) (European Commission, 2023; European Commission, 2024). Recent academic work treats Smart Villages not merely as technology adoption but as a multi-dimensional governance apparatus integrating collective action, digital solutions, social infrastructure, and inclusive local networks to tackle demographic, economic, and service provision challenges in rural areas (Albanese, Graziano, 2024; Dembogurski et al., 2026; Emerllahu et al., 2024).

Since 2007, EU rural development policy has progressively transitioned from infrastructure-centred interventions toward territorial, governance-oriented strategies in which local communities and multi-actor networks are central agents of change. This shift aligns with broader academic insights that contemporary rural development requires multi-stakeholder governance, social innovation, and adaptive local institutions rather than only physical infrastructure investments (Zavratnik et al., 2018; Emerllahu & Bogataj, 2024).

2.2 Networking as a driver for community development

Over the past two decades, networking has gained increasing prominence in rural development research and practice, reflecting wider shifts towards knowledge-based economies and place-sensitive development approaches. Rather than being understood as a supplementary activity, networking is increasingly conceptualised as a core organisational and governance mechanism that enables rural territories to mobilise dispersed resources, coordinate actions, and respond to complex development challenges (Vidickienė et al., 2018a). In this perspective, networks are not limited to formal partnerships but encompass both structured and informal relationships through which actors exchange information, share knowledge, and build trust to achieve collective outcomes that would be unattainable individually.

In rural settings, the relevance of networking is closely linked to the nature of contemporary revitalisation challenges. Processes such as population decline, shrinking labour markets, reduced access to services, and fragmented economic structures typically exceed the capacity of single organisations or sectors to address them effectively. As a result, rural development increasingly depends on collective action across community groups, local businesses, and municipal authorities, supported by intermediary organisations that facilitate cooperation and learning (Gedminaitė-Raudonė & Vilkė, 2020). Recent governance-oriented studies further suggest that socially innovative rural development requires stable organisational arrangements and horizontal collaboration capable of embedding new practices over time, rather than isolated project-based interventions (Chatzichristos & Hennebry, 2023; Lankauskienė & Gedminaitė-Raudonė, 2024).

This emphasis on networking is reinforced by contemporary European Union rural policy narratives that frame rural areas as “connected, empowered, and resilient” territories. Connectivity in this context is not limited to transport or digital infrastructure but increasingly refers to institutional and relational capacities, including the ability of local actors to cooperate, access external knowledge, and translate ideas into sustainable initiatives (Chartier et al., 2021). The Smart Villages discourse illustrates this shift particularly clearly, as “smartness” is framed as a multidimensional concept integrating governance innovation, service provision, community engagement, and appropriate technologies, rather than as a narrowly technological agenda (Emerllahu & Bogataj, 2024).

As rural economies diversify beyond agriculture and become more interconnected with tourism, cultural activities, and environmental services, the need for coordination among heterogeneous actors becomes increasingly pronounced. Individually rational decisions, such as developing isolated tourism products or marketing channels, may produce suboptimal outcomes or even negative externalities when not aligned with broader territorial strategies. In this sense, networking serves as an instrument of coordination, helping align interests, reduce duplication, and exploit complementarities among activities within a given territory (Lankauskienė & Gedminaitė-Raudonė, 2024). However, the benefits of networking are neither automatic nor evenly distributed; they depend on facilitation capacity, governance design, and actors' ability to actively engage with network structures.

From the perspective of rural communities and farmers, networking generates several interrelated benefits. First, it can lower coordination and transaction costs by enabling shared rules, repeated interactions, and brokerage functions, often provided by municipalities or intermediary organisations, that support joint marketing, logistics, or visitor management. Second, networks enhance learning and adaptive capacity by facilitating the circulation of experiential knowledge and enabling experimentation across contexts. Comparative rural governance research highlights that interregional networking plays an important role in diffusing and legitimising new development practices, particularly in marginalised rural regions (Chatzichristos & Hennebry, 2023). Third, networks can strengthen the voice and legitimacy of rural actors, especially when local governments participate actively. Municipal involvement can stabilise initiatives through convening power, co-investment, and regulatory support, although empirical evidence suggests that the effectiveness of such arrangements remains contingent on administrative procedures and implementation quality (European Court of Auditors, 2022).

Networking literature further distinguishes between one-sided and two-sided cooperation networks, a distinction that is particularly relevant in rural economies. One-sided networks typically connect relatively homogeneous actors, such as farmers cooperating with other farmers, and are effective for shared learning, representation, and collective bargaining (Vidickienė et al., 2018a). By contrast, two-sided networks link heterogeneous actor groups with complementary roles, such as producers and consumers or tourism providers and visitors. These networks often operate through platform-like arrangements that coordinate interactions, establish rules of participation, and reduce information and marketing costs (Zheng & Kaiser,

2013). Research on short food supply chains demonstrates that such networked coordination can enhance resilience and generate social, economic, and environmental benefits, although outcomes vary across contexts (Petruzzelli et al., 2023). Similar dynamics are observed in Smart Village initiatives, where partnership structures create organisational "infrastructure" for collaboration across governance, services, and local enterprise, with results strongly shaped by inclusivity and long-term funding arrangements (Albanese & Graziano, 2024).

Overall, networking should be understood as a dynamic capacity rather than a static organisational form. While it creates opportunities for coordination, learning, and innovation, its contribution to rural revitalisation depends on sustained facilitation, institutional support, and actors' ability to actively mobilise network resources over time.

3. Socio-economic profile of the Druskininkai municipality (Lithuania)

Druskininkai municipality, located in southern Lithuania near the Belarusian border, represents a territorial context where urban functions (spa and service economy) coexist with surrounding rural settlements and resource-based landscapes. As with other post-socialist rural territories in Central and Eastern Europe, the area faces persistent socio-economic disparities stemming from long-term structural and institutional legacies, including uneven development trajectories and limited diversification (Bartkowiak-Bakun, 2013). With a population of approximately 20,000 residents, the municipality is characterised by demographic ageing and youth outmigration, while local employment and income generation remain strongly tied to tourism and health-related services, creating vulnerabilities linked to seasonality and external demand (Gedminaitė-Raudonė et al., 2024). At the same time, Druskininkai retains significant local assets, including mineral springs, forest ecosystems, cultural heritage, and civic initiatives, which provide a basis for diversification through service innovation and multi-actor collaboration (Gedminaitė-Raudonė et al., 2024). In this sense, the municipality offers a relevant case for examining how local networking and governance arrangements can strengthen the sustainability of rural initiatives and contribute to rural revitalisation.

The *Salty Winds* network, within the ESIRA project activities, was selected by the Druskininkai LAG as a key local actor to implement and test social economy-oriented initiatives. The network in 2024-2027 operates as a living lab, where community actors (e.g., educators, craftspeople, producers, and members of rural communities) pilot and refine activities, including developing new educational sessions, updating training materials, and exploring marketing tools. Analytically, these ESIRA-supported activities are interpreted through the design thinking framework as iterative cycles of prototyping and testing that generate new insights and, when needed, prompt a return to earlier phases (e.g., redefining challenges or generating alternative solutions).

4. Methodology

Design thinking was used as an analytical framework rather than as the overall research methodology, and it is not assumed that all local actors explicitly applied design thinking as a formal method. The methodological design of the study is qualitative and case-study based, drawing on interviews, focus groups, long-term observation, and participation in educational activities. Within this design, design thinking served as a process-tracing framework for organising and interpreting empirical evidence according to five stages: empathise, define, ideate, prototype, and test. This framework was selected because the development of the *Salty Winds* network was not linear, but iterative: actors repeatedly identified emerging problems, reformulated coordination needs, tested organisational and digital tools, and adapted their practices in response to feedback. Thus, the qualitative case study provides the empirical basis of the research, while design thinking structures the interpretation of how network governance practices emerged, were tested, and were refined over time.

This study began in 2021 and adopted a qualitative case study design, supported by long-term observation of the *Salty Winds* network in the Druskininkai region. A case study approach is well-suited to examining complex real-life processes embedded in specific social and organisational contexts (Yin, 2017) and aligns with qualitative inquiry that foregrounds context, meaning-making, and process tracing (Creswell & Poth, 2023). Data were collected through (1) qualitative in-depth interviews, (2) participation in educational programmes delivered by Salty Winds members, and (3) two focus group meetings, enabling triangulation across sources and perspectives to strengthen analytic credibility (Flick, 2018). The empirical focus was on networking activities within the Salty Winds network, initiated by the Druskininkai Local Action Group (LAG), with the aim of assessing longer-term rural revitalisation dynamics, specifically, whether LEADER-supported initiatives could sustain or scale beyond funding, and which governance and organisational tools support continuity and resilience.

In-depth interviews were conducted in January 2023 and February 2025. Each interview lasted approximately 3 hours, and 4 interviewees participated in each round. The interviews were exploratory and qualitative, allowing for detailed accounts of how networking principles were interpreted, implemented, and negotiated among rural community actors and LAG members (Hennink et al., 2020). Participant observation was conducted through engagement in six educational programmes (approximately three hours each): one in 2021, two in 2022, one in 2024, and two in 2025. These activities provided insight into learning processes, interaction patterns, and the practical enactment of networking through capacity-building and service delivery practices (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Hennink et al., 2020). Two focus group meetings were held in February 2025 and December 2025, enabling collective reflection and comparison of viewpoints and helping to surface shared interpretations as well as contested understandings of network goals, roles, and coordination practices (Nyumba et al., 2018; Hennink et al., 2020).

The empirical material was collected from participants directly involved in the development and operation of the *Salty Winds* network. Respondents were selected purposively because of their

institutional knowledge, practical involvement, and ability to reflect on the network's evolution over time. The same core participants were interviewed in both interview waves in January 2023 and February 2025. They included the leader of the Druskininkai Local Action Group, the head/coordinator of the *Salty Winds* network, and rural network members acting as providers of educational, cultural, and tourism-related services. This repeated-interview design made it possible to trace changes in perceptions, governance challenges, and adaptation needs over time.

The focus groups involved representatives of the same local innovation ecosystem, including Local Action Group representatives, network coordination actors, and rural service providers. Participation in educational programmes and long-term observation enabled the researcher to observe how network activities were implemented in practice, how providers interacted with visitors and other stakeholders, and how educational and cultural tourism services were organised. Therefore, interviews and focus groups provided reflective accounts of the network's development, while observation and participation in educational programmes provided practice-based evidence on service delivery, cooperation routines, and emerging operational challenges.

The empirical material was processed through a structured analytical procedure. First, interview, focus group, and observation notes were organised chronologically in order to reconstruct the development trajectory of the *Salty Winds* network. Second, the material was grouped according to the five design thinking phases: empathise, define, ideate, prototype, and test. Third, recurrent themes were identified within each phase, including fragmented visibility, coordination needs, shared branding, membership rules, pricing, cost-sharing, marketing, platform functionality, and service renewal. Finally, evidence from different sources was compared to assess convergence and divergence across interviews, focus groups, observations, and living-lab activities. This procedure created a transparent chain of evidence linking empirical material to analytical categories and final interpretations.

To strengthen the transparency of the qualitative analysis, the empirical material was organised through a structured evidence-tracing procedure. First, interview, focus group, and observation notes were arranged chronologically and linked to the five design thinking phases: empathise, define, ideate, prototype, and test. Second, recurrent themes were identified within each phase, including fragmentation, visibility, coordination, shared branding, pricing, platform functionality, and service renewal. Third, the themes were compared across data sources to assess convergence and divergence among interviews, observations, focus groups, and ESIRA living-lab activities. This procedure enabled the construction of a chain of evidence linking raw empirical material to analytical categories and final interpretations.

The *Salty Winds* network was selected as a critical/illustrative case because it represents a rare example of continuity beyond project funding in the Lithuanian LEADER context. Initiated through LEADER-supported initiatives and facilitated by Druskininkai LAG, the network has developed organisational arrangements that sustain activities over time and has been recognised as a learning reference for other Lithuanian LAGs, which increasingly visit Druskininkai to observe

practices and draw transferable lessons. This positioning makes the case analytically valuable for examining how networking and governance tools can translate project-based initiatives into durable local development capacity.

The analysis was guided by a design thinking approach, used both as an object of inquiry and as a conceptual-analytical framework to examine the pathway from individual initiatives to networked collective action. The case study was structured according to the five-phase design thinking framework (empathise, define, ideate, prototype, test), as presented in the Stanford d.school Bootleg, and complemented by scholarship that conceptualises design thinking as an iterative innovation practice and organisational capability (d.school, 2018; Dell'Era et al., 2020; Micheli et al., 2019). This structure enabled systematic organisation of evidence across stages of problem framing, solution generation, iterative refinement, and evaluation.

The interviews and focus groups were used primarily to reconstruct the development trajectory of the *Salty Winds* network and to synthesise stakeholder perspectives according to the five design thinking phases. Accordingly, the empirical material is presented as aggregated phase-based evidence rather than as a quote-based thematic analysis of individual narratives.

The use of design thinking as an analytical framework also requires caution. Critical literature highlights several limitations of design thinking, including the risk of oversimplifying complex social processes, commodifying innovation practices, underestimating organisational politics and power relations, and presenting innovation as a linear or depoliticised process (Hernández-Ramírez, 2018; Lee, 2021; Dell'Era et al., 2020). These criticisms are relevant for rural governance research, where cooperation is shaped by unequal resources, institutional constraints, and long-term socio-economic conditions. However, in this study, design thinking is not treated as a universal theory of innovation or as a normative solution to rural development challenges. Rather, it is used in a limited analytical sense to trace how network practices were gradually developed, tested, and revised. This makes the framework heuristic rather than prescriptive and allows it to complement, rather than replace, network governance and rural development perspectives.

4.1 Design thinking operationalisation: from individual initiatives to networked actions

To analyse how individual rural initiatives evolved into coordinated networked action in the Salty Winds case, design thinking was operationalised as both (a) an empirical lens for understanding how actors framed and addressed development challenges and (b) an analytical structure for synthesising evidence across time and data sources. In rural development contexts, where outcomes depend on multi-actor coordination, trust-building, and learning, design thinking is particularly relevant because it foregrounds co-creation and iteration as mechanisms through which locally embedded initiatives may become more sustainable and scalable (Vidickienė et al., 2018b; Gedminaitė-Raudonė & Vilkė, 2020; Lankauskienė & Gedminaitė-Raudonė, 2024).

4.2 Empathise: understanding network members' experiences, values, and constraints

The empathise phase focused on building an in-depth understanding of network members' experiences, motivations, and constraints related to sustaining rural community activities beyond project cycles. Here, the local actors were Salty Winds members, such as craftspeople, artisans, food producers, farmers, organisers of community events, local entrepreneurs, as well as LAG stakeholders and municipal partners involved in rural tourism and community initiatives. Consistent with human-centred design principles, empathy work relied on immersion in practice and attention to tacit knowledge not captured through formal reporting (d.school, 2018; Micheli et al., 2019). Following Luchs (2015), three core activities guided this phase: (1) observing, (2) engaging, and (3) watching and listening. Empirical input came from long-term observation (starting in 2021), participation in educational programmes, and exploratory interviews. Particular attention was paid to how members described the limits of operating individually (e.g., discontinuity after funding, weak visibility, fragmented offerings) and whether networking was perceived as a pathway to scale effects and continuity. In addition, the study captured reflections from participants/attendees of educational activities to understand perceived value, expectations, and service-related constraints relevant to sustaining these activities.

4.2.1 Define: formulating a shared challenge for sustained network governance

The define phase synthesised insights from the empathise phase into a focused problem framing, explaining why certain community initiatives risk stagnation after LEADER support ends. In design thinking, this step consolidates multiple perspectives into a coherent challenge that is specific enough to guide action while remaining open to innovation (d.school, 2018; Dell'Era et al., 2020). In the Salty Winds case, the defining challenge centred on the transition from dispersed, project-led activities to sustained network governance: how to shift from individually organised initiatives (events, crafts, tourism, and educational services) to a coordinated model that supports continuity through shared branding, communication channels, cooperation norms, and clearer roles. The define phase, therefore, is connected directly to the research questions on (i) why LEADER-supported initiatives may not sustain or scale and (ii) which governance and organisational tools strengthen continuity and resilience.

4.2.2 Ideate: generating options for coordination, visibility, and member value

The ideate phase generated and compared possible pathways to strengthen networked action. Design thinking literature emphasises expanding the solution space through divergent idea generation and collaborative sense-making (d.school, 2018; Micheli et al., 2019). In this study, ideation was supported through facilitated discussions during educational programmes and focus group meetings, enabling members to propose alternatives for cooperation, joint marketing, event design, membership roles, governance routines, and communication practices. Rather than selecting "best ideas" in the abstract, ideation prioritised feasibility within rural constraints (time, capacity, seasonality) and alignment with local identity and municipal priorities. The analytic output was a structured set of solution categories, such as shared

storytelling and branding tools, coordinated calendars and visitor routes, coordination roles, digital visibility strategies, and partnership agreements, identified as candidates for trial and refinement.

4.2.3 Prototype: translating ideas into tangible network practices

In design thinking, prototypes can take the form of organisational arrangements, service formats, or governance routines that can be tested at low risk and refined through feedback (Dell'Era et al., 2020; d.school, 2018). In the Salty Winds case, prototyping was operationalised through the practical enactment of networking practices in real activities such as joint educational sessions, collaborative events, emerging shared promotional efforts, and experimentation with coordination formats among members. Educational programmes served not only as capacity-building activities but also as "living prototypes" of network functioning, where roles, cooperation norms, and shared narratives were enacted and adjusted. This phase captured the shift from "initiative ownership" by individual actors to "network ownership" through shared routines and collective representation.

4.2.4 Test and iterate: feedback, refinement, and learning over time

The testing phase was approached as a feedback loop rather than a single evaluation moment. It assessed how network members perceived the usefulness, legitimacy, and feasibility of emerging network practices and whether these practices strengthened continuity. Evidence for testing came from the two rounds of interviews (January 2023; February 2025), focus group reflections (February 2025; December 2025), and observational data documenting how cooperation unfolded in practice. Consistent with design thinking scholarship, iteration was treated as fundamental: solutions were refined through cycles of enactment and reflection, and earlier problem framings could be revisited if prototypes revealed new constraints or opportunities (d.school, 2018; Micheli et al., 2019; Luchs, 2015). Importantly, testing enabled analysis of both perceived benefits (e.g., improved coordination, greater visibility) and tensions (e.g., uneven participation, administrative burdens, mismatched expectations), factors that shape whether networked action can endure beyond project cycles. Main phases and mapping are provided in Table 2.

*Table 2. Design thinking phases and evidence mapping in the **Salty Winds** case study. Source: created by authors*

Design thinking phase	**Main data sources**	**Analytical focus**	**Typical outputs used in analysis**
Empathise	Long-term observation (since 2021); participation in educational programmes (2021–2025); in-depth interviews (2023, 2025)	Experiences of network members and potential members, values, and constraints; perceived challenges and sustainability issues	Evidence on challenges of individual initiatives; motivations for cooperation; initial interpretations of "networking".
Define	Synthesis of interview and observation material; focus group reflections (Feb 2025; Dec 2025)	Consolidation of insights into a shared problem framing	Explicit problem statement: transition from project-led initiatives to sustained network governance and continuity
Ideate	Focus groups (Feb 2025; Dec 2025); discussions with initiators of educational programmes	Generation and comparison of feasible solutions under rural constraints	Categories of network solutions (e.g., shared branding/storytelling, coordination roles, joint routes, visibility tools, partnership rules)
Prototype	Observation of joint activities (educational sessions; collaborative events); participation in educational programmes (2021–2025)	Enactment of ideas as "living prototypes" (routines, formats, roles)	Evidence of emerging cooperation practices; trialled coordination formats; early institutionalisation of routines
Test & iterate	Follow-up interviews (2023; 2025); focus groups (2025); longitudinal observation	Feedback, refinement, tensions, and learning over time	Judgements of usefulness/legitimacy; adjustments to routines and roles; identification of barriers (uneven participation, administrative burdens, expectations mismatch)

Each design thinking phase contributed a distinct and necessary analytical function in tracing the evolution of *Salty Winds* from individual initiatives to coordinated networked action. Empathise and Define captured how network members articulated fragmentation and translated lived experience into a shared problem framing, while Ideate structured the generation of feasible coordination options under rural constraints. Prototype and Test were particularly important because they revealed how proposed solutions performed in practice through "living" network routines, making visible new tensions (e.g., uneven participation, administrative burdens, capacity limits). Crucially, the table highlights design thinking as an iterative process: insights emerging during prototyping and testing prompted returns to earlier phases to reframe challenges and refine solutions, keeping the network's development dynamic rather than linear *Limitations of the study*. This study provides analytically valuable evidence on how rural initiatives can transition from project-based activity to sustained network governance. The first limitation concerns examining a single case, purposively selected for its strong evidence of post-funding continuity (since 2015). This enables in-depth process analysis but limits statistical generalisation; accordingly, the contribution is an analytical generalisation relevant to comparable rural networking contexts (Yin, 2017). Second, long-term engagement through participation in educational programmes strengthens contextual understanding but may introduce interpretive bias; this risk was mitigated through triangulation across interviews, observations, and focus groups (Flick, 2018). Third, the interview sample is limited (two rounds with four interviewees each), which may underrepresent less active or peripheral voices. Finally, observed outcomes may reflect place-specific enabling conditions (e.g., municipal involvement, tourism profile, or LAG capacity), so transferability depends on contextual similarity. A further limitation concerns the presentation of qualitative evidence. As the study focuses on reconstructing a process of network development through the design thinking framework, interview and focus group data were synthesised at the level of design thinking phases rather than presented through extensive direct quotations. This limits the visibility of individual practitioner voices, but supports the study's aim of identifying collective learning processes, governance practices, and iterative adaptation over time. Nevertheless, this case is important for knowledge generation because it serves as a living lab for continuity-oriented networking, attracting peer-learning interest from Lithuanian LAGs and rural development actors in other EU countries seeking solutions to sustain initiatives after LEADER funding ends.

5. Results

The Salty Winds network as an iterative design-thinking trajectory (2015–2025). The *Salty Winds* network is a community-based initiative in the Druskininkai region (southern Lithuania, near the Belarusian border) established in 2015 by the Druskininkai LAG in collaboration with local communities. Its mission is to create meaningful socioeconomic opportunities for local residents, particularly individuals with insufficient incomes, seniors, young adults (18+), farmers, artists, and rural community members, by supporting the development and marketing of educational, cultural, and tourism-related services and products. The network operates as a formal public

organisation with open but eligibility-based membership (local residence and relevant experience in tourism/educational services). By 2025, it included more than 25 members (individuals and legal entities), engaged more than 110 local residents, and established partnerships with tourism providers and spa centres. The network's core infrastructure is a digital platform (www.surusvejai.lt) that functions simultaneously as a marketplace for services, a coordination device for joint offers, and a quality label promoting educational services (e.g., Lithuanian traditions and food, Salty Lesson, orientation programme "Magical Druskininkai: (Not) Lost", the theatrical tour "Mineral Town" and many others). The following subsections analyze the network's evolution across the five design thinking phases, highlighting how earlier solutions were repeatedly refined as new constraints emerged.

5.1 Empathise: recognising the lived constraints of individual initiatives (2009–2015)

In the empathise phase, the key "problem signals" emerged from practice: local people possessed cultural knowledge, craft skills, and experience in community activities, but they lacked knowledge of how to sell, acquire customers, and conduct marketing. This insight was cultivated through the Druskininkai LAG's long-term participatory work (2009–2014), which mobilised residents via meetings, events, and everyday engagement, helping them articulate needs and identify locally grounded development opportunities. At the same time, Druskininkai, as a spa town, offered opportunities to attract customers seeking meaningful experiences beyond standard wellness services, creating a demand-side opening for educational and cultural programmes. The mismatch was organisational rather than creative: individual providers could develop attractive activities, yet struggled with visibility, coordination, and predictable customer access. These early experiences also revealed vulnerability typical of peripheral regions: depopulation and ageing reduced local demand and labour supply, while extensive forest coverage limited large-scale economic alternatives, making small-scale service diversification an especially relevant pathway. Empathy work, therefore, was not only about "what people want," but about the constraints shaping local agency: dispersed initiatives, fragmented communication, and limited market interface. This phase established the practical foundation for a collective conclusion that a shared platform and a cooperative model could convert individual creativity into more sustainable livelihood opportunities.

5.2 Define: articulating a shared development challenge and choosing a cooperative organisational form (2015–2017)

The define phase began when actors translated dispersed experiences into a clearer collective problem framing: the core challenge was not the absence of ideas but the lack of a shared structure to connect local service providers with tourists and other users. In 2015, the Druskininkai LAG and local stakeholders formalised this problem framing into an organisational response by establishing *Salty Winds* as a public organisation. The network was designed as a bridge between supply (craftspeople, rural communities, artists, farmers, educators) and demand (organised groups, families, residents, tourists, etc.), with a particular

emphasis on educational and cultural services aligned with the region's identity. Importantly, defining the challenge also meant defining governance rules. Members agreed on eligibility criteria (residence in the Druskininkai region; relevant competencies in tourism/non-formal education) and on an internal funding mechanism: contributing approximately 10–15% of profits from network-related activities to support platform operations and coordination. A modest public subsidy (~EUR 500) enabled initial website/platform development, but the model largely relied on internal resources thereafter. The define phase thus crystallised the network's intended value proposition ("local quality, sustainable services, community-based experiences") and established the initial governance architecture: formal membership, a contribution rule, and a platform-based coordination logic. This created a shared strategic direction, yet it also set the stage for later tensions around pricing, administration, and the adequacy of resources for long-term coordination.

5.3 Ideate: expanding solution space for cooperation, service bundling, and market access (2017–2020)

In the ideation phase, the network explored how to operationalise cooperation as a practical development model rather than a symbolic commitment. As membership expanded, *Salty Winds* generated multiple solution pathways to improve coordination and service viability: developing thematic routes and educational programmes, experimenting with different formats for diverse target groups (children, families, companies, etc.), and strengthening a shared marketing narrative to increase regional visibility. Ideation in this case was strongly shaped by rural feasibility constraints: time scarcity, seasonality, uneven service capacity, and limited professional marketing resources. Consequently, the network's ideas clustered around "low-threshold, high-synergy" instruments as centralised communication via the platform, shared promotion, and service bundling, combined with learning-by-doing through repeated programme delivery. The network's value proposition also became more refined: it positioned itself not only as a sales channel but also as a quality label that educates members about sustainability-oriented service design and explains why service quality matters. At the same time, ideation surfaced structural questions that later became central challenges: What is an appropriate pricing and payment model for educational services? How should costs be calculated and value distributed between individual providers and collective coordination? How can marketing costs be financed fairly, and how should taxation and administrative requirements be handled? The ideation phase, therefore, produced both (a) practical expansions in service content and target audiences and (b) an emerging "governance agenda" centred on financial sustainability, platform functionality, and capacity-building and skills-development requirements.

5.4 Prototype: stabilising network routines through service delivery, partnerships, and platform use (2020–2023)

In the prototyping phase, the network's ideas were translated into tangible organisational routines and "real-world trials" through everyday service delivery and partnerships. By 2022, *Salty Winds* had more than 25 members and had engaged over 110 local residents, indicating that collaboration was no longer sporadic but embedded in repeated practice. The platform (www.surusvejai.lt) functioned as the core prototype infrastructure: it hosted offers, connected providers with consumers, and supported the bundling of multiple educational experiences, especially relevant for organised groups. This phase also intensified external partnerships with spa centres and tourism actors, reflecting the network's strategy of leveraging Druskininkai's tourism flows as a stable demand base. However, prototyping made limitations visible. First, the business model proved under-resourced: member contributions alone did not cover the full costs of coordination, platform development, and marketing. Second, the commercialisation of educational services required more systematic competencies in pricing, cost calculation, and payment schemes. Third, platform limitations constrained scalability: the ordering process for complex service packages (multi-provider, large group bookings) remained insufficient, and the absence of integrated calendar tools or pre-scheduled training dates reduced usability and operational efficiency. Finally, maintaining the attractiveness of educational content required renewal and professional input, yet resources for expert support were limited. In design-thinking terms, prototyping revealed that the network's "solution" functioned as a collaboration platform, but that sustainability depended on upgrading governance and technical infrastructure, rather than merely increasing membership or service variety.

5.5 Test and iterate: confronting sustainability constraints and re-entering ideation through ESIRA living-lab work (2024–2025)

The testing phase became explicit when the network began systematically identifying which model elements required redesign. By 2023–2024, members recognised three interconnected bottlenecks: (1) insufficient income streams for sustainable operation, (2) the need for clearer pricing/payment structures and taxation-aware administration, and (3) the necessity of upgrading digital infrastructure to support bundled bookings, scheduling, and scalable coordination. In response, the network entered an "innovation" stage best interpreted as iterative cycling back through earlier design-thinking phases: reframing the challenge (Define), generating new options (Ideate), and preparing revised prototypes. This iterative turn was strengthened by the ESIRA project context from 2024 onward, which enabled a living-lab setting in Druskininkai coordinated by Druskininkai LAG, with *Salty Winds* as an active participant. Through consultations with researchers and external specialists, members developed a strategic action plan oriented to redesigning educational services, upgrading the platform, strengthening marketing and partnerships (e.g., showcasing offers to hotel staff and the Tourist Information Centre), building capacity (digital content creation; linguistic accessibility), and innovating the business model (pricing, cost calculation, payment schemes). The ESIRA-enabled activities

also supported learning mechanisms, such as train-the-trainer sessions, mentoring, focus group reflections, and shared events, which generated new ideas for service renewal and inclusivity. The result is a clear iterative logic: testing exposed constraints; ESIRA and living-lab collaboration supplied structured inputs for renewed ideation; and the network prepared revised prototypes for subsequent implementation cycles. Results are provided in Table 3.

Table 3. Design-thinking interpretation of the network Salty Winds trajectory. Source: created by authors

Design thinking phase	**Timeframe**	**Activities in *Salty Winds***	**Main outputs**	**Key tensions revealed**
Empathise	2009–2015	LAG mobilised residents; individual services and skills identified.	Shared understanding of opportunity and constraints.	Fragmented visibility; weak market interface; discontinuity risk.
Define	2015–2017	Network formalised as a public organisation; membership rules and contribution model agreed; platform created.	Organisational form; governance rules; initial platform.	Limited public support; reliance on member contributions; governance workload.
Ideate	2017–2020	The expansion of services, target groups, service bundling, and shared promotion was explored.	Broader service portfolio; refined value proposition (quality label).	Emerging questions on pricing, cost sharing, taxation, and marketing.
Prototype	2020–2023	Network routines stabilised; partnerships expanded; platform used for offers and coordination.	>25 members; >110 residents engaged; stronger tourism linkages	Under-resourced model; platform usability limits; need for professional renewal.
Test & iterate	2024–2025	Sustainability bottlenecks diagnosed; strategic redesign initiated; ESIRA living lab enabled renewed ideation/prototyping.	Action plan for platform, marketing, capacity-building, and business model innovation.	Scalability constraints; administrative complexity; continued need for iteration.

Interpreted through design thinking, network *Salty Winds* evolved from a set of community-led, LEADER-supported initiatives into a coordinated governance arrangement centred on a platform, formal membership, and shared rules for cooperation. The network's development was not linear: prototyping through service delivery and partnerships generated learning but also exposed persistent sustainability constraints, such as financial viability, pricing, and taxation-related administration, marketing cost coverage, and gaps in digital infrastructure.

The subsequent innovation stage (2024–2025), strengthened by the ESIRA living-lab collaboration, illustrates iteration as a governance capability: testing did not merely evaluate existing practices but also triggered renewed problem framing, expanded solution generation, and the preparation of revised prototypes. In this sense, the case demonstrates how rural networking can function as a mechanism for converting dispersed individual initiatives into collective value creation, while also showing that long-term continuity depends on the network's capacity to repeatedly redesign its tools, routines, and infrastructure in response to emerging constraints.

Given the small scale and identifiable nature of the case, full raw data are not publicly reported. Instead, transparency is strengthened through a triangulation matrix that shows how the main findings are supported across data sources (see Table 4). The table below summarises the chain of evidence from empirical material to analytical interpretation.

This triangulation demonstrates that the main findings are supported by converging evidence across interviews, focus groups, observations, and living-lab activities, thereby strengthening the credibility of the case-study interpretation.

Table 4. Evidence triangulation across data sources and design thinking phases. Source: created by authors

Design thinking phase	**Main empirical evidence**	**Convergence across sources**	**Analytical interpretation**
Empathise	Interviews and long-term observation showed that local actors had cultural, educational, and craft-based initiatives, but lacked visibility and stable access to tourists.	Interviews, observations, and participation in educational programmes all confirmed fragmentation and weak market interface as recurring problems.	The initial challenge was not lack of local resources, but weak coordination and limited visibility.
Define	Interviews and focus groups showed that actors framed the core problem as the absence of a shared organisational structure connecting local providers with users.	Different sources converged around the need for a common platform, clearer roles, and joint promotion.	The network was defined as a governance response to fragmented LEADER-supported initiatives.
Ideate	Focus groups and stakeholder discussions generated ideas related to joint marketing, service bundling, pricing, quality signalling, and platform improvement.	Sources converged on the value of cooperation, but also revealed tensions around pricing, cost-sharing, and administrative responsibilities.	Ideation expanded the network's service logic while exposing future governance challenges.

Design thinking phase	Main empirical evidence	Convergence across sources	Analytical interpretation
Prototype	Observation of educational programmes and interviews showed how joint services, partnerships, and the digital platform were tested in practice.	Evidence confirmed that the network improved visibility and cooperation, while also revealing limits in financial viability and platform functionality.	Prototyping demonstrated the practical value of networked delivery but also revealed the need for stronger organisational and digital infrastructure.
Test and Iterate	Focus groups, the ESIRA living-lab collaboration, and stakeholder reflections identified bottlenecks in income streams, service renewal, marketing, and digital tools.	Sources converged on the need to redesign services, improve booking/payment functions, and strengthen member capacities.	Testing triggered renewed problem framing and preparation of revised prototypes, confirming iteration as a governance capability.

6. Discussion

This study contributes to EU debates on post-project rural development by showing how networking can operate as a governance pathway that partially addresses the sustainability limitations often associated with LEADER-type instruments. While LEADER is widely recognised for mobilising local actors, recent evidence suggests that long-term effects vary substantially across territories due to differences in governance capacity and funding structures (Paschalidou et al., 2025) and that bureaucratic procedures and project-administration logics may constrain durable structural change (Johansson & Holmquist, 2024). The European Court of Auditors similarly reports limited evidence of sustained "additional benefits" beyond project cycles (European Court of Auditors, 2022). Against this background, the *Salty Winds* case illustrates one plausible mechanism for continuity: the transformation of dispersed LEADER-supported initiatives into a formalised network with shared rules, a contribution-based internal funding model, and a platform that supports joint visibility, coordination, and quality signalling in collaborative rural and cultural tourism.

The findings respond directly to the first research question by showing that community-led initiatives evolved into a coordinated rural network through a gradual process of formalisation, rather than through a single organisational decision. The Druskininkai Local Action Group played an important intermediary role by mobilising local actors, supporting cooperation, and helping transform individual educational, cultural, and tourism-related activities into a collective network model. This confirms that the transition from project-based activities to network governance depends not only on local initiative, but also on facilitation, trust-building, and the creation of shared organisational routines.

Regarding the second research question, the case identifies several governance practices that enabled cooperation and the creation of shared value among heterogeneous rural actors. These include formal membership rules, an internal contribution mechanism, common branding, platform-based visibility, service bundling, and cooperation with tourism and spa-sector actors. These practices helped reduce fragmentation and created a more coherent territorial offer. However, the case also shows that such arrangements remain fragile when coordination work, marketing costs, pricing, digital infrastructure, and administrative responsibilities are not sufficiently resourced.

Analytically, using design thinking as a process-tracing lens addresses the third research question by showing that continuity is not a linear "scaling" outcome but an iterative capability. Prototyping and testing revealed constraints related to pricing, taxation-aware administration, marketing costs, and platform usability, which triggered renewed problem framing and solution generation, reinforced by ESIRA living-lab collaboration. This perspective aligns with broader arguments in smart villages and rural governance that emphasise relational and institutional infrastructures, such as coordination capacity, learning routines, and multi-actor collaboration, alongside digital tools.

The methodological contribution of design thinking lies in its heuristic value for documenting how network governance practices are created, tested, and refined over time. In this study, design thinking was not used as a universal theory of rural innovation, but as an analytical framework that helped structure the empirical trajectory of the case across the phases of empathising, defining, ideating, prototyping, and testing. Its value is strongest in cases where researchers seek to understand how rural actors learn, adapt, and redesign organisational arrangements in response to emerging constraints. At the same time, the framework has limitations: if used uncritically, it may oversimplify complex governance relations and underplay power asymmetries, institutional constraints, and uneven capacities among local actors. For this reason, design thinking should be treated as complementary to network governance and rural development perspectives, rather than as a substitute for them.

The findings are context-dependent. Druskininkai's spa-tourism demand, municipal priorities, and LAG facilitation likely enabled network consolidation; transferability to lower-capacity regions may require stronger intermediary support or different revenue models. Methodologically, a single case supports analytical generalisation but limits claims of prevalence. Future research could compare multiple LAG territories, assess network performance over longer time horizons, and examine how different platform governance designs shape equity, participation, and financial sustainability.

7. Conclusion

This paper examined networking as a tool to strengthen rural revitalisation beyond project-based interventions, using the *Salty Winds* network case in the Druskininkai region to address three research questions. First, the analysis shows how community-led initiatives evolved into a more

formalised governance arrangement: an initially dispersed set of educational and cultural tourism activities supported through LEADER mobilisation and local capacity building was consolidated into a network with a form of public organisation with eligibility rules, shared coordination, and a digital platform that connects providers with visitors and local users. Second, the study identified core network governance practices enabling cooperation and shared value creation among heterogeneous actors (craftspeople, farmers, artists, community organisations, and tourism stakeholders): formal membership arrangements, an internal contribution mechanism (10–15% of profits), centralised coordination combined with participatory content generation, partnership-building with tourism/spa actors, and platform-based tools for visibility and service bundling.

Third, the design thinking framework clarified the network's development as iterative rather than linear. Empathise and define phases captured the shared recognition that individual initiatives faced limited visibility and continuity. Ideation and prototyping expanded the service portfolio and coordination routines, while testing revealed persistent constraints, including financial viability, pricing, administrative complexities, marketing cost coverage, and the need for service renewal and platform upgrades. ESIRA living-lab collaboration reinforced this iterative cycle by providing structured opportunities to revise problem framing, generate new solutions, and prepare revised prototypes.

Overall, the study fulfils its objective by demonstrating how networking can serve as a governance mechanism to address the sustainability gap highlighted in broader evaluations of LEADER-type approaches, while underscoring that continuity depends on the capacity to iterate, learn, and redesign network practices in response to emerging constraints.

Acknowledgment

The authors gratefully acknowledge the Druskininkai LAG for sharing insights in building and sustaining the *Salty Winds* network. Their openness enabled a deeper understanding of how community-led initiatives evolve into coordinated forms of cooperation. The authors also thank the ESIRA project team and partners for creating an enabling environment for learning and experimentation through living-lab activities, including the train-the-trainers programme and mentoring-oriented support that strengthened reflection and iterative development. More broadly, the ESIRA consortium's commitment to rural inclusion and innovation is acknowledged for reinforcing the view that rural places and the people who shape them remain essential to Europe's social and economic future. This research was conducted within the framework of the Horizon Europe project ESIRA – Enhancing Social Innovation in Rural Areas (Grant Agreement No. 101136253), funded by the European Union.

[1] Albanese, V. E. & Graziano, T. (2024). Disentangling rural smartness in European policies: A critical overview of the Smart Village concept. *AIMS Geosciences*, 10(4), 882–906. DOI: 10.3934/geosci.2024041.

[2] Biczkowski, M. (2020). LEADER as a mechanism of neo-endogenous development of rural areas: The case of Poland. *Miscellanea Geographica*, 24(4), 232–244. DOI: 10.2478/mgrsd-2020-0041.

[3] Chartier, O., Salle, E., Irvine, K., Kull, M., Miller, D., Nieto, E., Vestergård, L., Potters, J., Slätmo, E. & Zomer, B. (2021). *Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas: Contribution from SHERPA science-society-policy platforms* [SHERPA Position Paper]. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4557440.

[4] Chatzichristos, G. & Hennebry, B. (2023). Social innovation in rural governance: A comparative case study across marginalised rural EU regions. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 99, 193–203. DOI: 10.1016/j.jrurstud.2021.06.004.

[5] Cooke, P. & Morgan, K. (1993). The network paradigm: New departures in corporate and regional development. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 11(5), 543–564. DOI: 10.1068/d110543.

[6] Creswell, J. W. & Poth, C. N. (2023). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (5th ed.). Tousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

[7] De Zordo, S., Marre, D. & Smietana, M. (2022). Demographic Anxieties in the Age of 'Fertility Decline.' Medical Anthropology, 41(6–7), 591–599. DOI: 10.1080/01459740.2022.2099851.

[8] Dell'Era, C., Magistretti, S., Cautela, C., Verganti, R. & Zurlo, F. (2020). Four kinds of design thinking: From ideating to making, engaging, and criticizing. *Creativity and Innovation Management*, 29(2), 324–344. DOI: 10.1111/caim.12353.

[9] Dembogurski, L., Madureira, L., Bento, R. & Carvalho, A. (2026). Smart villages in practice: A meta-synthesis of implementation experiences in Europe. *Sustainable Futures*, 11, 101579. DOI: 10.1016/j.sftr.2025.101579.

[10] Emerllahu, V. & Bogataj, D. (2024). Smart villages as infrastructure of rural areas: A literature review and research agenda. *IFAC-PapersOnLine*, 58(3), 268–273. DOI: 10.1016/j.ifacol.2024.07.162.

[11] Esparcia, J., Escribano, J. & Serrano, J. J. (2015). From development to power relations and territorial governance: Increasing the leadership role of LEADER local action groups in Spain. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 42, 29–42. DOI: 10.1016/j.jrurstud.2015.09.005.

[12] Flick, U. (2018). Doing triangulation and mixed methods. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications. DOI: 10.4135/9781529716634.

[13] Gedminaitė-Raudonė, Ž., Vidickienė, D., Lankauskienė, R. & Simonaitytė, V. (2024). *Regional report on social exclusion and social economy initiatives in rural areas – Druskininkai area: Lithuania*. ESIRA Project.

[14] Gedminaitė-Raudonė, Ž., Vilkė, R. (2020). Inovatyvus suinteresuotųjų dalyvavimu grįstas kaimo politikos formavimo modelis: „SHERPA“ patirtis. Lietuvos kaimiškųjų vietovių konkurencingumo stiprinimas: geroji patirtis. In Gasperavičienė, A., ed., *Lietuvos kaimo vietovių konkurencingumo stiprinimas: geroji patirtis: 9-oji mokslinė praktinė konferencija* (pp. 61–67). Kaunas: Vytauto Didžiojo universiteto. DOI: 10.7220/2351-6909.2020.

[15] Hennink, M., Hutter, I. & Bailey, A. (2020). Qualitative research methods (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Ltd.

[16] Hernández-Ramírez, R. (2018). On Design Thinking, Bullshit, and Innovation. *Journal of Science and Technology of the Arts*, 10(3), 2. DOI: 10.7559/CITARJ.V10I3.555.

[17] Hysa, E., Kruja, A., Rehman, N. U. & Laurenti, R. (2020). Circular economy innovation and environmental sustainability impact on economic growth: An integrated model for sustainable development. *Sustainability*, 12(12), 4831. DOI: 10.3390/su12124831.

[18] Johansson, J. & Holmquist, M. (2024). LEADER and rural development policy – What's the problem represented to be? *Journal of Rural Studies*, 108, 103287. DOI: 10.1016/j.jrurstud.2024.103287.

[19] Koźmiński, A. K., Noga, A., Piotrowska, K. & Zagórski, K. (2020). *The Balanced Development Index for Europe's OECD Countries, 1999–2017*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

[20] Kusio, T., Kudełko, J., Borges, A., Delic, A. & Stroila, I. (2022). Are there any differences in rural development challenges within European countries? Social and economic contexts from EU rural leaders. *International Food and Agribusiness Management Review*, 25(5), 737–756. DOI: 10.22434/IFAMR2021.0147.

[21] Lankauskienė, R., Simonaitytė, V. & Gedminaitė-Raudonė, Ž. (2025). Sustainable Culinary Tourism Pathways in the Baltic Sea Region: A Comparative Perspective. *Sustainability*, 17(23), 10472. DOI: 10.3390/su172310472.

[22] Lankauskienė, R., Gedminaitė-Raudonė, Ž. (2023). Toward Holistic Perceptions of "Smart" Growth in Development Paradigms and Policy Agendas. *Land* 12, 482. DOI: 10.3390/land12020482.

[23] Lankauskienė, R., Gedminaitė-Raudonė, Ž. (2024). Challenges and Prospects for the Determinants of Socioeconomic Development in Rural Areas: Evidence from Lithuania. European countryside, 16(1), 10–25. DOI: 10.2478/euco-2024-0002.

[24] Lee, J., Árnason, A., Nightingale, A. & Shucksmith, M. (2005). Networking: Social capital and identities in European rural development. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 45(4), 269–283. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9523.2005.00305.x.

[25] Lee, K. (2021). Critique of Design Thinking in Organizations: Strongholds and Shortcomings of the Making Paradigm. *Journal of Design and Business*, 26(4), 497–515. DOI: 10.1016/j.sheji.2021.10.003.

[26] Lutz, W., Amran, G., Belanger, A., Conte, A., Gailey, N., Ghio, D., Grapsa, E., Jensen, K., Loichinger, E., Marois, G., Muttarak, R., Potancokova, M., Sabourin, P. and Stonawski, M. (2019). *Demographic Scenarios for the EU*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. DOI: 10.2760/590301.

[27] Micheli, P., Wilner, S. J. S., Bhatti, S. H., Mura, M. & Beverland, M. B. (2019). Doing design thinking: Conceptual review, synthesis, and research agenda. *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, 36(2), 124–148. DOI: 10.1111/jpim.12466.

[28] Navarro, F. A., Woods, M. & Cejudo, E. (2016). The LEADER initiative has been a victim of its own success: The decline of the bottom-up approach in rural development programmes. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 56(2), 270–288. DOI: 10.1111/soru.12079.

[29] Nyumba, T. O., Wilson, K., Derrick, C. J. & Mukherjee, N. (2018). The use of focus group discussion methodology: Insights from two decades of application in conservation. *Methods in Ecology and Evolution*, 9(1), 20–32. DOI: 10.1111/2041-210X.12860.

[30] Paschalidou, M., Chatzitheodoridis, F., Spinthiropoulos, K., Kalogiannidis, S., Malliachova, A. (2025). LEADER approach and sustainability overview in European countries, *Open Agriculture*, 10(1), 0471. DOI: 10.1515/opag-2025-0471.

[31] Petruzzelli, M., Ihle, R., Colitti, S. & Vittuari, M. (2023). The role of short food supply chains in advancing sustainable food systems. *Cities*, 141, 104496. DOI: 10.1016/j.cities.2023.104496.

[32] Ray, C. (2000). The EU LEADER Programme: Rural development laboratory. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 40(2), 163–171. DOI: 10.1111/1467-9523.00138.

[33] Shucksmith, M. (2010). Disintegrated rural development? Neo-endogenous rural development, planning and place-shaping in diffused power contexts. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 50(1), 1–14. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9523.2009.00497.x.

[34] Syssner, J. (2020). *Pathways to demographic adaptation: Perspectives on policy and planning in depopulating areas in Northern Europe*. Cham: Springer Nature. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-34046-9.

[35] Vasylieva, T., Lyulyov, O., Bilan, Y. & Streimikiene, D. (2019). Sustainable Economic Development and Greenhouse Gas Emissions: The Dynamic Impact of Renewable Energy Consumption, GDP, and Corruption. *Energies*, 12(17), 3289. DOI: 10.3390/en12173289.

[36] Vidickiene, D. & Gedminaite-Raudone, Z. (2018). Challenges for agricultural policy in the service-driven economic system. *Economic of Agriculture*, 65(4), 1545–1555. DOI: 10.5937/ekoPolj1804545V.

[37] Vidickienė, D., Gedminaitė-Raudonė, Ž. & Vilkė, R. (2018a). Networking as a driver of rural development. *Management Theory and Studies for Rural Business and Infrastructure Development*, 40(3), 339–349.

[38] Vidickiene, D., Melnikiene, R., Gedminaite-Raudone, Z. (2018b). Challenges for farmers' collaboration in the post-industrial economy. Innovation and Cooperation. *Rural Areas and Development 15,* 205–218.

[39] Vilke, R., Gedminaite-Raudone, Z. (2018). To whom belongs the future of rural prosperity 2020+? In Wigier, M. & Kowalski, A., eds., *The CAP and national priorities within the EU budget after 2020* (pp. 50–62). Warszawa: Instytut Ekonomiki Rolnictwa i Gospodarki Żywnościowej. DOI: 10.30858/pw/9788376587516.

[40] Vilke, R., Vidickiene, D., Gedminaite-Raudone, Z. (2018). Innovating apart or together: Lithuanian farmers and rural communities. In Treija, S. & Skujenice, S., eds., *Research for Rural Development, Vol. 2* (pp. 160–166). Jelgava: Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies. DOI: 10.22616/rrd.24.2018.067.

[41] Yin, R. K. (2017). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

[42] Zavratnik, V., Kos, A. & Stojmenova Duh, E. (2018). Smart villages: Comprehensive review of initiatives and practices. Sustainability, 10(7), 2559. DOI: 10.3390/su10072559.

[43] Zheng, Y. & Kaiser, H. (2013). Optimal quality threshold of admission in a two-sided farmers' market. *Applied Economics*, *45*(23), 3360–3369. DOI: 10.1080/00036846.2012.711941.

Other sources

[44] ESIRA (2026). Enhancing social innovation in rural areas. Retrieved January 26, 2026. Retrieved from: https://www.esira.eu.

[45] European Commission, EU CAP Network (2024). Smart villages and Smart Rural 27: Recommendations for policy and practice. Publications Office of the European Union. Retrieved from: https://eu-cap-network.ec.europa.eu.

[46] European Commission (2006). The LEADER approach: A basic guide. Retrieved January 26, 2026. Retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/sites/default/files/2B953E0A-9045-2198-8B09-ED2F3D2CCED3.pdf.

[47] European Commission (2021). A long-term vision for the EU's rural areas – Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040 (COM/2021/345 final). Retrieved January 29, 2026. Retrieved from: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0345.

[48] European Commission (2023). Smart villages: Orientations for LEADER/CLLD implementation. EU CAP Network. Retrieved January 29, 2026. Retrieved from: https://eu-cap-network.ec.europa.eu.

[49] European Commission (2024). Smart Rural 27: Outcomes and recommendations. EU CAP Network. Retrieved January 29, 2026. Retrieved from: https://eu-cap-network.ec.europa.eu.

[50] European Commission (2026a). Rural Pact community platform. Rural Pact Community Platform. European Commission. Retrieved January 6, 2026. Retrieved from: https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/index_en.

[51] European Commission (2026b). Common Agricultural Policy strategic plans 2023–2027: Implementation and policy orientation. Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development. Retrieved January 6, 2026. Retrieved from: https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu.

[52] European Court of Auditors (2022). EU's LEADER approach for rural development: LEADER and community-led local development facilitates local engagement but additional benefits still not sufficiently demonstrated (Special Report No. 10/2022). Publications Office of the European Union. Retrieved January 6, 2026. Retrieved from: https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/publications/SR22_10.

[53] European Union (2006). Council Decision 2006/144/EC of 20 February 2006 on Community strategic guidelines for rural development (programming period 2007–2013). Official Journal of the European Union, L55, 20–29.

[54] European Union (2013). Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). Official Journal of the European Union, L347, 487–548.

[55] European Union (2021). Regulation (EU) 2021/2115 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 2 December 2021 establishing rules on support for strategic plans under the CAP. Official Journal of the European Union, L435, 1–186.

[56] Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford University (d.school) (2018). Design thinking bootleg. Retrieved from: https://dschool.stanford.edu/resources/design-thinking-bootleg.

[57] United Nations (2026). The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025. Retrieved January 6, 2026. Retrieved from: https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2025.