

ESIRA – ENHANCING SOCIAL INNOVATION IN RURAL AREAS

TRAINING MODULES

Module 4. Community Strengthening in Rural Areas



ESIRA – ENHANCING SOCIAL INNOVATION IN RURAL AREAS

Horizon Europe Grant agreement: 101136253

Credits

Authors:

Iván del Caz, Beatriz Izquierdo (University of Burgos), Sonia Marcos (University of Burgos), M^a Elena Nogueira (University of Burgos) & María Pineda (University of Burgos).

Acknowledgements:

Experts from the University of Burgos, Oxígeno Foundation and SODEBUR have contributed to the development of these materials in different ways: reviewing their content and structure, educational design and support in the adaptation of the resources to the needs of the target groups. The authors would like to thank the following individuals for their constructive and valuable contributions: Juanjo Asensio, Sara Azcona, Jose Luis Foradada, Virginia Fuentes, Javier Hoyuelos, Beatriz Izquierdo, Luis Marcos, M^a Elena Nogueira & Ángel Pérez.

2026

Burgos (Spain)



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Module 4. Community Strengthening in Rural Areas

Objective

This training module is an educational resource created as part of the ESIRA train-the-trainers programme, which forms part of Deliverable 5.2. Training modules, included in WP5 – Community-led innovation spaces and pilot social economy initiatives. The main objective of the train-the-trainers programme is to capacity build and to strengthen the skills of Multi-Actor Platform (MAP) facilitators and rural actors to identify, support and ensure the sustainability of social economy initiatives and develop community networks in the rural territory.

The main objective of the Training Module 4 is to provide theoretical and practical knowledge and skills to training facilitators and rural actors in the areas of examining alternative approaches for strengthening community structures in rural areas, with a specific focus on the concepts, practices, and enabling conditions that support socially meaningful innovation and social inclusion. The training material provides a conceptual and analytical foundation to guide project activities related to community empowerment, territorial knowledge, and rural social innovation.

Structure

This training module is structured to provide a comprehensive understanding of community-centred approaches to social innovation in rural areas. It begins with an introduction to the definition and practical application of key concepts, such as capacity building, community strengthening, and territorial knowledge, framing them within the context of increasing individualisation and the growing fragility of rural areas, which call for community-based action to prevent social exclusion and foster social cohesion. The second section focuses on the specific features of social innovation in rural contexts and its relationship with community-led initiatives, with particular attention to vulnerable groups at higher risk of social exclusion in rural territories. The third section examines the factors that enable or hinder community strengthening and rural socialisation processes, identifying structural, social, and institutional dynamics that shape collective action. Finally, the module concludes with a summary of the main findings and key insights, offering guidance for advancing socially meaningful innovation and reinforcing inclusive development pathways in rural communities.

The content of this training module is complemented by the following materials in Deliverable 5.3 “Training Modules Updated”:

- **ESIRA Guide for supporting innovative social economy initiatives.**
- **Practical Tools 4.1, 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4 (Annex).**

1.1 The search for community in an increasingly individualistic society

The current society, particularly in developed countries, has undergone a gradual and inevitable transformation towards individualisation. Over recent decades, numerous social changes (in organisation, intimate relationships, family structure, and socialisation methods) have led to social atomisation or fragmentation, resulting in a predominantly individualistic society (Richard-Schuster et al., 2009).

In a society where individualism and personal autonomy are extolled, the community is no longer sustained solely by tradition or obligation; instead, it becomes a choice and a functional necessity. It is sought for support, security, or meaning that the State or the traditional family no longer fully provide. We establish weaker, but more numerous, ties, which the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2003) called the "cloakroom community": something that is put on and taken off according to need. Faced with global uncertainty, people look to the community (local or virtual) for a space of shared identity and collective action that allows them to influence their environment and transcend individual loneliness. Communal nuclei still exist, functioning as emotional refuges and sources of solidarity, but they require a conscious and sustained effort for their maintenance.

This evolutionary trend towards individualisation is causing the disarticulation of communal ties in developed societies, which leads to a series of interconnected social problems: social fragmentation, disaffiliation, and social exclusion (Richard-Schuster et al., 2009).

- **Social Fragmentation:** This refers to the breaking of the social fabric that previously bound people together. Society breaks down into groups or individuals with few interdependent ties, making collective vision and action difficult.
- **Disaffiliation or Rootlessness:** This is the process of disengagement or loss of social ties and institutional protections that integrate the individual into society (such as stable employment, social security, or membership in a strong community). Sociologist Robert Castel (1997) used it to describe the fragility of people who are neither fully integrated nor totally excluded, but in a zone of vulnerability.
- **Social Exclusion:** This is the final and most serious result. Social exclusion is a concept that highlights the deprivation of access and rights affecting an individual or group, caused by a variety of factors (social, political, geographical, etc.), resulting in an inequality compared to the majority of the population (Escribano-Pizarro et al., 2020). This consequently results in the deprivation of full participation in the social, economic, political, and cultural spheres of society.

The complexity of the social problems generated by individualisation (fragmentation, disaffiliation, and exclusion) demands a pragmatic, context-specific community



intervention strategy. When facing any initiative or action project, it is preferable to adopt an operational approach. The truly important factor for guiding intervention is understanding the specific characteristics of the community one will be working with. This involves answering essential questions that reveal its internal perception and structure, such as:

- Identity: Do people recognise themselves as a community?
- Meaning: What implications or value does the concept of "being a community" hold for them?
- Representation and Power: Who are the voices that speak for or seek to represent the community?
- Social Inclusion: Are all voices represented, or are there excluded groups, and what are the reasons for that exclusion?

These are some of the questions that should guide and define the community strengthening of each local environment. Unlike the community of origin—which one cannot choose—the conception of community as choice implies that people mobilise all their resources and capacities (both local and global) to access the necessary means for social transformation. This perspective is not passive: it requires constant action and a vigilant commitment.

1.2 Groups at Risk of Vulnerability in Rural Areas

The rural population is highly exposed to processes of social exclusion and is even more vulnerable than the urban population. It is fundamental to understand that vulnerability in rural areas is deeply linked to depopulation, ageing, and the scarcity of services, housing, and a lack of youth employment and leisure, creating an environment of structural fragility. Vulnerability in these areas is not solely due to a lack of money, but to the deprivation of access to rights and services. This fragility is the starting point for identifying specific risks:

1.2.1 Migrants

The settlement of migrants in rural areas that are experiencing a demographic decline has gained greater relevance in recent years as a significant economic, social, and political issue, as well as an opportunity for development for local communities. In Spain, for example, the way in which different national groups plan their migration is clearly manifested in their residential configuration—that is, the type of household established by foreign-born immigrants (Camarero & Sampedro, 2019). There is a clear contrast in the residency pattern of immigrants in small municipalities: Romanian and Bulgarian citizens typically live in traditional family structures, while Moroccan men are characterised by living without a family nucleus or alone. Additionally, there is a significant proportion of women from Colombia and Ecuador who have married Spaniards.

Understanding the lived realities of integration and inclusion is essential. Interactions between the local and immigrant populations are often characterised by instrumentality and subordination. However, for rural areas suffering from demographic decline and a lack of labour, the successful integration of immigrants is crucial (Zahl-Thanem & Haugen, 2019). Despite the arrival of new residents, this movement does not always result in a long-term or permanent settlement but is characterised by a high degree of volatility (Camarero & Rivera, 2024).

Among the main problems surrounding migration are social prejudices: the greater the cultural difference between the immigrants and the receiving society, the higher the probability that the host society will perceive a cultural threat (Esses, 2021). Another outstanding issue is precarious employment: immigrants are perceived as the workforce to fill the jobs least desirable by the local population, given their poor working conditions (Sampedro, 2022).

1.2.2 Women

In the words of the same author, regarding the gender issue, a key element for the demographic sustainability of rural areas, inequalities persist, particularly in the labour ecosystem (affecting both native and migrant women). This can lead to female rootlessness and, consequently, a scarce participation of women in the social, family, cultural, and economic life of the villages:

"We have seen a transition from the major issues that initially dominated the women's question (their exclusion from the agricultural profession, access to employment, the issue of care and balancing work and family life) towards new ones that were previously absent from the rural agenda, such as gender violence or the opening up of rural communities to ethnic diversity or sexual orientation" (Sampedro, 2022, p. 2).

1.2.3 Young People

In the case of the situation of young people in rural areas—a group we could call 'late-young' between 25 and 34 years old, according to Camarero Rioja & Rivera Escribano (2024)—the individual efforts of this group to overcome challenges shared by their generation (the individualisation discussed at the beginning) are marked by a strong asymmetry, as success largely depends on the personal and class resources of each young person (Shucksmith, 2004).

The difficulties young people face when trying to settle in rural areas can be grouped into two main categories (Camarero & Rivera, 2024): on the one hand, structural obstacles—difficulty in accessing affordable housing. Ironically, in many of these rural settings, there is a process of gentrification or elitisation that raises costs; on the other hand, the failure to meet personal motivations makes it difficult for young people to create a relational environment (social circle).



When addressing community processes, another recurring difficulty is the participation of young people. In rural areas, young people often feel disconnected from community decisions, both due to the topics discussed and the lack of motivation and communication channels outside their circles and language. Allowing them to manage and take responsibility for online platforms, social networks, or digital tools in the region can create a more accessible and attractive participation channel for them. Similarly, creating virtual forums, online surveys, or consultation platforms are effective ways to allow young people to contribute their ideas and feel part of the process, even if they cannot physically attend meetings.

1.2.4 Older People

The older population is the most representative group among rural inhabitants and faces several challenges. Firstly, increased longevity implies changes related to health, the care associated with the ageing stage, housing, and ageism.

Secondly, the accessibility of specialised services (medical specialists, social services, aid organisations, etc.) is included in the structure of social inequality (Camarero, Cruz & Oliva, 2016). Inaccessibility takes on special relevance in the case of older people, as their reduced ability to travel by car exacerbates the problem. This translates into an additional burden for the supporting generation and for family groups who must assume or make up for these logistical deficiencies (Camarero, 2022).

This need for proximity also brings about other triggers, which, while occurring in specific episodes (such as widowhood or a health crisis), also happen through gradual transitions. In these transitional periods, the person gradually loses faculties, and the family slowly adapts, for example, by hosting the relative in the home for periods or rotating care among several members. This results in ageing also transforming the relationship between families and mobility. It is from these lines that new possibilities for ageing in the rural environment emerge (ageing in place, co-housing, etc.) (del Pino & Camarero, 2022).

However, for these new ways of life to succeed, it is crucial to address the specificities of rural ageing from a community perspective. The study by Ponce de León & Andrés (2017) suggests that rural ageing implies fewer resources and more isolation (with entrenched social stigmas), but also more active and supportive social relationships. Promoting active ageing through the community and older people's centres can prevent loneliness and delay dependency, which represents an economic benefit for the Administration.

Although this section has dealt with the main groups that may have greater visibility, other groups also experience various forms of exclusion with similar problems to those addressed. These include current or former inmates, people with addictions, those facing discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, race or ethnicity, as well as the long-term unemployed and people who are homeless. These groups are likely

statistically invisible because they are not captured by traditional statistics or studies (Escribano-Pizarro et al., 2019).

1.2.5 People with disabilities

The vulnerability of persons with disabilities in rural areas is exacerbated by a combination of geographical factors and a shortage of specialised resources, creating a double barrier to full inclusion.

Regarding physical and service barriers, rural life often lacks the necessary adaptations for autonomy and equal opportunities. This barrier manifests itself on two levels:

- **Infrastructure and physical environment:** There is a lack or insufficiency of accessible infrastructure, affecting basic elements such as public buildings, interurban and local transport, and the design of pavements and streets. This significantly limits mobility and autonomous social participation.
- **Specialised services:** There is a marked lack of specialised support services at the local level. Low population density does not justify the presence of essential resources such as specific therapies, adapted day centres, or local social and health support teams, forcing users and their families to rely on long journeys to urban centres (Quezada & Esteban, 2025).

Regarding barriers to labour market inclusion, the rural labour market is rigid, making it difficult for this group to find employment. The barrier is not only the lack of job offers, but also the lack of suitability.

Employment and Training: There is greater difficulty in accessing decent employment and adequate vocational training. This is due to the scarcity of job opportunities in general and, crucially, the lack of adaptation of jobs to specific needs, which perpetuates dependence on social assistance (Quezada & Esteban, 2025).

1.2.6 Ethnic Minorities

The integration of ethnic minorities in rural areas is marked by the persistence of historical mechanisms of exclusion that hinder their social and economic development. The exclusion of this group is particularly acute in the fundamental pillars of well-being:

- **Employment and precariousness:** High rates of unemployment or a high concentration of informal or precarious employment persist, hindering economic stability and social security contributions.
- **Access to Basic Resources:** They often face barriers in accessing basic resources, including difficulties related to housing and situations of residential segregation in rural areas themselves (Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030, 2023).

On the other hand, these groups also face barriers related to stigmatisation and prejudice. The social dynamics of villages, which are often small and closed, can exacerbate integration problems, with a greater risk of discrimination and social stigmatisation based



on cultural and historical prejudices. This mistrust or rejection limits their full participation and integration into community life (school, social, associations), creating a vicious circle of isolation and marginalisation (Fundación Secretariado Gitano, 2022).

1.3 Techniques for Community Leadership and Strategies for Citizen Participation

The Industrial Revolution came about due to the improvement and efficiency of goods production and the generation of jobs, which caused the massive rural-to-urban exodus. The 21st century is leaving the importance of production and factories in the background, giving way to a future of work led by knowledge, science, innovation, information, new ways of relating to one another, and data analysis.

The European Union (EU) has about 30% of its population, some 137 million inhabitants, living in its rural areas, which span 83% of its territory. This imbalance between territory and population is also due to a similar process of rural exodus, but the EU has a common and defined vision of how to improve the situation of these territories.

Specifically, by 2040, the EU aims to achieve stronger, better-connected, more prosperous, and more resilient rural communities. To this end, particular attention is paid to aspects such as strengthening transport networks, educational and healthcare services, and job opportunities; as well as empowering the population and developing social innovation dynamics.

The technological leap we are experiencing is transforming our reality, creating jobs that did not exist 15 years ago and discovering new lines of development that will require professionals and professions whose functions we do not yet know. The primary sector must open itself to new ways of approaching agriculture and livestock farming, and have the capacity to innovate, just as it did in the 60s-80s with the advent of agricultural machinery that facilitated fieldwork. The connectivity of our villages is essential and key to this rural revolution. We are one of the best-connected European countries, whether through fibre, 5G, or satellite; although there are still grey areas, and some villages still lack internet access, with satellite, you can practically connect from anywhere. Just as decades ago, water, electricity, and telephone were essential, today it is crucial to be connected to the internet.

This technological revolution means that decentralising work is now a reality, and the possibility of practising almost any profession from a village, no matter how small, is feasible. I know architects, creatives, physicists, engineers, programmers, writers, fashion designers, etc., who practice their profession from towns with fewer than 200 inhabitants.

We live in a reality that allows us to face the future with hope. We can be the protagonists of a new revolution, a rural revolution that changes the inertia of exodus to cities into a controlled and conscious exodus back to our villages. We need strategies that address the

demographic challenge and territorial balance from this perspective, enhance our rural environments, our villages, and medium-sized cities, and reduce the trend towards overpopulated cities.

It is in our hands, both for those living in cities and those of us living in villages, to generate new forms of relationship and dialogue between rural and urban areas, aimed at developing strategies and action plans that respond to this emergency.

This requires working from other approaches linked to people, enabling us to become aware and break paradigms that limit us creatively and culturally. Therefore, a facilitating leadership that fosters collaboration is a fundamental pillar for the development of sustainable initiatives in rural areas. Leadership does not only imply the ability to direct or coordinate, but also the ability to inspire, motivate, and mobilise the community towards common goals. In a rural context, where community relationships are closer and more personal, leadership has a special nuance: leaders must be trusted figures who can interpret the needs of the community, manage resources fairly, and promote inclusive participation.

There are various community leadership techniques that have proven effective in rural settings. One of them is facilitative leadership, which focuses on promoting cooperation among community members and acting as a bridge between different groups. This type of leadership is characterised by fostering dialogue, building consensus, and ensuring that all voices are heard. Instead of imposing solutions, the facilitative leader helps the community find its own answers, promoting co-creation and autonomy.

Another key approach is shared leadership. Instead of concentrating all the decision-making and execution power in one person or group, shared leadership involves distributing responsibilities among various community actors, giving each a share of leadership within the process and the project's development. This approach fosters a greater diversity of perspectives and ensures that decisions reflect the interests of all groups involved, from young people to the elderly, women, and vulnerable groups. This leadership model has been common for decades in our villages, but it has gradually been lost due to the spread of an increasingly dominant individualistic and competitive culture in our society. It is important to recover the wisdom of this type of community work, where the diversity of opinions and experiences enriches decision-making and facilitates conflict resolution by having common goals that benefit the village.

We have all heard at some point the term coined by physicist Edward Lorenz (1963), the "butterfly effect," which stems from the old Chinese proverb: "The flap of a butterfly's wings can be felt on the other side of the world," which this scientist explained mathematically.

In one way or another, everything is connected; nothing is isolated, and every action has positive or negative consequences on another person or another system. Let's break down the term "ecosystem" into the two words it comprises: "eco" and "system," and we



will better understand the need for balance and coexistence in order to have a future as a planet and one centred on people.

In 1935, English ecologist Tansley introduced the concept of "ecosystem," considering the complex interactions between the organisms forming the community and the flows of energy and materials that pass through it. In this way, he defined the ecosystem as a biological system made up of a community of living organisms and the physical environment in which they interact.

In other sources, we can find definitions like "a social, professional, or educational environment in which a group of people evolves" or "a complex set of interrelated elements belonging to a particular domain." We cannot separate the parts from the whole, just as we cannot separate human behaviour from the rest of living organisms and the physical environment in which we interact. What might seem obvious is something we have lost, whether consciously or unconsciously, in large cities and over-industrialised environments, where everything is only understood in terms of human relations, professional, educational, social, and economic, supposedly to develop society for a group of people. This one-directional view creates an unsustainable ecosystem imbalance. Studies like those from the Global Footprint Network assert that year after year, we exceed the capacity of Earth's ecosystems by more than 75%, overwhelming their ability to regenerate natural resources and support ecosystems; these are sufficiently alarming data for us to question and become aware of how we are living within a global and local ecosystem that is essentially a biological system made up of a community of living organisms (including humans) and the physical environment in which we interact.

Similarly, we cannot speak about urban environments without speaking about rural environments, and vice versa. We cannot isolate the urban world from the realities, challenges, and difficulties of the rural world. It has been proven that megacities with millions of inhabitants are not environmentally sustainable; they are black holes that absorb resources without maintaining an ecosystem balance. And if we speak socially, cities are the cradle of the greatest social inequalities, with the widest wage gap among their residents and the highest levels of social isolation.

If we truly want to transition to an economic and political model that places people and the planet at its core and serves them, this transition must go through the rural world, through territorial balance, and through new relationships of equality between urban and rural.

The first step is to move from thinking in isolated and individual terms to understanding that we live connected, and that all our actions have repercussions on other people and the planet.

As Gandhi said, "There is enough on Earth for everyone's needs, but not for everyone's greed," or, "Live simply so others may simply live."

The second step is recognising that we live in a community; no one lives in isolation. There is always contact with something, someone, a living being. If we want to develop our rural areas, we must know and recognise the local communities, respect and foster coexistence, and seek balance. You cannot come to a region and impose a vision of development without considering the receiving community, just as the village cannot be isolated or closed off to new residents. The attitude of listening from those arriving and the welcoming attitude from those receiving is key to building a strong community resilient to change.

We are part of a common unity, a community; our limitations, barriers, and fears acquired over the years through lived experiences, education, or culture hinder us from understanding that we are part of this common unity – our family, our village, our region, our territory... our planet.

It is essential to develop a region to understand that we must work together in unity, not in isolation, and with each one pursuing their own interests without considering the rest. In the long term, this lack of community vision leads to failure and self-destruction. To evolve, we must do so collectively; it cannot be done in isolation. Balance becomes essential for evolution.

Normally, when participatory processes are undertaken, they revolve around the general interest or common good, without considering particular or private interests. Just as mentioned how individual action affects the collective, collective actions also affect individuals. This leads to low citizen participation in these processes, and it is often the same people who participate, acting as spokespeople for the voices of everyone, the majority. Participatory processes must be based on a balance between the collective and the individual to work for the common good and also the private interests that contribute to the evolution towards a healthy ecosystem.

1.4 Tools, Organisation and Management of Rural Community Initiatives

To address the strategic challenges of our territories, we must transition toward a governance model that abandons old hierarchical structures and shifts toward participatory and horizontal models. For this, we need to encourage a more active citizenry in public matters and a more open and transparent administration, with shared values of participatory culture and co-responsibility for continuous improvement, creating shared and open co-creation processes that are built from the definition of participatory workshops to reach consensus on scope, needs, objectives, criteria, and context. There doesn't have to be a pre-defined model, and all stakeholders should be included in the process.

The process of transitioning to a more open and horizontal governance begins with active listening sessions in the territory and applying new governance trends so that reflections



on a paradigm shift emerge, where we must understand and transition from institutions that give orders to institutions that facilitate processes, conversations, and learning. We must move from hierarchical structures to collaboration ecosystems.

We must work on the trust crisis that our institutions have lost, and to do this, we need to build territories that bet on social innovation, the power of co-creation, and face the fear of making mistakes by moving to action. For all this, it is key to understand our environment, fostering effective conversations to enhance creativity, knowing our history and culture, and innovating to build a future together without leaving anyone behind.

The co-creation process of a participation model in the territory is organised into three areas that will allow us to increase the number of people and organisations involved and thereby improve the quality of participation:

a. 1. Capacity Building:

To improve participation and its quality, it is necessary to motivate learning in soft skills to empower citizens, open new paths for technical staff, and change entrenched dynamics of political representatives. Some development lines for information and training, among others, may include social skills, the rights and duties of citizens, deliberation and decision-making, project management, failure management, social innovation, and how to develop triple-bottom-line projects (social, environmental, and economic).

b. 2. Sociocommunity Strengthening:

Strengthening the spirit of community and pride in belonging are fundamental to motivating participation. Examples of how to achieve this strengthening can be through community projects that develop the value of common assets, create cross-sectional spaces for deliberation from diversity (gender, age, culture, territory, language, etc.), or design challenge programs for citizens to collectively co-create solutions and proposals. Promoting an active population through leisure, culture, activities, and more, integrating all views, needs, and expectations, will create an environment of opportunities and include a gender perspective.

c. 3. Territory Knowledge:

It is necessary to open doors to the knowledge of municipalities and territories. Therefore, we should create communication and awareness campaigns about spaces, projects, and experiences within the territory, highlighting the heritage, natural spaces, history, traditions, and art. We should generate community experiences that link territory knowledge with current issues and encourage participation in the cultural and social activities of the regions. At the same time, it is essential to raise awareness about the closest institutions, their structure, organisation, functions, limitations, and

competencies so that from this knowledge, we can generate better-informed participation spaces, prepared to develop projects in response to the territory's challenges

The development of a successful participatory ecosystem depends on occupying new spaces that have not yet been covered in the territory and recognising and enhancing existing projects. By doing this, we can merge and balance the particular interests of different groups with the general interest or common good of the region, which is essential for generating conversation spaces with new interlocutors and involving actors who had not previously seen participatory processes as a way to develop the territory, as well as their personal or professional projects.

The organisation and management of community initiatives in rural areas is a key process for strengthening the social fabric and revitalising the territory. The ability of rural communities to unite around common goals, design collaborative initiatives, and efficiently manage their own resources is fundamental to the success of any project. However, for these initiatives to be sustainable and effective in the long term, in addition to the three areas mentioned earlier, it is necessary to have participatory strategic planning. This methodology allows rural communities to clearly define their goals, prioritise actions, and establish a roadmap to achieve the expected results. The participatory approach ensures that all community members have a voice in the planning process, increasing the legitimacy of decisions and ensuring that proposed solutions are aligned with the real needs of the territory.

Democratic management of initiatives is another fundamental aspect. Instead of relying on external leaders or entities, rural communities must be able to organise themselves in a horizontal and democratic manner, where all members have the opportunity to participate in decision-making. This not only strengthens the inhabitants' commitment to the initiatives but also fosters greater transparency and shared responsibility in resource management.

We can also add online relationship-building tools to the processes of collaborative community building, which can facilitate this process, though always overcoming the large digital divide that exists in rural settings. The use of digital platforms and online communication tools can help coordinate the different actors involved in an initiative, especially when the community is geographically dispersed. These tools allow for virtual meetings, document sharing, and continuous monitoring of project progress. Additionally, digital platforms can be used to involve those who, due to time or distance, cannot participate in face-to-face meetings. An example of such platforms is *Rural Citizen* (<https://www.ruralcitizen.org/>).

In terms of organisation, it is crucial that community initiatives have a clear and well-defined structure. This implies having well-delineated roles and responsibilities for the different actors involved, as well as an effective system for coordinating and monitoring



activities. Creating specialised committees or working groups can be an effective strategy to divide tasks and ensure that every aspect of the project is managed efficiently.

Moreover, community initiatives must be developed in a flexible and adaptive manner. Rural communities are subject to constant changes, whether in economic, demographic, or environmental terms, so projects must be designed to adjust to these new realities without losing sight of their core objectives. Adaptive management allows initiatives to remain viable in the long term, adapting to the changing needs of the territory and proactively responding to emerging challenges.

Finally, it is important to highlight the significance of continuous evaluation in the management of rural community initiatives. Projects must be periodically evaluated to measure their impact and determine whether they are meeting the established goals. Evaluation not only allows for strategy adjustments, if necessary, but it also offers an opportunity to celebrate achievements and reinforce the community's commitment to the project.

Local, provincial, and national leaders who aim to develop community development strategies and collaborative innovation ecosystems must understand that we are entering an era of change, and therefore, leadership styles must change as well. The hierarchical models we have known, both at the institutional and corporate levels, are no longer valid.

In this new changing scenario, the organisations that can adapt and move from entities that issue orders to organisations that facilitate processes, conversations, bring positions closer, and learn, will be the ones that survive and succeed.

According to Laloux (2014), the **Teal model** represents an advanced stage in the evolution of human organisations. Laloux identifies five stages of organisational evolution, associated with colours, and Teal organisations represent the most advanced stage in this model and the aspirational model that organisations should adopt if they want to survive the economic model change, we are experiencing.

Teal organisations are organisational structures that operate with innovative principles and practices based on **self-management, wholeness, and an evolutionary purpose**. These organisations seek to create a more human and adaptive work environment, capable of responding to environmental changes with flexibility and resilience.

Self-management: Teal organisations do not rely on traditional hierarchies or command-and-control structures. Instead, they implement self-management models where teams are autonomous and responsible for their decisions and results. This fosters collaboration, creativity, and shared responsibility.

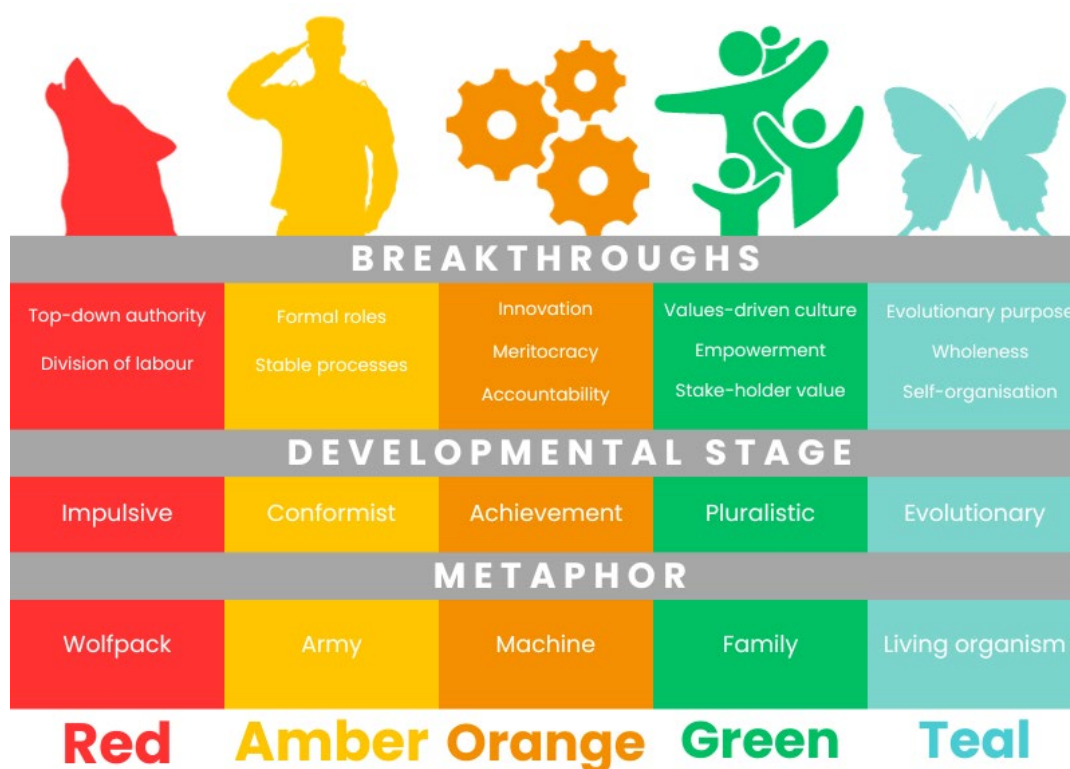
Wholeness: Teal organisations promote an environment where employees can be themselves, bringing their "whole self" to work. This involves creating a workplace culture

that values authenticity, emotional well-being, and personal development. It's about an environment where people can express their emotions and vulnerabilities without fear of reprisal.

Evolutionary Purpose: Teal organisations are guided by a purpose larger than the mere maximisation of profits. This **evolutionary purpose** is a dynamic guiding principle that can change and adapt as the organisation and its environment evolve. Employees align with this purpose, which motivates them and gives their work meaning.

Image.

Roles in the organisations.



Source: [Libertymind](http://libertymind.com).

In addition to these foundational elements, there are a series of additional characteristics of **Teal Organisations** that I want to highlight in order to understand the model and how it can be applied to governance in rural settings.

Decentralization: Decisions are made in a decentralized manner, trusting that those closest to the problems have the best perspective to resolve them.

Transparency: Information is openly shared within the organisation, fostering a culture of trust and accountability.

Flexibility and Adaptability: The structures and processes in Teal organisations are flexible, allowing them to quickly adapt to changes in the environment.



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Trust-based Relationships: Trust is a fundamental pillar, replacing strict controls and fostering a culture of mutual support and collaboration.

These types of organisations aim to create more human and adaptive environments, where people can work collaboratively and meaningfully, aligned with a common purpose. We need territories to bet on **social and relational innovation**, co-creation as a development model, to act, become the protagonists of change, and have the capacity to face the fear of the new.

1.5 Innovative and Cross-Sectional Community Actions

In rural areas, **innovative actions are essential** for revitalising communities and improving the quality of life of their inhabitants. However, for these actions to have a profound and lasting impact, they must be cross-sectional, meaning that they should address various dimensions of rural development simultaneously: economy, social cohesion, education, culture, environmental sustainability, and more. These actions should be designed not only to solve immediate problems but also to generate **structural changes** that strengthen the community fabric in the long term.

Innovative and cross-sectional actions allow rural communities to effectively tackle multiple challenges at once. For example, a sustainable rural tourism initiative can not only generate employment but also promote the preservation of the cultural and natural heritage of the region, strengthen the sense of local identity, and at the same time offer educational and training opportunities for young people. These types of **comprehensive projects** create synergies between different areas, maximizing the impact and sustainability of actions.

1.5.1 Rural Leaders

Leadership is defined as the process by which individuals, as part of a group, influence all members of the group to achieve a goal – that is, rural leaders are those members of the rural community who coordinate, represent the group, plan, direct activities, and evaluate group progress under the specific conditions of rural communities. Rural leaders can be traditional, emerging, or professional figures, selected or identified by their social prestige, technical knowledge, or organisational capacity, organising community activities, proposing and coordinating plans, representing the community, and channelling external resources when required (Meshram et al., 2022). They contribute to creating extensive social networks, organising community actions, and mobilising human, social, cultural, and economic capital in rural areas.

The potential to highlight the work of these rural leaders serves as an inspiring foundation for others and is essential for changing the narrative about rural areas, fostering a new way of perceiving our villages from the cities.

1.6 Evaluation and Indicators for Strengthening Rural Communities

Defining a series of impact indicators that allow us to measure and quantify the results generated by the creation and implementation of Rural Innovation ecosystems is essential.

Below are some indicators that can help measure the results and impacts achieved by projects that promote the strengthening of the community. This is not an exhaustive list, nor does it include measures of economic growth, but rather examples that may be useful when analysing and evaluating the impact of a project on the community in relation to: participation and job creation, support for entrepreneurship, promotion of cultural, leisure, and sports activities, and promotion of local heritage.

Table.

Participation and Job Creation Indicators.

Indicator	Measurement Methodology	Verification Sources
Number of direct and indirect beneficiaries of the project, disaggregated by gender	Implement a detailed registration system for all employees and participants in project activities and any other initiatives, disaggregated by gender.	Documentation of attendance at events, courses, and project activities; documentation of employment contracts; provision of equipment and service contracts associated with the project.
Number of jobs generated directly and indirectly by the project, disaggregated by gender	Implement a detailed registration system for all new jobs generated directly and indirectly by the project, disaggregated by gender.	Documentation of direct work contracts and service contracts.
Average remuneration for generated jobs, disaggregated by gender and professional categories	Implement a job registration system detailing salaries from which the average remuneration will be calculated, disaggregated by gender	Documentation of employment contracts.



	and professional category.	
Number of participants in training and capacity-building actions, disaggregated by gender	Implement a registration system for participants in training and capacity-building actions, disaggregated by gender.	Documentation of attendance at training actions, whether in-person or online, disaggregated by gender.
Number of participants in awareness-raising and dissemination actions, disaggregated by gender	Implement a registration system for participants in awareness-raising and dissemination actions, disaggregated by gender.	Documentation of participant attendance in awareness-raising and dissemination actions, disaggregated by gender.
Number of volunteers who participated in activities, disaggregated by gender	Implement a detailed registration system for all volunteers participating in project activities, disaggregated by gender.	Documentation of volunteer attendance at project events and activities, disaggregated by gender.
Number of municipalities benefiting from project activities	Implement a detailed registration system for all municipalities where project activities are conducted.	Documentation of activities carried out in each municipality.
Number of associations, cooperatives, and businesses established/registered/consolidated directly or indirectly by the project	Implement a monitoring and registration system for new associations, cooperatives, and businesses created or strengthened by the project, disaggregated by gender and sector.	Incorporation records, documentation of official registrations, and service contracts.

Number of tables, participation forums, panels, working groups, networks, etc., promoted	Implement a registration system for all tables, forums, panels, working groups, and networks created or promoted by the project.	Meeting minutes, attendance lists, and documentation of organised events.
(If applicable to the project) Number of visits (or visitors) to websites created by the project	Use web analytics tools to track and record the number of visits and visitors to project websites.	Web analysis reports and visit logs.

Table.

Support for Entrepreneurship and Building Innovative Rural Ecosystems

Indicator	Measurement Methodology	Verification Sources
Number of new or improved businesses and/or self-employed workers	Implement a detailed registration system for all new businesses and self-employed workers created or improved by the project.	Incorporation records of new businesses, documentation of self-employed registrations, and service contracts.
New or improved spaces for training and/or support for entrepreneurship	Implement a monitoring and photographic registration system for new or improved spaces dedicated to training and support for entrepreneurship.	Documentation of opening or improvement of spaces, lease or purchase contracts, activity records, before-and-after photos.
Others	As needed by the project	As needed by the project

Table.

Culture, Leisure, and Sports

Indicator	Measurement Methodology	Verification Sources
Actions and facilities associated with artistic creation and cultural projects	Implement a detailed registration system for all actions and facilities dedicated to artistic creation and cultural projects.	Documentation of cultural events, records of facility usage, contracts for cultural services.
Leisure actions and facilities	Implement a monitoring and registration system for all actions	Documentation of leisure events, records of leisure



	and facilities dedicated to leisure arising from the project.	facility usage, contracts for leisure services.
Others	As needed by the project	As needed by the project

Table.

Promotion of Local Heritage.

Indicator	Measurement Methodology	Verification Sources
Cultural heritage elements enhanced by the project's actions	Implement a detailed registration system for all cultural heritage elements enhanced through the project's actions.	Documentation of enhancement projects, activity reports, and visitor logs.
Restoration and improvement of cultural heritage elements	Implement a monitoring and registration system for all restoration and improvement actions conducted on cultural heritage elements.	Restoration documentation, progress reports, contracts for restoration services.
Others	As needed by the project	As needed by the project

1.7 Factors for Action to Promote and Strengthen Community in Rural Areas

The activation areas and social innovation levers we have seen in this module provide the framework for building the development strategy of the territory. However, we must consider a series of action factors for the correct application of that strategy in order to reactivate rural territories from a systemic perspective.

The reactivation of rural territories is a complex process that requires a series of strategies and integrated approaches. Below, I detail the key points I consider essential for achieving effective and sustainable reactivation:

1.7.1 Integrate Strategies

- **Respond to Rural Diversity:** Rural environments are diverse in terms of geography, culture, economy, and needs. Strategies must be customized for each community, considering their unique characteristics and specific potentials. Therefore, before any action in the territory, it is crucial to understand the strategies of local action groups, municipalities, provinces, etc., to integrate all strategies in a complementary manner and respond to various interests.
- **Specific Intervention and Broaden the Scope of Action:** Interventions should be specific and focused, addressing particular issues in each region while adapting the methodology to each context. At the same time, it is essential to expand the

scope of action to include a variety of sectors (agriculture, industry, technology, services, etc.) and actors (local governments, businesses, associations, etc.).

- **Create Positive Rural Narratives:** Changing the narrative around rural areas is key to generating opportunities. It is necessary to shift the negative perception and defeatism often associated with rural zones by creating and disseminating success stories, valuing the territory, recognising what already exists, and enhancing what works and unites the community. Promoting the benefits of rural life, such as quality of life, closeness to nature, and opportunities for innovation, is essential.

1.7.2 Multilevel Governance

- **Personal and Institutional Responsibilities (Local, National, and Transnational) for Social Inclusion in Rural Areas:** The OECD (2008) defines a rural area as one with a population density of less than 150 inhabitants per square kilometre. This low threshold is not merely a statistical metric; it's an indicator of the challenges faced by the State and society in ensuring a dignified life and meeting basic needs. This aligns with the focus of "development" as outlined in various global cultural reports, which insist that development shouldn't be understood simply as economic growth, but must be based on meeting basic needs so all people can lead a dignified life. Furthermore, extending this protection to future generations is paramount, making the development of socially sustainable initiatives essential.
- The fight against poverty and social exclusion has been a fundamental and constant priority in the social policies of EU Member States since the European Social Charter of 1961. This concern peaked at the Lisbon Summit (2000), culminating in the establishment of the European Social Agenda.
- **Global Frameworks and Local Implementation:** Just as community action ensures that rules translate into an increase in the effective freedom and quality of life of the most vulnerable individuals, culture becomes a driving force capable of stimulating the creation and development of protocols and global normative frameworks—similar to existing ones (such as human rights, children's rights, or the Kyoto Protocol). The objective is to provide useful and appropriate instruments that regulate the complex relationships between nations, societies, cultures, and communities, setting the rules of the game at the international level. These protocols and agreements define the universal values and dignity that must be protected. In turn, community action ensures that these abstract and global principles are materialised practically and concretely at the local level.
- **Political Leadership:** Political leadership is crucial for driving meaningful changes. Leaders must be committed to rural development and actively work to



promote policies and resources that benefit these areas. We need political representatives who look beyond their party affiliations, prioritising the development of their municipality or region. When we think of entrepreneurs, we often think of the business world, but there are new generations of politicians who genuinely serve the public interest. We need entrepreneurial mayors to reactivate our territories, capable of initiating innovative projects and taking calculated risks to break free from the immobilising dynamics present in many of our towns.

- **Transition from Hierarchical to Facilitating Leadership:** Throughout this discussion, I have frequently referred to facilitating leadership. Just as we need entrepreneurial mayors, we must promote leadership that empowers local communities by facilitating collaboration and participation rather than imposing top-down decisions.
- **Coordination Among All Public Administrations:** Whenever I engage with a territory, I often encounter overlapping municipal and territorial policies, duplicated efforts, repeated mistakes, or contradictory policies directed at the same citizens. If we consider that the autonomous community is of one political colour, the provincial government another, and the municipalities of different parties, we create the perfect storm for each entity to seek its share of prominence and power. This situation is entirely contrary to the interests of local residents and generates a culture of competition and confrontation that leads nowhere. I am reminded of a quote attributed to Gandhi: “An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind. What is obtained through violence can only be maintained through violence.” Part of the function of facilitating leadership is to reconcile positions and ensure that all levels of government (local, regional, national) work in a coordinated and efficient manner, avoiding duplications and leveraging synergies for the benefit of each territory.
- **Commitment, Dialogue, and Participation of Stakeholders:** It is fundamental to include all stakeholders (local communities, businesses, institutions, non-governmental organisations, local action groups, etc.) in the decision-making and action process, promoting open dialogue and active engagement. This is essential for developing a rural ecosystem that fosters innovation and development.
- **Facilitation, Motivation, and Animation:** In every region, there are individuals capable of uniting wills, and it is essential to identify and involve them, as they are best equipped to motivate, unite, and encourage the local population, helping to identify resources and potentials while fostering an entrepreneurial spirit.

1.7.3 Territorial Cooperation

- **The Call for Community Action:** Despite numerous reports and plans diagnosing this situation, the desired change is not materialising due to a lack of political will and definition. This paralysis forces civil society to take on the task of ensuring continued residence in the villages. The most frustrating aspect is that

the solution does not require inventing new policies, but rather applying existing ones in a differentiated, territorial, and integrative way, abandoning the current uniform and universalist approach that doesn't work in rural settings (Escribano-Pizarro et al., 2020). Community action and socio-educational intervention are strategies designed to operate at the local and daily-life level. Their main goal is to accompany specific individuals in their empowerment processes (both personal and collective) to contribute to a substantive and significant improvement in their quality of life. Community action operates at the micro-level (local and daily), seeking the empowerment of concrete individuals to improve their quality of life.

- **Encourage Cooperation Among Territories and Actors:** Fostering collaboration among different provinces and diverse actors, both sectorally and territorially, increases development possibilities, innovation, scalability of projects, and replicability of successful initiatives. Additionally, promoting the formation of associations and alliances that drive social innovation enables creative solutions to recurring local problems through community collaboration and inter-territorial partnerships. This also facilitates access to relevant and up-to-date information and promotes the exchange of knowledge and best practices among rural communities and other involved actors.
- **Create Rural-Urban Alliances:** The dialogue and relationship between the rural and urban worlds, especially between medium and large cities and villages, needs to change. Although we sometimes hesitate to acknowledge it, the perception of superiority held by urban residents over those living in rural areas is still prevalent in the collective imagination. Changing this imbalance, engaging in equal dialogue, and establishing strategic alliances between rural and urban areas to leverage complementarities and create synergies is key to evolving towards a new economic and political model that places people and the planet at the centre of the equation.

Conclusion

To effectively reactivate rural territories, it is crucial to adopt a holistic approach that integrates diverse strategies and promotes collaboration and innovation. Multilevel governance, facilitation of processes, strengthening local capacities, territorial cooperation, and promoting social innovation are essential pillars of this process. By involving all stakeholders, fostering a sense of pride and belonging, and adapting to the specific needs and realities of each community, we can advance towards more prosperous and sustainable rural environments, shifting the inertia from urban exodus to a controlled rural migration.



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