

REBOUND

Fostering Resilience in Rural Communities

Project result 1

**European Report on the State of the Art on
Rural Resilience and Community well-being**

Country: EU level

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1 Introduction

The aim of the European Report on the state of the art on rural resilience and community well-being is to analyse innovative processes and patterns pertaining to rural resilience at a European level. This report summarises the first phase of the REBOUND project and will be the basis for the development to the training materials.

The present report contains the following elements:

- Analysis of bibliography and strategic and operational documents on rural resilience at EU level;
- Stakeholder Questionnaire analysis;
- Summary of the focus group with key stakeholders;
- Case studies on innovative models of community resilience development.

2 Analysis of bibliography and strategic and operational documents on rural resilience at EU level

2.1 Rural resilience in EU policies

The term “resilience” has only recently made its way into EU rural policies. For example, in the “Rural Inspiration Awards” organised by the European Network for Rural Development, the category of “Resilient Futures” has been present since 2021 – previously projects dealing with resilience were classified under other categories, such as “Rural Revitalisation” (2019) or “Climate Adaptation” (2020)¹. In the Rural Development Regulation (RDR) adopted in 2013, the term “resilience” or “resilient” is used only in the context of climate resilience, and mainly in connection with forestry production. Even in the next generation of EU funding, the RDR adopted in 2021 talks mainly about “resilient agriculture” or “resilient farms”. However, in the Action Plan developed in 2021 to implement the Long Term Vision of EU Rural Areas, one of the four building blocks is called “Resilient Rural Areas” and it covers activities aiming to make rural areas “more resilient to climate change, natural hazards and economic crises”².

In spite of this relatively recent emergence of the concept in EU policies, a considerable range of policy instruments can support activities and initiatives to build up community resilience in EU rural areas. The most important of these tools are:

- LEADER/CLLD
- the European Commission’s Smart Village initiative
- other measures of the EU funds operating in rural areas.

These tools will be discussed in the following sections.

¹ Source: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/rural-inspiration-awards/rural-inspiration-awards-2022-the-future-is-youth_en

² https://rural-vision.europa.eu/action-plan_en

2.2 LEADER/CLLD

LEADER (from the French “Liaison entre actions de développement de l’économie rurale”, i.e. “Links between activities for the development of rural areas”) is a territorial approach to rural development implemented in the EU from 1991. It was first introduced on a pilot basis as a “Community Initiative” financed directly by the European Commission, and since 2000 it was included in national or regional Rural Development Programmes financed by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).

LEADER was designed to address the lack of success of „mainstream” regional policies, which did not manage to close the gap between poorer areas and regions, very often rural, and their richer neighbours. The LEADER approach capitalises on the endogenous potential of rural areas and communities, which are able to generate innovation and growth when given the freedom to decide what they want to do in their area and how they would do it.

The initial phase of LEADER as a Community Initiative (1991-1999) has led to the establishment of certain principles which must be met in order for local development in rural areas to be successful. These are sometimes called the „seven principles” or „seven features” of LEADER and include:

- **The bottom-up approach:** the local community initiates the development activities in its area and takes key decisions such as the preparation of the local strategy or the selection and implementation of projects;
- **The area-based approach:** it is the local community that defines the area which they want to develop, and the public funding is directed to this area as a whole, and not to individual sectors of the economy;
- **The partnership approach:** local actors (from the public, private and NGO sectors) work together and jointly decide what is needed for their area, without any of them dominating the others; such partnerships are called Local Action Groups (LAGs);
- **Multi-sectoral integration:** the activities supported by LEADER have to be interrelated and form a coherent whole, capitalising on linkages between sectors to achieve synergies and potential multiplier effects;
- **Innovation:** local actors are encouraged to seek new solutions to the local challenges; this refers not only to the projects supported, but also to innovative methods of community involvement and animation;
- **Decentralisation of decision-making:** this was considered one of the key success factors of LEADER, by moving away from decisions being taken at the level of national or regional Managing Authorities and giving the full power to the local level;
- **Networking and cooperation:** it is important that local actors do not feel they are isolated with their problems, but are in contact with other areas across the EU who face similar challenges and with whom they can jointly explore possible solutions; this involves exchanges and learning from each other (networking) as well as implementing joint projects (cooperation)³.

The LEADER approach was generally recognised as an effective method of local development in rural areas, and evaluation results showed its high capacity to involve local actors and strengthen local

³ In a number of recent publications, the last two features, networking and cooperation, are presented as two separate principles, while the principle of „decentralised decision-making” sometimes disappears. This reflects, unfortunately, to some extent the reality of LEADER implementation across the EU, where with successive editions of the approach the autonomy of the local actors was often reduced due to administrative considerations.

economies⁴. From the year 2000 LEADER has been applied to all kinds of rural areas across the EU, and since 2007 it has become mandatory for all Rural Development Programmes. Thus, in all Member States and regions which use EAFRD funding, the Managing Authorities must allocate at least 5% of the rural development budget to LEADER. There are member states where 100% of rural areas are covered by LAGs.

One of the key characteristics of LEADER is the fact that once the local development strategy has been approved, the local partnership receives a budget (from EAFRD with national co-financing) and can support individual projects, implemented by public or private actors (or by the LAG itself). The selection of projects takes place at the level of the local partnership. Beneficiaries receive advice and guidance from the LAG on how to prepare project applications, and also during the implementation and reporting phase. Very often projects supported by LEADER are quite small and are implemented by beneficiaries that do not typically apply for mainstream EU funding schemes.

Following the successful application of territorial approaches to rural development, since 2007 the same method can also be applied to coastal areas and can be financed with the European Fisheries Fund (now called the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund, EMFAF). Since 2014 the range of EU Funds where CLLD could be implemented has been extended to cover also the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF) and, since 2021, also the Just Transition Fund (JTF). In these Funds, the approach is no longer called LEADER (since this acronym is specifically linked with “rural economies”), but “Community-Led Local Development” (CLLD). Since 2014 it is also possible to finance one local strategy with several EU Funds. The application of CLLD in EAFRD is mandatory and managing authorities have to allocate at least 5% of total rural development budget to LEADER. In other Funds CLLD is not mandatory and Managing Authorities can decide if they want to use this approach or not, and under which fund.

In the 2014-2020 period, there were 2830 LAGs in rural areas, of which 2206 were funded exclusively by the EAFRD and the remaining 624 were multifunded⁵. At the time of writing (December 2022), the selection of LAGs in rural development programmes for 2021-2027 has not started yet in most member states.

2.3 Smart Villages

Smart Villages in the EU started from high-level policy discussions. Following an initiative by some members of the European Parliament, three European Commissioners (for Agriculture, Regional Policy, and Mobility and Transport) launched the “EU Action for Smart Villages” in 2017. However, many rural communities have applied innovative solutions to specific challenges they were facing for a long time, long before the term “Smart Village” became popular.

According to a working definition developed in 2019, “Smart Villages are communities in rural areas that use innovative solutions to improve their resilience, building on local strengths and opportunities. They rely on a participatory approach to develop and implement their strategy to improve their economic, social and/or environmental conditions, in particular by mobilising solutions offered by digital technologies. Smart Villages benefit from cooperation and alliances with other communities and actors in rural and urban areas. The initiation and the implementation of Smart

⁴ See for example the [Ex-post evaluation of the Community Initiative LEADER II \(2003\)](#)

⁵ Based on: <https://ldnet.eu/implementing-cohesion-policy-funds-through-multi-fund-clld/>

Village strategies may build on existing initiatives and can be funded by a variety of public and private sources”⁶.

This long definition shows that it is not easy to see if a given village can be classified as “Smart” or not. The use of digital tools – which is essential in the concept of “smart cities” – is not a decisive factor, although many Smart Villages rely on them. Among the topics often addressed by smart villages are the following:

- Digitisation of rural areas
- Innovation in rural services
- Renewable energy
- Environmental sustainability
- Urban-rural linkages
- Asset based value chains (agricultural and/or non-agricultural).⁷

In practice, Smart Villages are different from other rural policy tools mentioned in this report in that they don’t have a budget associated with them: it is up to managing authorities at national or regional level to find an appropriate funding mechanism for such initiatives. Many member states are planning to use LEADER/CLLD to support Smart Villages. For example in Poland, LEADER LAGs can provide small grants (a little over EUR 1000) to villages of their area interested in developing a Smart Village action plan. Later, projects contributing to these action plans will be able to apply for LEADER funding and will be prioritised in the selection process.

2.4 Other measures of the EU funds operating in rural areas

While LEADER/CLLD is generally recognised as the most important funding source for rural resilience, there are also other measures/priorities of EU funds which can be used to support rural communities in becoming more resilient. The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) envisages support for such activities as, for example:

- investments in broadband and flood protection infrastructure,
- diversifying farmers’ incomes into non-agricultural activities,
- support to producer organisations, producer groups and cooperation for innovative solutions along the food value chain,
- information, knowledge sharing and advisory services, especially targeting the protection of nature, environment and climate, including environmental education and awareness actions and the development of rural businesses and communities.

Also resources of the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund can be used occasionally by rural communities to finance, for example, infrastructural investments, business development, or support to facilitate employment of vulnerable groups.

However, the availability of these funding sources for rural communities depends on decisions of national and regional authorities for whom rural development is seldom considered a priority. The main target of EAFRD funding remains support to agricultural producers and their organisations, while ERDF and ESF funding is very often concentrated in big cities and on large-scale projects, for efficiency reasons or as a result of political power play. Thus, rural communities often struggle to find

⁶ See: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/smart-and-competitive-rural-areas/smart-villages/smart-villages-portal_en

⁷ https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/tg_smart-villages_scoping-paper_draft.pdf

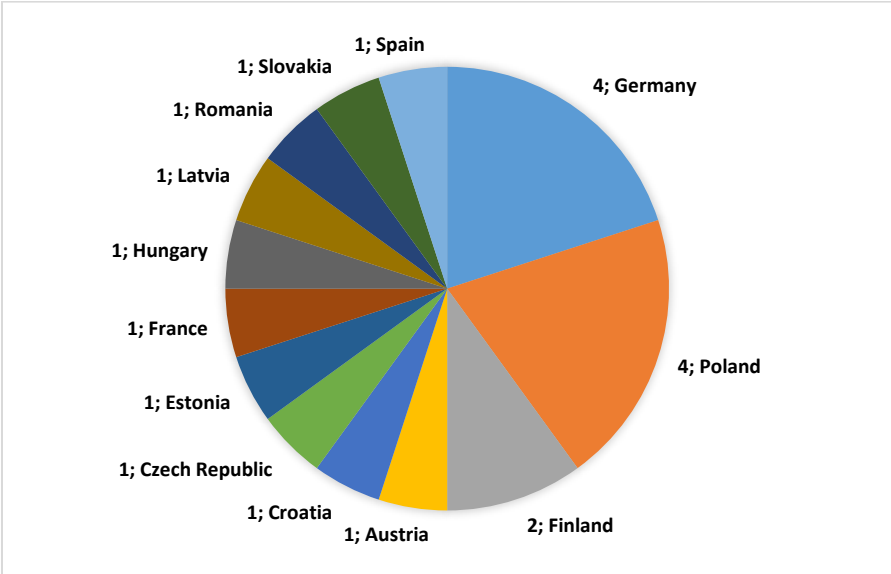
funding sources that would be adapted to their needs. This is reflected in many responses of the stakeholder survey presented below.

3 Stakeholder Questionnaire Analysis

3.1 Profile of the respondents

To complement national surveys carried out in Ireland, Portugal and Slovenia, twenty stakeholders from 13 countries across Europe answered the EU-level survey on “*rural community resilience*”. On this basis, **the aim of collecting views from a broad range of national contexts and professional backgrounds was achieved to a satisfactory extent**. Figure one below shows the country of residence of all 20 respondents.

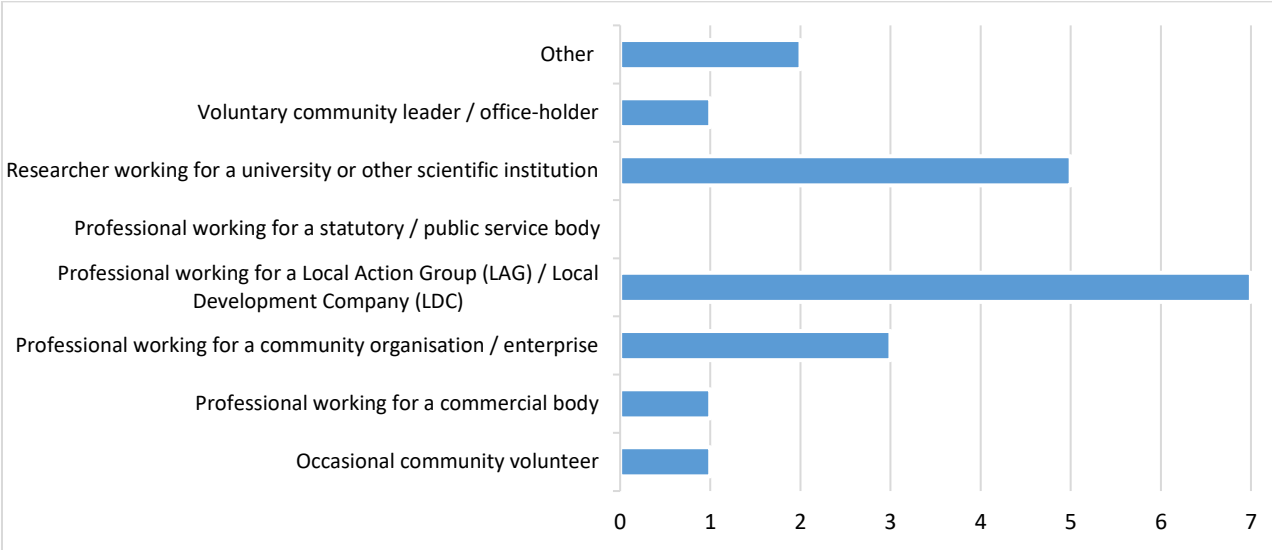
Figure 1 Countries in which respondents are based at the time of the survey



Source: own diagram (Original question in the survey: In what county are you based?)

As Figure 2 below shows, most of the respondents work in a local action group or local development company (n=7). Other relevant groups are research and scientific institutions (n=5) as well as community organisations and enterprises (n=2). Only two respondents describe themselves as community volunteers, which indicates a **clear professional perspective of the answers delivered in this European level survey**.

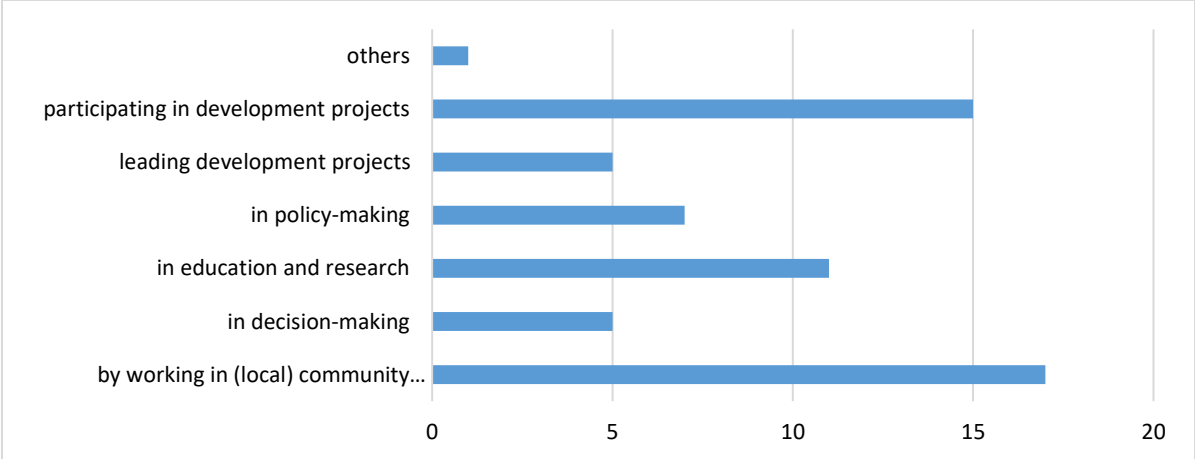
Figure 2 Main role of the respondents



Source: own diagram (Original question in the survey: Which of the following best describes your role?)

For the great majority of persons surveyed, “rural community resilience” is either a core element of what they do at work (n=9) or is on their agenda to some extent (n=8). Respondents generally deal with the concept of resilience in the context of leading (n=5) and participating in (n=15) development projects, as well by means of direct collaboration with community groups and initiatives (n=17). Therefore, **respondents have a predominantly practical link to the topic of “rural community resilience”**. To a minor extent, surveyed persons relate to the topic against the backdrop of education and research (n=11) as well as policymaking (n=7) and decision-making (n=5). The following Figure 3 presents the above-mentioned findings.

Figure 3 Ways for coming across the issues of rural community resilience



Source: own diagram (Original question in the survey: Does the issue of ‘rural community resilience’ feature in your work or voluntary activity?)

3.2 Rural resilience in practice

3.2.1 Understanding of rural community resilience in practice

The respondents’ understanding of the term “resilience / rural resilience” mainly subdivides into three categories or types, which are defined based on qualitative text analysis.

1. Community capacity to change and to adapt (n=7)

This understanding of “rural community resilience” focuses on the influence of external threats and challenges affecting the area. A focus on a “*changing world*”, “*changing circumstances*”, the “*changing natural-cultural-social-economic environment*”, or on “*crises*” frames the influence of external processes of change that many communities currently face in rural environments. Desirably, communities possess the ability to “*adapt*” or “*react*” to these changes in a “*sustainable way*” or “*remain stable with a good quality of life for residents*”.

2. Community capacity to cope, withstand and resist (n=5)

This understanding of “rural community resilience” is a little less dynamic in its conceptualisation and focusses mainly on the “*stability*” and “*robustness*” of rural communities. The shared perspective of this understanding is to “*withstand*”, “*prepare*” or “*cope*” with “*difficult/risky/crisis situations*” and “*preserve a long-lasting character*” of the community. This robustness leads to the maintenance of the “*long-term liveliness*”, “*sustainability*”, and “*strength*” of communities.

3. Community capacity to shape and enable change (n=3)

This last common understanding of “rural community resilience” emphasises the capacity of rural communities to “*enable community members*” to influence processes of change according to their own will. This is an “*internal ability*” of communities, which “*use future challenges to transform rural areas into smart regions*”.

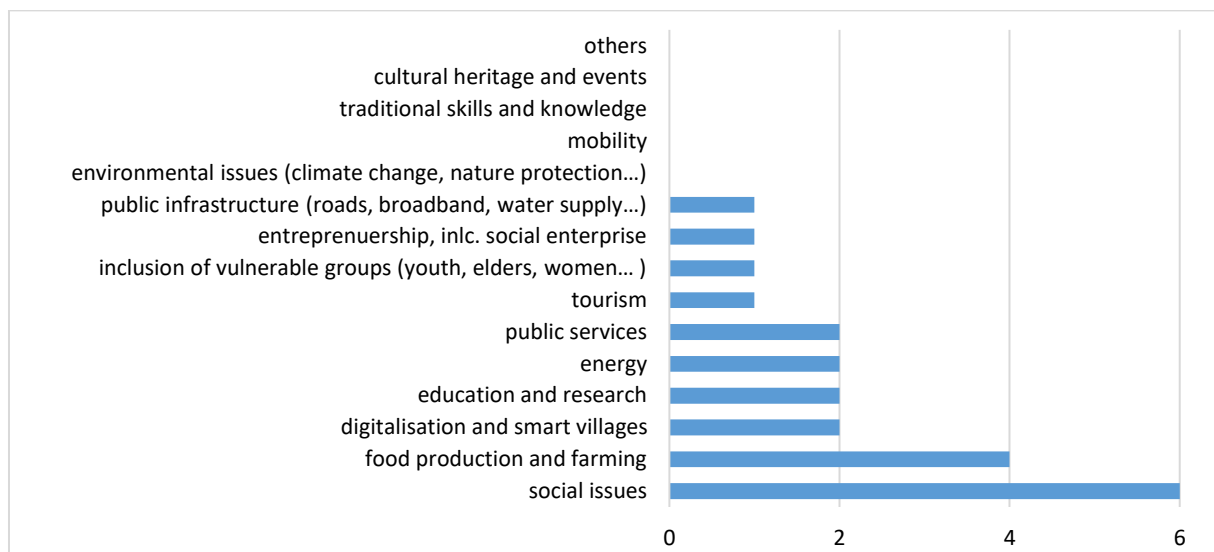
4. Others (n=5)

Other responses emphasised specific aspects related to “rural community resilience” like for example a “*feeling of belonging and well-being*”, their “*viability*”, “*active engagement*” or even “*participative approaches*”. In addition, the abilities “*to reflect on*” and “*shape challenges collectively*” as well as working together towards “*the common good*” are mentioned in the survey.

3.2.2 Projects, topics and examples of rural community resilience

Regarding the context and the topics of projects related to community resilience that the respondents highlighted in the survey, the prevalence of social (n=6) issues as well as food production (n=5) is notable in Figure 4 presented below. Moreover, topics like digitalisation, education and research, energy and public services (all n=2) were named repeatedly.

Figure 4 Topics of projects related to rural community resilience



Source: own diagram (Original question in the survey: In what kinds of projects and in what context or field has 'rural community resilience' featured?)

Most of the referenced projects are to some extent embedded in an EU-funding background. LEADER/CLLD is the most frequent answer (n=5). Horizon2020 (n=2), the ESF (n=2), the GAP (n=1) or INTERREG (n=1) are also mentioned.

Referenced projects cover a significantly wide thematic range. However, most of them involve the production of public goods and services (food production, employment, rural services in health, education or village stores, green energy, risk prevention, gardening, care services etc.), and have in common also the explicit local anchoring of their production and delivery (local/regional providers, cooperatives and local shared ownership, cooperation among community members and actors). The projects contribution to increased community resilience is often related to a **higher degree of independence or preparedness achieved**, as well as to a **higher level of awareness, engagement and self-organising of citizens in collective affairs and community spirit**. Some project examples below illustrate these findings.

Example 1 - Digital rural guides in Germany

Smart villages not only focus on technological development, apps and digital solutions for village life. They can also promote modern "caring communities", where everybody enjoys analogue and digital participation, regardless of age, social background, lifestyle or beliefs. Digitalisation can pick up the interests of new target-groups in village and rural development and motivate them to become new community leaders and development facilitators. Participation, self-design and organisation as well as support from outside are relevant success factors for this project.

Example 2 - Neighbourhood Cuisine in Romania

The "Neighbourhood Cuisine" project, initiated by the Saschiz Women's Neighbourhood Association through the Local Action Group (LAG) Dealurile Târnavelor (Tarnavelor Hills), was funded by the EAFRD. It proved to be a visionary project due to its emergency response in the period generated by the Coronavirus pandemic. The demand and number of orders turned out to be far above expectations. The association facilitated cooperation between actors in the field of agricultural production and

processing in the LAG territory and enabled them to market agri-food products through the creation of a short supply chain, with its own direct distribution network. Lastly, the project promoted gastronomic and agri-food events when the pandemic allowed.

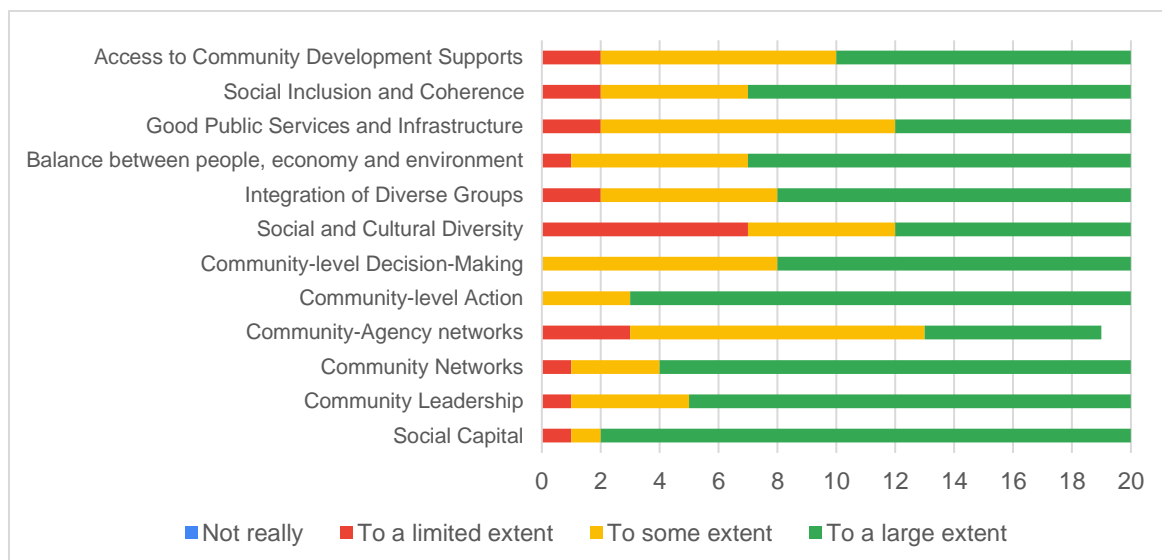
Example 3 – Local Economy & Coworking Hub in Latvia

A public coworking hub was established and led by civil society and voluntary groups providing a space to collaborate with local artisans enabling new forms of local economy to arise. Rural heritage and knowledge were transmitted and incorporated into modern practices, enabling the rediscovery of traditional artisanship in a new way and for innovative economic fields and markets. This heritage and knowledge are specific to the rural areas in question.

3.3 Factors of resilience

The REBOUND survey also included a set of questions to help identify the key factors that determine resilience (e.g. capacity factors) and help define the temporal and spatial scales for investigating resilience in practice. In figure five below, a set of four aspects stand out for receiving wide support as “contributing to rural community resilience”. According to respondents, social capital and community-level action are the two key factors contributing to rural community resilience. In addition, community leadership and networks seem to be highly relevant to build resilience. Social and cultural diversity as well as community-agency networks turned out to be less important.

Figure 5 Extent to which respondents perceive given factors contribute to rural community resilience



Source: own diagram (Original question in the survey: Please indicate the extent to which you think each of the following contributes to rural community resilience)

Respondents were also asked to choose the “most significant factors determining rural community resilience” from the presented key criteria in the preceding question. Figure 6 shows the clear consensus among respondents highlighting social capital as the most significant factor. Community networks and leadership follow as the next most relevant criteria. In slight contradiction to the answers illustrated in Figure 5 above, respondents also remark on the aspect of “integrating diverse groups” as relevant.

Figure 6 Most significant factors promoting rural community resilience



Source: own diagram (Original question in the survey: Which of these factors (above) are most significant in promoting rural resilience?)

3.4 Barriers

3.4.1 Barriers and obstacles to rural community resilience

Respondents reacted to the open question on barriers to build rural community resilience indicating the following five thematic groups.

1. Deficient participation and communication (n=5)

Rural communities with poor participatory approaches, lacking spaces for interaction and participation, insufficient cooperation or a weak sense of belonging tend to be less resilient. A constant flow of information is necessary among local stakeholders to enable participation and active contributions to village life.

2. Lack of social capital and community leadership (n=5)

Low social capital, more visible as lack of community networks and weak leadership, is identified as a barrier for building strong rural community resilience. Mistrust among actors and the usurpation of the leadership roles in the search for and implementation of solutions are also named.

3. Negative mind-set or mentality (n=4)

Moreover, people's and community's negative attitudes and lack of hope in the future developments act as a strong hindrance to the building of rural community resilience. Old structures or old thinking or beliefs like conservatism and rooted egoism are common inhibiting factors.

4. Politicians, bureaucracy and decision making (n=4)

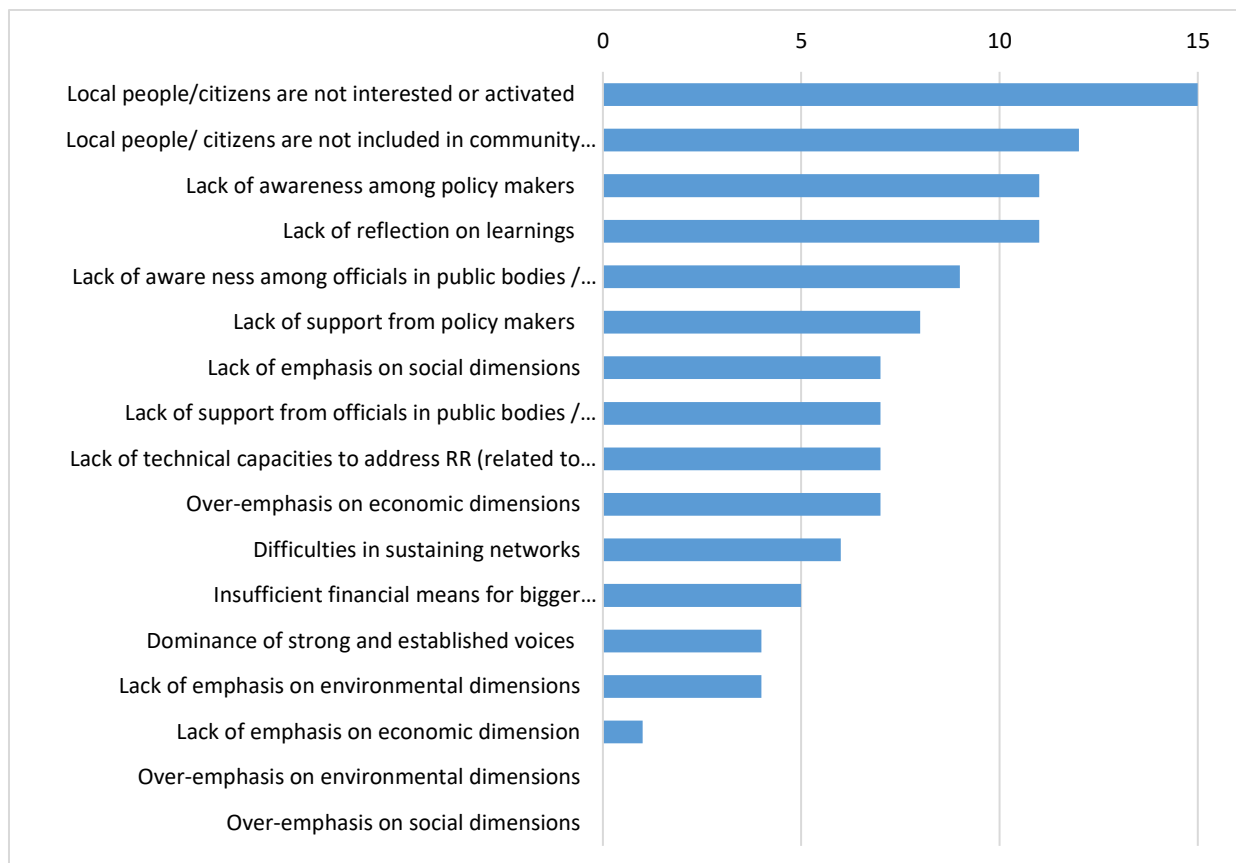
Politicians are criticised for being short-sighted, ignorant of foreseeable transformations and lacking respect for local initiatives and people. Administration and "planners" are seen as excessively bureaucratic and burdened with "toxic management rituals".

5. Others (n=7)

Finally, respondents brought up other topics and barriers. Some factors affecting rural communities are considered to undermine their resilience, such as aging and social isolation. Additionally, the lack of awareness and specific knowledge about threats and the imbalance between the economic, environmental and social dimensions of communities were named. Resisting instead of adapting to change is considered a mistake often made by communities.

A multiple-choice question showing a set of barriers or obstacles for developing rural community resilience offers the results shown in Figure 7. The lack of involvement and interest of citizens in their rural communities is the most frequently mentioned barrier (n=15), followed by the lack of inclusion of citizens in community activities that support rural community resilience (n=12). Furthermore, the role of policymakers, public bodies and politicians was highlighted as relevant to promote rural community resilience. Their lack of awareness and support are significant barriers to building stronger rural community resilience.

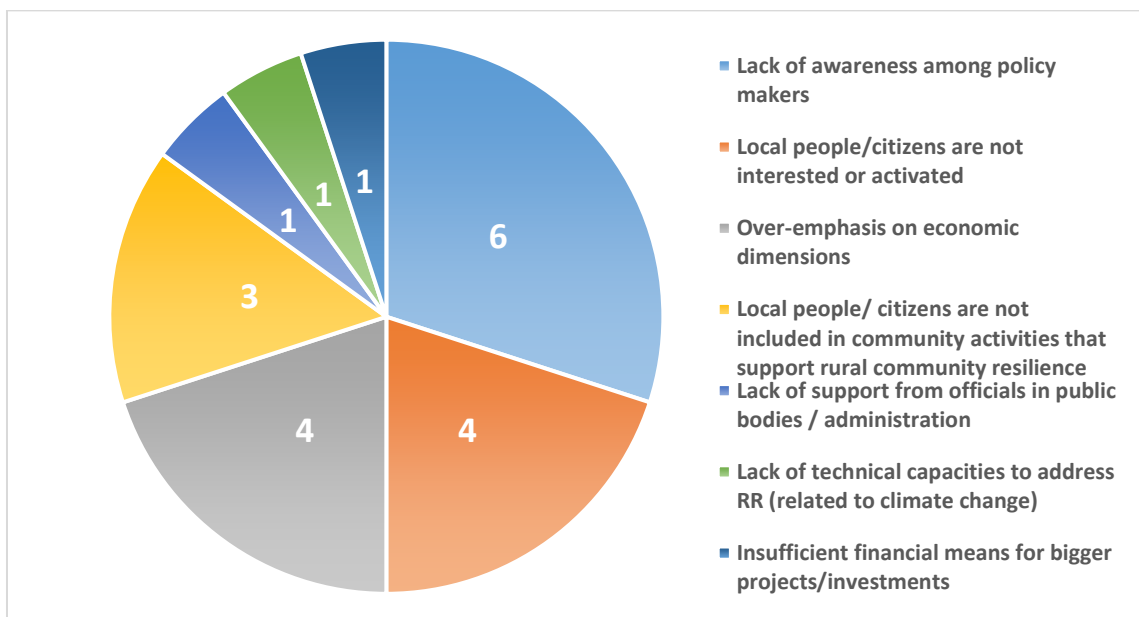
Figure 7 Typical barriers and obstacles to rural community resilience



Source: own diagram (Original question in the survey: Which of the following are the most significant barriers or obstacles to rural community resilience?)

When considering which factors were the most relevant as barriers or obstacles to rural community resilience, respondents highlighted again the lack of awareness of policymakers (n=6), the deficient activation and involvement of citizens in their communities (n=4), and the focus on economic growth and development as the ultimate objective of development projects (n=4). Figure 8 below shows further answers concerning the most significant barriers.

Figure 8 Most significant barriers to promoting rural community resilience



Source: own diagram (Original question in the survey: Of the factors you have identified (above), which one is the most challenging /difficult?)

3.4.2 Specific and general interventions needed to overcome challenges and barriers

1. Involving citizens and community organisations by means of animation and participation (n=9)

A clear consensus among respondents exists about the civic nature of promoting rural community resilience. For a stronger involvement of community members and groups more animation, dynamism and capacity building at the local level are needed. Civic voices need to be heard and their initiatives and organisations require stronger support and funding. One respondent proposed specific “programmes and approaches to involve locals” and build rural community resilience.

2. Effective policymaking for building rural community resilience (n=6)

Peripheral and depopulated rural areas in Europe are affected by a whole series of structural deficits and challenges (employment, poverty, education, healthcare etc.), which can only rarely be counteracted by citizen involvement and participation alone. Some respondents pointed out the need for ensuring a balanced allocation of EU funding and policy interventions in these areas. Rural proofing mechanisms could be part of the solution but need to be implemented at all levels of administration. Trust among actors between levels has to be built to successfully implement such an approach. In addition, politicians and intermediary organisations for local, rural and economic development must be part of this multi-level approach. A specific operationalisation of resilience in policy with strong links to implementation practice are a precondition for it to empower communities. If not, resilience runs a clear risk of becoming a hollow concept or catchword.

3. Awareness raising (n=2)

A change of mind-set can only be achieved by continuous awareness raising and strategic communication.

4. Growth paradigm in the economic sphere (n=2)

The transformation of the economy to take account of planetary concerns and overcome the classic growth paradigm were also mentioned.

Respondents were subsequently asked (in an open-ended question) to describe what needs to be done to overcome or address the other identified barriers and obstacles to rural community resilience (mentioned in Figure 7).

Relating to the issue of “unengaged communities” the respondents suggested investing in general awareness campaigns, e.g. focusing on grassroots initiatives that are already practising more resilient ways of developing the social, economic and ecological dimensions of their communities (e.g. common good, long-term visioning and planning). Development of education and training also qualify as valid approaches to raise awareness and enable communities to start building resilience.

A stronger culture of debate and dialogue needs to be promoted inside communities themselves. There also needs to be dialogue between communities, between communities and their local authorities and between all of these actors and policymakers at higher levels. This can happen by means of supporting and installing “*transnational, inter-territorial networks*” for cooperation and best practice exchange on the specific topic of building rural community resilience.

This can be undertaken through “*opening up more opportunities for financing projects of small local initiatives and organisations in rural areas from the EU level, not only local or national*”. Social innovation and strengthening the LEADER-CLLD approach “*needs more attention*”.

Finally, an important bottleneck to developing more resilient rural communities seems to be the weak support provided by local and regional administrations in which the rural communities are embedded. The respondents mention a lack of “*open-minded and flexible officials in public bodies*”. Awareness and agility to adapt is necessary for effective policy implementation and development support.

3.5 Rural resilience addressed in policymaking at different levels

Respondents were asked about how the topic of rural community resilience is being addressed in policymaking at a local, regional, national and European level.

3.5.1 At the local level

1. It is being addressed inadequately or insufficiently (n=6)

Many respondents note that currently there is an abundance of challenges and crises in processes that rural communities are confronting. Too many issues need to be solved in the short-term, which distracts local policy makers from an integrated and holistic approach. The weak focus on animation was also criticised.

2. Local leadership and multi-level problems (n=4)

The capacity of rural communities operating at a local level to attract attention and resources from the higher levels of the multi-level administrative and territorial settings is limited. A mismatch between local needs and support offered at higher levels occurs. A key aspect relies on capable and articulated local leadership which creates awareness at different levels.

3. LEADER-CLLD as good practice (n=2)

The LEADER programme and its capacity to build resilience at the local level was mentioned. Through this approach, communities can find own ways to implement their ideas and obtain funding for them.

3.5.2 At the regional level

1. It is being addressed to a limited extent (n=7)

Respondents had a predominantly negative assessment of resilience building overall at the regional level. One remarked, *“it is more a result of obliging EU policies”* than a deliberate approach by regional actors. Intrinsic motivation seems to be lacking.

2. Programming and urban focus at the regional level (n=5)

Fields of action with a regional scope like climate adaptation or landscape development play a role in regional development programmes and contribute to rural community resilience to some extent. However, some respondents highlighted that the regional decision-making level is based on and primarily focused on urban development. One respondent answered: *“urban-rural linkages are shaped by the outflow of the middle class from urban to rural areas”*. Lastly, regional administrative bodies usually tend to *“apply solutions that are designed without taking into account the local population and therefore not adapted to them and without involving the local population in their design and execution”*.

3. LEADER-CLLD as good practice (n=2)

The LEADER programme was also mentioned in the context of the regional level.

3.5.3 At a national level (e.g. EU member state)

1. It is being addressed weakly/poorly or without an integrated approach (n=12)

Respondents overwhelmingly evaluate the fostering of rural community resilience at the national policy level as weak, deficient or even non-existent. In some cases, it has a *“declarative nature”* and allows *“no integrated or synergetic interventions and cooperation among relevant managing authorities for the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF)”*. This is because *“public administration, particularly on a middle management level does not have to fear any consequences if they do not work or implement national or EU policies. There is a lack of measured milestones and consequences related to achieving planned results.”* Finally, respondents also added that there is a distance between the national and local level, producing a *“lack of sensitivity”* for local conditions and limited possibilities to adapt national policy *“often generating rejection”* of local actors and communities.

2. Exceptions (n=2)

Some policies support alternative energy production or smart solutions in rural areas. In addition, ongoing campaigns and events like the Rural Parliament or advertising campaigns to promote moving to the countryside were mentioned as good practices promoting resilience.

3.5.4 At a EU level

1. It is being addressed insufficiently (n=10)

Along the same lines as for the national level of policymaking, a majority of the respondents consider that at the EU level the promotion of rural community resilience is being insufficiently addressed. The *“level of pressure”* that could be applied in this case towards the member states is underutilised. Specifically, EU policy guidelines tend to be vague and remain a discursive practice with limited practical implications for rural or regional development.

2. LEADER-CLLD as good practice (n=2)

The LEADER programme was mentioned as a European initiative and policy building agenda with practical implications for building rural community resilience.

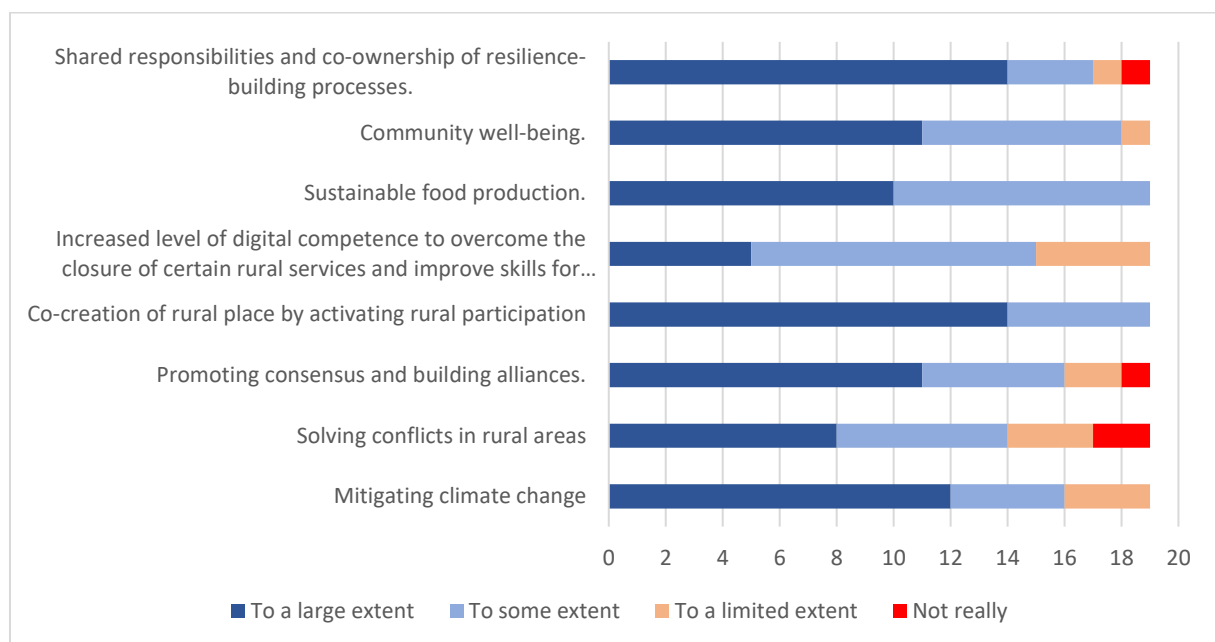
3.5.5 Examples of policymaking

1. LEADER-CLLD (n=3)
2. The National Strategic Rural Frameworks (n=3)
3. Regional and rural development programmes (n=2)
4. Natural hazard prevention plans at a regional level (n=2)
5. Rural pact and long-term vision for rural areas (n=1)
6. Guidelines for a progressive countryside, published by the "Digitale Landpioniere" (n=1)

3.6 Future factors

Respondents were also asked (in a multiple-choice question) to describe what factors would influence the resilience of rural communities in the future. The main results are shown in Figure 9 below.

Figure 9 Factors contributing to rural community resilience in the future



Source: own diagram (Original question in the survey: Looking to the future, please indicate the extent to which you think each of the following contributes to promoting rural community resilience?)

An open-ended question collected further factors influencing rural community resilience in the future. Building strategic partnerships and networking across the board of topics affecting communities will be relevant, according to respondents. Inclusion and participation of all members of the community in shaping their own development path was also mentioned. Lastly, becoming more independent of external resources and becoming more self-organised would be relevant.

3.7 Measuring rural resilience

Respondents proposed various approaches and indicators to measure rural community resilience. The following summary subdivides them in quantitative and qualitative indicators and approaches.

1. **More quantitatively measurable indicators and approaches**

- Population changes and demography
- Share of population at risk of poverty
- Air and water pollution indicators
- Availability/production of renewable/green energy
- Existence of a village strategy or action plan
- Number of people involved in community activities
- Social participation (number of associations, cooperatives, etc. and percentage of people participating)
- Economic development indicators

2. **More qualitatively measurable indicators and approaches**

- Active communication between communities and the local municipality
- Leadership and active group of citizens
- Capacity to apply project funding
- Level of heritage conservation (environmental and cultural)
- Level of helpfulness in crises
- Amount of time to change the administration
- Measuring social capital (civil engagement)
- Community's ability to adapt to changing circumstances
- Happiness and satisfaction index of people in rural areas

One respondent highlighted the need of structuring measurability according to a necessary time perspective (immediate, mid-term and long-term indicators). Another suggested developing own resilience model for rural community resilience.

3.8 Education and training

Respondents overwhelmingly evaluated the role of education and training as fundamental for the promotion of rural community resilience. Many have positively experienced how the capacity and knowledge of citizens and stakeholders developed in the context of capacity building, training and education in different thematic contexts: smart villages and digitalisation, renewable energy, transformational practices, cooperatives and employment, climate change, feminism and female empowerment as well as social innovations.

Education and training also help to build social capital among participants, often members of the same community. Discussing, learning new and inspiring examples also empowers people and communities who are beneficiaries of such education and training frameworks.

One respondent stressed the importance of educating people about ideals and value concepts such as an *“orientation towards the common good and long-term development, democratic and environmental values as well as social participation (how to organise collectively, how to make collective decisions, how to devise and design collective projects and how to seek resources and implement these collective projects)”*.

Asked specifically about capacity building and community development, respondents also confirmed the relevance of these factors for building stronger and more resilient rural communities. One person remarked interestingly *“it is a precondition. Disintegrated and unaware communities cannot be resilient”*. Capacity building enables community members and organisations to implement projects effectively, conferring the necessary knowledge and abilities. It also *“influences the behaviour of people and empowers them”* reinforcing the aspect of “self-confidence”. It also *“helps to build new networks and support development projects”*.

Other respondents identify a clear link between community or capacity building and the strengthening of social capital as a main driver for more resilient rural communities. Lastly, capacity building and community development contributes to more self-determination and self-efficacy of communities, allowing them to take over the reins *“of their own future and resilience”*.

3.9 Main findings

- **Twenty** respondents from **thirteen countries** in total. With a “[...] clear **professional** perspective [...]” and a “[...] predominantly **practical** link to the topic”.
- Three main understandings of resilience ranging from **resistance to transformability**.
- The project context in which resilience is addressed as a topic is often related to the achievement of a higher degree of **independence or preparedness**, as well as to a higher level of **awareness, engagement and self-organising** of citizens in collective affairs and community spirit.
- **Social capital** and **community-level action** are the two key factors contributing to rural community resilience. In addition, community leadership and networks seem to be highly relevant to build resilience. Social and cultural diversity as well as community-agency networks turned out to be less important.
- Main barriers to developing higher rural community resilience are **deficient participation and communication**, lack of social capital and community leadership, a negative mind-set or mentality as well as politicians, bureaucracy and decision making.
- Resilience building is **deficiently addressed at all levels of policy**. The **LEADER-CLLD** approach represents a **worthy exception** to the rule, even though it has its own flaws and challenges.
- Building **strategic partnerships and networking** across the board of topics affecting communities, inclusion and participation of all members of the community in shaping their own development path and becoming more independent of external resources and more self-organised are relevant factors for higher rural community resilience in the future.
- Respondents proposed various approaches and indicators to **measure** rural community resilience, subdivided in quantitative and qualitative categories. A time variable and the long-term nature of rural community resilience building should not be underestimated.
- Respondents overwhelmingly evaluated the role of **education and training as fundamental** for the promotion of rural community resilience.

4 Summary of the focus group with key stakeholders

Eight key stakeholders gathered on the 16th of December 2022 to discuss the main findings from the stakeholder questionnaire at a European level in REBOUND. The following are the main findings and validations from the focus group:

4.1 Understanding rural community resilience, its barriers & success factors

- The three main conceptualisations/understandings of resilience identified from survey responses were validated.
- The determining factor “social capital” was validated by the focus group, e.g.: *“It’s also rural communities with a high level of social capital that easily attract new incomers”*.
- Scarcity of resources and multiple roles of local agents and actors were seen as special features of rural communities in the context of resilience building processes.
- Leadership must be compatible with wide participation. Listening to the results of participative processes is required for higher resilience. Healthy leadership builds or has natural trust in the community and facilitates solutions accepted by majorities.

4.2 General ideas on the design of a training course on rural community resilience

- Flourishing/fostering resilience can be a demanding approach and the danger of overwhelming communities is palpable. Opportunity costs of not tackling resilience issues are bigger.
- The general framing and approach must take into account that if rural areas do not flourish then also cities won’t survive; rural areas provide essential services to the whole society. Blaming or responsabilisation of rural communities for interdependencies they cannot influence must also be avoided.
- Capacity building is much more than just training because it has to include the empowerment of communities and transferring experiences.
- The aim should be “Bring people to learn together ... not just to train them”

4.3 Topics and issues to be addressed during training

- Critique on preselected contents: REBOUND needs to tap into individual community needs for training and capacity building. It is important to address the training to a wide range of local actors, as diverse as possible to facilitate experience transfer.
- Learn how to learn should be a topic. Reflection is needed on how communities/beneficiaries can include routines, methods and approaches conveyed during training.
- Planning and evaluation methods should be covered, need to self-assess the status quo and the quality of process. Some elements of project cycle management can also be useful to provide a structure.
- Self-protection from burnout is a relevant topic for local leaders. In addition, it improves the quality of participatory approaches including other people in leadership positions and roles.
- Peer to peer approach should be used.

4.4 What target groups would benefit the most from training?

- Wide outreach to all possible stakeholders brings up issues of limited resources in REBOUND.
- Differentiate contents of the training depending on addressees → people actively involved in making the change (who need specific practical skills, e.g. public speaking) or with the wider community members who should learn about civic skills.
- Also, in the pilot phase, REBOUND needs to start with multipliers, i.e. people with natural leadership and capacity to be considered legitimate by their communities.
- Important question: what arguments and added-value convince our addressees to take part in the training?

4.5 Policy recommendations

- Policy approaches by themselves are not likely to motivate rural communities to be reflective and innovative. Make sure that support is available when such initiatives emerge.
- Policy mechanisms for distributing and multiplying good examples and successful approaches are missing.
- Flexible support for innovative ideas in communities is urgently needed. Funding possibilities should be open-ended, without a tight corset of what can be funded and what not.
- More tailor-made policy for rural communities is needed. When communities are encouraged to participate, their ideas should be taken into account, otherwise it leads to “burnt soil” that will not foster participatory approaches again.
- The access to knowledge at the local level is limited. Communities need problem solvers that help them with very specific requests instead of “contact points”.
- Involving politicians at local level can be a double-edged sword as they can easily dominate the process, as is the case in many LAGs. Building resilience needs a strong civic component and should not be managed by officials, planners or lawyers. But when the process requires big changes in the local area and local support, you need politicians back in the ring!

5 Case studies on innovative models of community resilience development

5.1 Carnikava – Riga Gulf Coast – Latvia

Context:

The village of Carnikava used to have the status of municipality, which it lost as a result of administrative reforms. This has resulted in many inhabitants feeling disappointed or left behind, and the level of civic activity has dropped down significantly.

Approach:

The initiative aimed to bring back activity to an area which lost its status as centre of municipal authorities. It started with creating an information platform to disseminate information about local businesses and other local activities. Before this initiative, local businesses were operating mainly at private homes and only those in the know were buying the goods/services, but for example newcomers didn't know about them. The initiative to make a change was based on a group of local activists and, initially, a dedicated person funded by the local fisheries LAG.

Good practices:

An active group of people emerged which initiate many new activities in the area and have a reputation of good organisers (so they can also take up external requests, e.g., to organise a study visit or a trip in a touristic boat).

The LAG is preparing its new strategy and organising the process of “prioritising” local needs, based on formal or informal community associations in each village (a kind of “localised citizens’ budget”). From a study visit to Italy the inspiration was brought concerning community energy, which might be implemented at a later stage.

Reflections on rural community resilience:

A strong community is one that can organise its life by itself, can survive external crises maintaining the local economy running sufficiently for the community to survive and have development on a small scale. Rural communities are used to relying on their own initiative.

Sometimes quite simple activities can make a big difference by creating trust and enthusiasm among the rural people, who can see their ideas taken seriously. Access to information and an open mind is essential. People need to have their own ideas what needs to be done, it is sometimes easier with young people or newcomers. Support at policy making level is crucial, including accessible and flexible funding sources.

The case study interview was conducted with a board member of the Fisheries Local Action Group Jūras Zeme (Sea – Land), who is also president of PREPARE (Partnership for Rural Europe) – a pan-European NGO bringing together national rural movements from many EU member states as well as neighbouring countries.

5.2 Świątokrzyskie region in central Poland – Poland

Context:

The mayor of Baćkowice has long ago foreseen that his area can be threatened with depopulation, so has been consistently taking initiatives to prevent this. The decline of the local textile industry has left many local women unemployed.

Approach:

The municipality has made land available for business investment and obtained funding from ERDF to build a business incubator. The mayor encouraged a textile entrepreneur who found a niche market (producing uniforms for military or health services) to establish his production in the incubator. As public transport had disappeared and women from the surrounding villages had no means to get to work, the mayor negotiated with the bus company of the nearby city to move its offices to Baćkowice and pay lower costs and taxes. In return, the bus company opened a connection enabling women to get to the textile plant. Over 100 women, many of them aged 50+ and/or from migrant communities, found employment there.

Good practices:

Other initiatives in the area:

- further development of the business incubator with municipal funding, with new companies setting up (e.g. a dentistry cabinet from Warsaw, which improves access to health services for the local population);
- small grants from the municipality to local NGOs and to informal groups, including advance payments to help overcome lack of cash;
- the creation of local associations to take over public schools at risk of closure and convert them to community schools, and getting one of the best schoolmasters in the region to settle down in Baćkowice, thus ensuring high quality education in the local secondary school;
- a new home for the elderly – not only with day care, but also with the possibility to stay and get 24 hours care
- the local LEADER LAG putting in place different activities stimulating community initiative and facilitating access to funding to small scale beneficiaries.

Reflections on rural community resilience:

The public system, including social support – very often highly bureaucratised – is not sufficient to maintain rural communities alive; it is up to the people themselves, while the public sector can only create a good framework. Institutionalisation of NGOs is not the answer; a multiple network of linkages is important, as well as the involvement of educated, open-minded, forward-thinking people.

The case study interview was carried out with two people: (1) the manager of the nearest LEADER LAG »Association for the development of Świętokrzyskie rural areas« and president of the Polish LAG network, and (2) vice-president of the Polish Rural Forum and researcher in rural sociology.

5.3 Villages of Flegessen, Hasperde and Klein Süntel (FHKS) – Central Lower Saxony – Germany

Context:

Around 2010 the villages of Flegessen, Hasperde and Klein Süntel in Lower Saxony (Germany) had gathered some experience in the village renewal programme, financed by the Land of Lower Saxony. The programme was supposed to initiate citizen participation in the villages and rural areas in the area of Hameln and Bad Münder and start projects that would renovate the looks and infrastructure in rural areas.

Approach:

Unfortunately, this whole process lacked creativity and power, so some villagers were quite frustrated. In addition, the local authority announced that the primary school would be closing, which provided an initial spark for a powerful village movement. A “core group” got together and decided that they could not waste the potential of community participation and started gathering ideas of how to do this more sustainably over time and with more creative approaches. Then they registered the association, Ideenwerkstatt Dorzzukunft e.V., and organised the first “Ideas-Workshop” in 2012. As a result, they started creating “project groups” with their own key-person responsible to report back and coordinate with the core group.

Good practices:

Since then, community participation has been catalysed into diverse initiatives and projects in all kinds of areas (education, food, mobility, housing, enterprises ...). The association is mainly supported by voluntary work. Also, they have been able to access different small funding programmes from the cultural and community sector at a regional and federal level. Key persons see themselves as facilitating the process and enabling others to endeavour and get into a more commercial area, like for example a food-coop, a cohousing project or the academy for change. These small enterprises work successfully in market economy context.

Reflections on rural community resilience:

The process of building resilience in the villages of Flegessen, Hasperde and Klein Süntel teaches how to build collective capacity starting from a small core-group and spreading responsibilities among more people in the community. The need to articulate collective power through a series of organisations with and without legal entity and with different degrees of professionalisation is also instructive. Stronger self-organisation, a participative needs assessment as well as sensitive

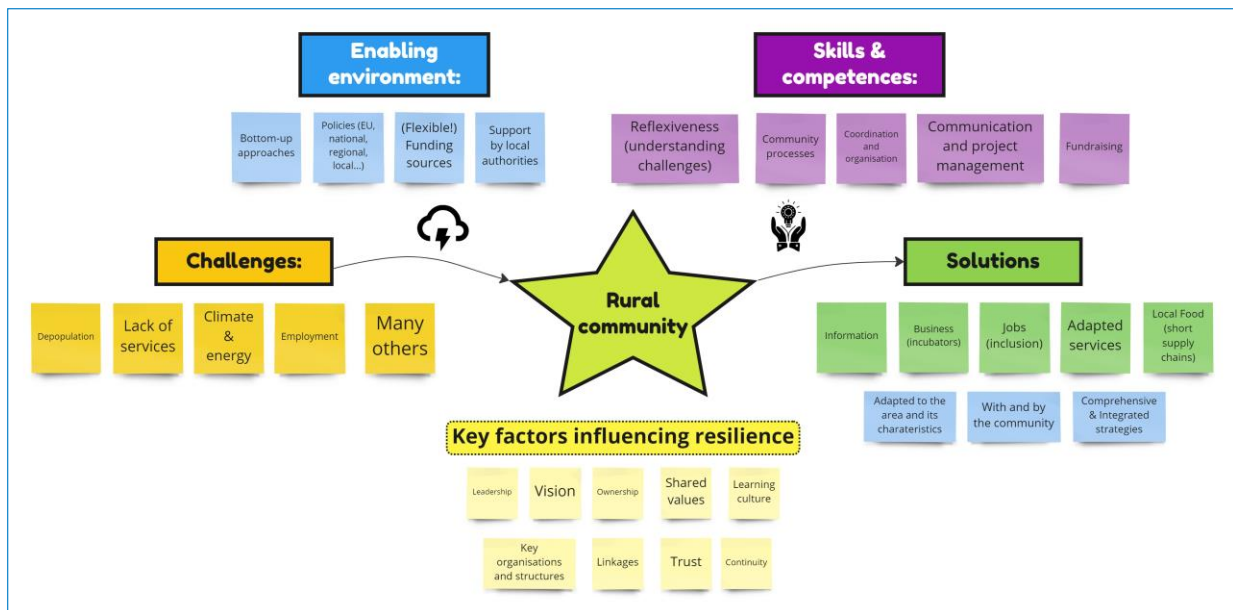
governance and new very specific services and infrastructure as tangible results for higher resilience in the community are key aspects to reflect upon.

The case study interview was conducted with the Deputy Manager of the “Akademie des Wandels” and also board member of “Ideenwerkstatt Dorfzukunft e.V.”.

5.4 Common elements and learnings from the analysed case studies

The graph below represents the summary of key findings from the analysed case studies, pointing out common elements that determine rural community capacity to build resilience.

Figure 10 Summary of key findings from the analysed case studies



Source: own diagram.

If a rural community is to deal in a resilient manner with challenges it is facing, such as depopulation, lack of services, climate and energy crises, it needs to be based **on three kinds of assets/strengths**:

- those linked with **relations within the community**: leadership, linkages between different actors/sectors, sense of ownership and trust;
- those linked with **the way people think**: a common vision for the future, set of shared values, sense of continuity (beyond electoral calendar or funding periods) and joint learning/reflection;
- those linked with **institutions**, such as local associations, LAG/partnership, public authorities and other public bodies, places where people can meet or businesses can operate.

To foster these strengths and give them scope for action, an **enabling external environment** is needed. This includes public policies at various levels (rural development policies, educational, social, fiscal etc.), as well as funding sources adapted to local needs (sufficiently flexible, easy to access by small local actors).

The local community needs **a set of skills** that would enable it to find approaches to tackle the existing and coming challenges. A whole range of skills were mentioned by the interviewees, including:

- an understanding of the challenges and ability to foresee their consequences,

- an understanding of community processes, ability to motivate people and encourage them to act, to innovate and to take responsibility,
- organisational and management skills that can help move from ideas to action,
- communication skills that can help raise awareness of different actors, explain to them the challenges, facilitate consensus, mobilise external support,
- fundraising to obtain the necessary financial support.

The case studies show a number of **different solutions**, from setting up an information platform, incubating local businesses, creating inclusive jobs, innovative provision of services to the community, promoting and valorising local food products and many others. To be effective, these solutions must be:

- **adapted to the needs and opportunities** of the area (no »one-size-fits-all« or top-down models),
- developed **with and by the community**, and not »for« the community,
- **comprehensive and integrated**, going away from silo mentality.