



*European Economic and Social Committee*

NAT/738  
Contribution of rural areas to the 2018 EYCH

## **OPINION**

European Economic and Social Committee

**The contribution of Europe's rural areas to the 2018 Year of Cultural Heritage ensuring  
sustainability and urban/rural cohesion**  
(own-initiative opinion)

Rapporteur: **Tom JONES**

Plenary Assembly decision	15/02/2018
Legal basis	Rule 29(2) of the Rules of Procedure Own-initiative opinion
Section responsible	Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment
Adopted in section	05/09/2018
Adopted at plenary	19/09/2018
Plenary session No	537
Outcome of vote (for/against/abstentions)	201/2/7

## 1. Conclusions and recommendations

### *Conclusions*

- 1.1 The EESC fully supports the designation of 2018 as the European Year of Cultural Heritage and commends all efforts by promoters and organisers at all levels to increase visibility and celebrate Europe's diverse and rich cultural heritage<sup>1</sup>.
- 1.2 The EESC encourages all stakeholders and participants to adopt the widest possible definition of culture and to be inclusive of all citizens.
- 1.3 This year should not only be a celebration of the past, but should also promote evolving, new and challenging expressions of human inspiration and skill that often arise out of the traditions embedded in each country's rural cultural heritage.
- 1.4 Twelve months is a small window, but it is hoped that this extra effort and investment will incentivise citizens to focus on the opportunities around cultural heritage in rural areas. This should enable them to build a re-energised, aesthetic, social and economic treasury of wellbeing for present and future generations. At the mid way point, over 3500 projects have received the European Year of Cultural Heritage label, with the percentage of rural projects varying from region to region.
- 1.5 The EESC endorses the European Alliance for Culture and the Arts' call, of January 2018, for the European Institutions and Member States to ensure "substantial support within the post-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)". It also welcomes the European Commission's proposed commitment to culture in its draft budget of May 2018 and its commitments through the New Agenda for Culture<sup>2</sup>.

### *Recommendations*

- 1.6 Rural Cultural Heritage with all its richness and diversity should be formally recognised for its intrinsic artistic value and its economic and social contribution to the wellbeing of all European citizens<sup>3</sup>.
- 1.7 Investment by public funders should be "rural proofed" so that when any new funding streams are designed, these include support for the ongoing contribution of farming families and employees and for non-governmental organisations involving individual creators, as well as folk groups, local action groups, and care farms. This should take full account of the measures needed to enhance the infrastructure of rural heritage.

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<sup>1</sup> EESC opinion on [New Agenda for Culture](#) (not yet adopted and published in O.J.).

<sup>2</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/culture/news/new-european-agenda-culture\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/culture/news/new-european-agenda-culture_en)

<sup>3</sup> EESC Conference 20 and 21 June 2016.

- 1.8 Existing EU funding streams, including the Rural Development Programme should increasingly see culture as of horizontal value and should support cultural projects, including those protecting, promoting and enhancing biodiverse landscapes. Restoration of pastoral farming and remote cottages in the Pyrenees, vineyards in Santorini, protection of common grazing in Șeica Mare (Romania) are good examples, as is the Leader cultural project in Lesvos (Greece) to support the integration of migrants. Agri-environment schemes should continue to build farmland habitats and the built environment should reach higher standards of design, respecting traditional cultural patterns while being relevant to modern usage.
- 1.9 Sustainable woodlands, forests and waterways deserve support measures to avoid degradation and pollution. Resources must be provided to maintain protective strips of trees and shrubs introduced in rural areas in the past (e.g. in Poland based on the Dezydery Chłapowski concept) which reduce soil erosion and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and help increase yields and enrich the landscape.
- 1.10 The contribution of farm open days, school rural visits, shows, craft and other fairs and cultural festivals help urban citizens to better understand and appreciate rural areas and deserve public funding support as do measures to build bridges between rural and urban citizens through cultural projects.
- 1.11 Measures to introduce rural culture and traditions to new generations through innovative modern idioms should be encouraged and the economic and social benefit measured, with good practice shared and celebrated. Artists and other inspiring cultural actors, sometimes from other locations, should be supported to help communities realise the full potential of local cultural assets.
- 1.12 The serious loss of craft skills needs to be addressed through increased investment in training, so that intergenerational transfers occur building on past knowledge and encouraging innovation. Rural schools should teach the employment potential of rural assets as well as external career opportunities. There is a specific challenge, not just for young farmers, but for all rural young people to be entrepreneurial in their custodial role of embracing their heritage.
- 1.13 Rural cultural heritage should be promoted sustainably for the purposes of tourism, among other things, so that urban citizens can learn to appreciate the cultural values of rural areas and increasingly opt for rural homes and work in remoter settlements.
- 1.14 Marketing of rural cultural produce, including gastronomic heritage, should be promoted and geographically-branded status protected, giving assurance on quality and traceability to citizens.
- 1.15 Volunteering, community participation and social enterprises as well as rural private businesses, should be encouraged to develop and share their cultural activities, including promoting the diversity of languages and dialects, for the benefit of all citizens. "Smart" rural communities should embrace the value and the potential of their local cultural assets and seek opportunities to cooperate with similar groups elsewhere to promote linkages, including enhancing the economic benefit of greater tourism opportunities.

- 1.16 While projects to mark the 2018 European Year of Cultural Heritage will likely continue into the future, it is important that a clear stocktake and evaluation of quantifiable investment and outcome be carried out, taking account of economic, social and cultural factors. Some EUR 8 million were allocated to the Year following Trilogue negotiations between the European Parliament and Council in 2017. It would be fair to expect that a quantifiable proportion of this support was available to rural areas.
- 1.17 More research is needed to quantify and measure the quality of the benefits of heritage and ongoing cultural activity for citizens' wellbeing and to underpin solutions for future action. Stoic defenders of heritage need support to welcome new migrants and different cultural traditions.
- 1.18 Urgent action is required on connectivity of transport and digital infrastructure which is essential for settlement in rural areas and for the development of cultural tourism.

## 2. **Introduction**

- 2.1 This opinion specifically focuses on the wide range of assets and talent that rural areas and their citizens have, and will, contribute to Europe's cultural heritage and on how this wide definition of culture contributes to a more viable and prosperous rurality. We support the Pan-European Charter for rural heritage which promotes sustainable spatial development<sup>4</sup> and the reference in the 2016 Cork Declaration 2.0: "Land management has a key role in the interface between citizens and the environment. Policies must incentivise the delivery of environmental public goods, including the preservation of Europe's natural and cultural heritage".
- 2.2 This initiative has to be subject to "rural proofing" and the EESC is concerned that sufficient knowledge about the Year will not reach the small community groups in villages and small towns in time for them to prepare and celebrate the vast array of cultural assets around them. This Year should not only be a celebration of the past, but should also promote evolving, new and challenging expressions of human inspiration and skill that often arise out of the traditions embedded in each country's rural cultural heritage.
- 2.3 Listing existing cultural activities and learning from successful projects has real value, but the 2018 celebrations should also include new, innovative cultural events which build on the past and transfer cultural heritage on to new generations in a contemporary way, giving new opportunities to rural areas. Creative Europe has two rural projects, "Roots and Roads" and "Food is Culture" which, if successful, could contribute to learning and development.
- 2.4 While it is difficult to quantify the economic and social benefits of cultural activity, (over 300 000 jobs directly linked to European culture), the OECD believes that culture should be used as an indicator of wellbeing and it is important for the 2018 EYCH organisers to undertake some analysis which could justify future public investment. There should be a clear account of how successful the year was in reaching rural and remote areas and how any legacy of good

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Resolution No.2 of the European Conference of Ministers responsible for Spatial/Regional Planning of the Member States of the Council of Europe (CEMAT), on the Pan-European Charter for the rural heritage: Promoting sustainable spatial planning – "The rural heritage as a factor of territorial cohesion", adopted at the 15th session of CEMAT, Moscow, Russian Federation, 9 July 2010.

practice such as the AlpFoodway<sup>5</sup> and the Terract projects<sup>6</sup> can be built upon for future prioritisation at European and regional levels.

### 3. General and specific comments

- 3.1 Rural landscapes, the mosaic of natural geological structures and human imprints of agriculture, forestry, lakes, rivers and built settlements provide, perhaps, the greatest cultural heritage there is. From national parks and Natura 2000 sites to urban fringe green spaces, there is a diverse beauty to appreciate, a source of inspiration to generations of artists, musicians, litterateurs, dancers, and to all of us, who fall into none of these categories. The Commission's New Agenda for Culture is rather brief on rural perspectives. However, it does state that "restoration and upgrading of cultural and natural heritage contributes to growth and sustainability. Integrated management of cultural and natural assets encourages people to discover and engage with both". The Mayangna people of Nicaragua use the same word for nature and culture. This is ecological citizenship.
- 3.2 Rural communities even add value to the landscapes. It is farm and woodland managers and employees and craftspeople – male and female – who have sculptured these landscapes. Generations of skilled people who harnessed land and water for food, shelter and to generate income. The idea, for example, of belts of greenery and shrubs to preserve the soil developed in nineteenth-century Poland, gave the recent landscape its distinctive features. They shaped field boundaries from stone and branch, erected barns and workshops. They tended, over successive generations, native breeds of livestock suited to terrain and climate and managed vegetation. They developed locally specific gastronomy and folklore traditions. We have also inherited a rich heritage of fine buildings – mansions, castles, churches, but also peasant cottages, small rural mills and shops, such as those carefully restored at the St Fagan Folk Museum in Wales. The upkeep of similar historical architecture is often borne by private investment, with some vital public and charitable support. An innovative project in North Wales utilises renewable energy from the seabed to heat and thus reduce costs at Plas Newydd, a National Trust stately home<sup>7</sup>. Celebration of the past and the present should seek to balance the idealistic with the reality of human struggle and effort.
- 3.3 We appreciate all efforts including those of The European Heritage Alliance, to sensitively retain this heritage. Restoration includes the need for supportive planning authorities ensuring sympathetic building conversions. The REVAB project cofunded by the Erasmus Programme provides training to enhance the potential for re-using redundant agricultural buildings, thus preventing their obliteration.
- 3.4 Rural people created their own culture, reflecting their work, leisure and social challenges, in all forms of art, sport and general community activity. Rural areas are often important reservoirs for the diversity of minority languages and dialects. Place names of villages, farms and fields

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.alpine-space.eu/projects/alpfoodway/en/home>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.terract.eu/fr/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.bangor.ac.uk/studentlife/studentnews/gift-s-marine-renewable-visit-to-plas-newydd-18421>

have significant meaning which deserve to be understood and respected. They have, and still, create a legacy of value to society generally.

- 3.5 However, their economic activities also evolve and sometimes disappear. Not all landscapes are pristine. Some bear witness to industrial exploitation, to wars and pillaging, to the ravages of drought, flooding and fire or even to overexploitation caused by excessive, concentrated tourism activities. They all have a story to tell, lessons to learn. Mitigating the impact of climate change will require positive intervention to retain diversity and a choice of experiences. Maintaining links with the past is branded "provision of public goods" and landscapes become degraded if there is not sustainable biodiversity, sensitive planning and managed access. Even the artistic cultural manifest is diluted as rural populations decline below sustainable levels.
- 3.6 Eurostat 2017 notes that more than a third of Europeans do not participate in cultural activities, which is why developing rural-cultural tourism, linked to health and recreational activities is, and will be, a major bridge between urban and rural peoples. The city of Galway is a good example of rural-urban cultural partnerships and the European Capitals of Culture initiative (e.g. Plovdiv, Bulgaria, and Matera, Italy, in 2019) should always demonstrate rural as well as city cultural characteristics. In Wales, the Heritage Statutory Body, CADW, has an open doors initiative, which is part of a 50-country project to help citizens trace the footsteps of change, to better understand their being – "to plan your future you need to understand your past".
- 3.7 In Greece, there is another example of shared knowledge, at the Art Farm<sup>8</sup>, developed by Sotiris Marinis. In the village of Megali Mantinea in West Mani, he has built tree houses and a training centre, working on the principle that "an experience here educates about our rural and cultural heritage".
- 3.8 Rural cultural tourism is an existing and growing economic and social resource-provider and the basis of joint investment. Responsibility for protecting and supporting Europe's cultural heritage is a national, regional and local competence and having a public sense of pride in place is key. The European Institutions can promote a sense of European common values and incentivise and promote good practice and shared experiences<sup>9</sup>. Traditional, regional culinary recipes, beers and wines, costumes and music, as exhibited at Berlin's Green Week<sup>10</sup>, attract thousands of international visitors annually and help connect the present with the past. Connecting food and craft produce of rural producers directly with consumers through farmers' markets and internet selling is increasingly popular – for example the REKO local food groups in Finland.
- 3.9 Places for solitude, listening to and watching birdlife and experiencing woodlands – forest diversity as well as plant species for medical uses – all contribute to wider citizen curiosity, exploration and wellbeing. Broadening the range of opportunities and discovery should help avoid an over concentration of visits to vulnerable sites. This builds added economic and employment value, based on rural core assets, in more remote areas, a value already appreciated

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/agroktima.artfarm/>

<sup>9</sup> EESC opinion on [New Agenda for Culture](#) (not yet adopted and published in O.J.).

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.gruenewoche.de/>

by smart villages and communities. In the mountain areas of Lombardy the AttivAree project strengthens people's sense of belonging by reinforcing natural heritage through art. It also works to refurbish hostels and promote availability in remote villages such as Lavenone<sup>11</sup>. Travel agencies should be encouraged to work in partnership with geographically remote entrepreneurs and social enterprises promoting sustainable cultural tourism.

- 3.10 Disseminating and depicting cultural information using digital technology will, creatively, narrow a divide that was increasing between town and country, between young and older generations. Projects such as YourAlps<sup>12</sup> which reconnect youth and mountain heritage are welcomed. There are many emerging examples of innovative ways of portraying cultural traditions, such as the artistic project used in Aasted in Denmark and the village of Pfyn in Switzerland. These are projects resulting from local initiatives and identified local needs, use participative processes, which are themselves part of Europe's cultural tradition. Public and private resources should be available at European, state and regional levels to accelerate investment in similar initiatives.
- 3.11 New digital tools are also increasingly being used, for example in places of past and present conflict, to recreate important historical sites destroyed by abandonment or warfare. Technology is used to read headstones and fading manuscripts more accurately<sup>13</sup>. We welcome the Commission's plans for a "Digital4Culture Strategy" and expect this to consider any relevant rural aspects. The MEMOLA Project, for example, uses 3D scans of old irrigation areas to educate new irrigation processes.
- 3.12 More research is needed to understand how cultural activity matters to people and what health benefits are derived for all ages but especially for those with physical or mental illnesses<sup>14</sup>, while existing Erasmus Plus Programmes, such as the TEMA Masters, currently fund good research opportunities. The high-level Horizon 2020 EYCH conference on "Innovation and Cultural Heritage"<sup>15</sup> called for further efforts to develop research work to identify priorities and best practice in promoting cultural activities.
- 3.13 Initiatives supported by charitable and philanthropic foundations have contributed significantly to preserving natural sites and supporting activities, often through social enterprises, which boost the development of rural areas in a sustainable manner. The Finnish Cultural Foundation supports research into measures to prevent agricultural residues affecting water quality in the Baltic Sea. It works with farmers believing that more biodiversity equals a richer landscape. Other charitable initiatives are welcome, such as the Wales Schools' Cultural Heritage Trust which promotes inter-school cultural competitions involving young people in defining and

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11 <http://attivaree.fondazionecripio.it/it/news/news-attivaree-al-miart-con-airbnb-per-la-presentazione-delle-installazioni-e-degli-artisti-che-hanno-collaborato-al-progetto-di-valorizzazione-dei-borghi-di-italian-villages.html>AttivAree project in the Lombardy region

12 <http://www.alpine-space.eu/projects/youralps/en/home>

13 Project of Andrew Skerrett presented in the Hearing of the study group on 24 July 2018 in Cardiff.

14 Innovate Trust –Positive outcomes from field days horticulture project.

15 [https://ec.europa.eu/info/events/innovation-and-cultural-heritage-2018-mar-20\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/events/innovation-and-cultural-heritage-2018-mar-20_en)



delivering their choice of cultural activity<sup>16</sup>. One example, which enables young people to explore their cultural heritage, is the school in Piscu<sup>17</sup>, Romania, which is both a specialist heritage school and an organiser of workshops and conferences. The EESC, itself welcomed pupils from schools across Europe in March 2018 to discuss their cultural priorities under the "Your Europe, Your Say!" banner<sup>18</sup>. They concluded, *"I want to live in a Europe that gives valour to and protects all forms of culture... we want to avoid elitism and popularise culture...but also have the opportunity to create our own..."*. In Giffoni, a village in southern Italy, some 300 students prepared films and videos to promote their region.

- 3.14 Investment by public funders should be "rural proofed" so that when any new funding streams are designed, these include support for the ongoing contribution of farming families and employees, and for non-governmental organisations involving individual creators, as well as folk groups, Local Action Groups, and care farms. This should take full account of the measures needed to enhance the infrastructure of rural heritage.
- 3.15 There is scope and demand from cultural tourists for greater thematic and geographical links. Joint branding and joined-up access projects are welcome. Village and small town agricultural shows and national events such as the Royal Welsh at Builth Wells<sup>19</sup>, which attracts some 240 000 visitors, and the Hay on Wye literary festival which brings an estimated £21m into a small rural area, are significant economic and social contributors. Farm open days, fairs, cultural festivals, such as the Llangollen International Eisteddfod, concerts, walking processions, such as the one in Veurne in Belgium, narrow gauge steam train railways, Nordic walking and traditional dance troupes, all contribute immensely to maintaining and promoting rural cultural heritage. The contribution of volunteers at these events, over many generations, is itself, a significant part of our cultural legacy. The work of the European Volunteer Centre and national and regional voluntary organisations in promoting quality cultural volunteering is applauded and they are encouraged to continue their valuable efforts, including providing health and safety training to ensure safe and enjoyable experiences for volunteers and tourists alike.
- 3.16 However, there is an increasing shortage of skilled artisans to transfer knowledge and train a new generation in ways to protect and develop this diverse heritage. The JEMA initiative<sup>20</sup> which originated in France, regularly promotes the work of craftspeople and the need to train new generations. Addressing this need is a good opportunity for intergenerational bonding through, and for, cultural purposes. More practical training and recognition of acquired skills are essential within existing EU and national/regional programmes, concentrating, not only on existing craft and environmental skills, but also on mentoring, developing new techniques and cultural business entrepreneurship. Support is required for artists and others to work with local rural and urban schools, inclusively developing cultural ideas across generations and between ethnic groups.

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16 [https://jamesprotheroe.wordpress.com/Darren Park Primary School, Ferndale](https://jamesprotheroe.wordpress.com/Darren_Park_Primary_School,_Ferndale).

17 <http://piscu.ro/piscu-school/#>

18 <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/civil-society-citizens-participation/your-europe-your-say>

19 <http://www.rwas.wales/royal-welsh-show/>

20 Journées Européennes des Métiers d'Art <https://www.journeesdesmetiersdart.fr/>

3.17 Rural cultural heritage is also about participative democracy. There is a strong European tradition of communal solidarity and of tackling isolation and disadvantage through community activities, many of which are based on culture. Building local sustainable leadership and delivering local priorities through community-led local development (CLLD) and the Leader method adds to a legacy of organised civil groups and movements. Social and cultural activities help bind people together in geographical areas with sparse public and private services. A tradition of voluntary sector intervention, sometimes as a deliverer of last resort, sustains sensitive, vulnerable landscapes of human survival. Public support for such activities is vital.

Brussels, 19 September 2018

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President of the European Economic and Social Committee

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