



Creative Fellow 

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### Rural Renaissance – A Tool for Revitalising Villages

# Rural Renaissance – A Tool for Revitalising Villages

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# Systems change

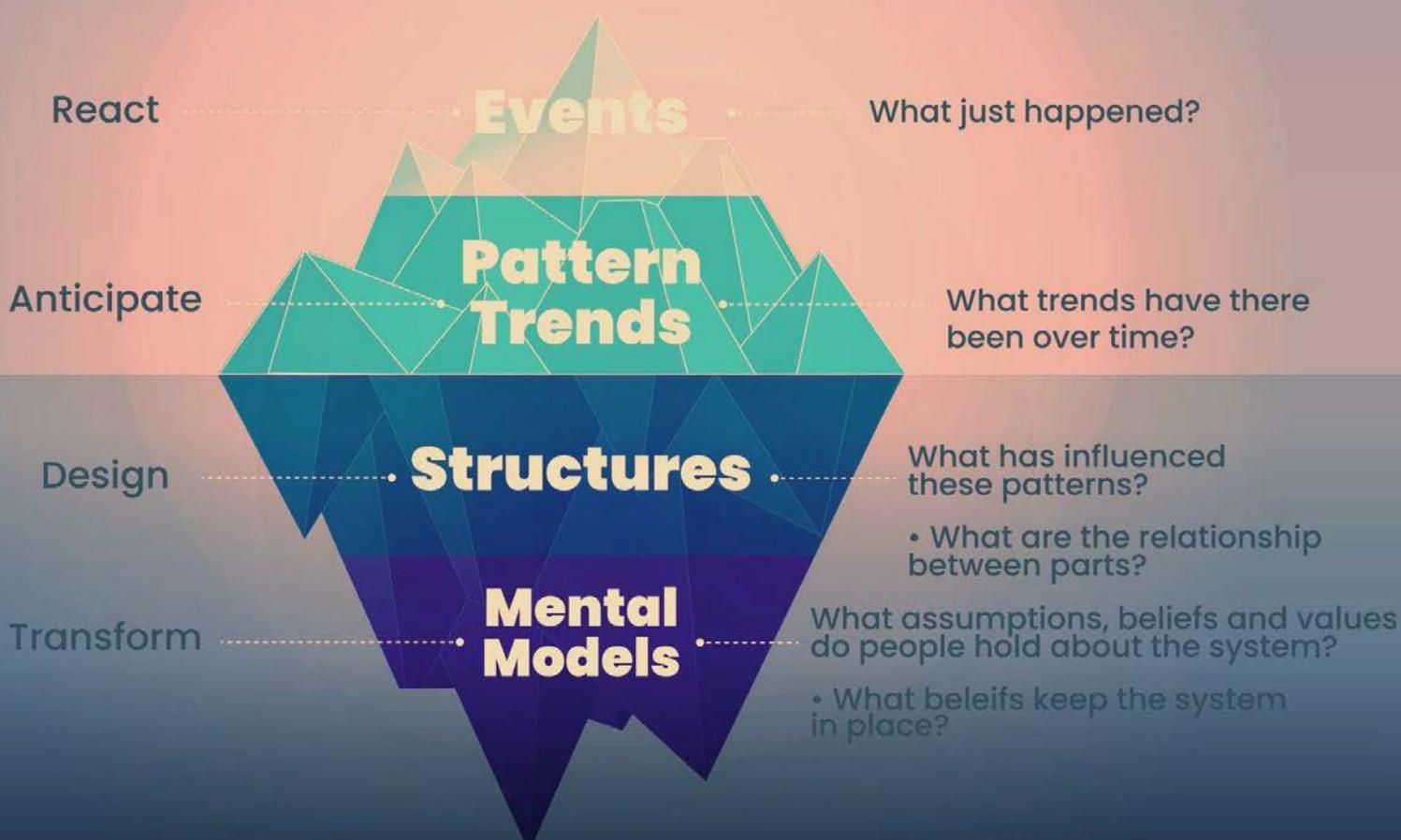
## 1. REVITALISING VILLAGES AS SYSTEMS CHANGE

*“If we address each issue—whether it's water scarcity, climate change, or poverty—as an isolated challenge, the solution we derive will likely be short-term and superficial, not addressing the deeper-rooted imbalances.” (Senge, 2008)*

Revitalising villages demands a multifaceted and comprehensive approach, emphasizing a **community-driven** ethos. Villages are not just administrative markers on a map. They pulse with the lifeblood of a nation's history, culture, spirit, and wisdom, weaving an intricate tapestry of socio-cultural nuances. Tackling the revitalisation of such places demands a holistic, systems-thinking approach. It is about discerning the often unseen patterns, roots, and origins beneath the surface and understanding them as interwoven threads in a vast socio-economic web.

**Depopulation**, a pressing concern in many European rural areas, is not an isolated issue but a manifestation of many consequences of deeper problems and a complex interplay. Addressing it head-on requires strategies grounded in a comprehensive understanding of these intricate connections, to ensure sustainable rural revitalisation. At the heart of such rejuvenation lies the immeasurable impact of culture. Its systemic influence radiates through various facets, from economic vibrancy to mental well-being and safeguarding of cultural treasures. Harnessing culture, as this report suggests, is not just a reactive measure but a proactive and cost-efficient investment against looming societal challenges. Through this research, we have managed to identify methods to not only critique but also address and offer solutions to current challenges.

Tandem Europe (2022) paints a picture of rural areas as reservoirs of **unique** strengths - from the camaraderie of close-knit communities to indigenous skills and fresh perspectives. Yet, these areas, brimming with potential, often languish on the peripheries **due to external, detached decision-making**. To truly unlock their potential, one must bridge the urban-rural chasm, not merely in terms of geography but in fusing disparate lifestyles. It involves igniting intergenerational dialogues between urban youth and village veterans, fostering a rich tapestry of solidarity. The report highlights potential areas of growth, through emphasising **family-centric** initiatives, planning diverse cultural events **co-created** with locals, implementing a mentoring introducing program for the new **young** people potentially interested in the village in erstwhile abandoned villages. Essential amenities, from accessible transport to vibrant community spaces for gathering, emerge as fundamental pillars. Central to all these initiatives is a commitment to *collaboration, community care, inclusivity, activism, and creating a robust network*. Culture serves as a **powerful tool** for reshaping mental perceptions. Abandoned villages often carry connotations of neglect and despair, frequently avoided and seen as deteriorating zones. In this context, culture emerges as a source of inspiration and the metaphorical language of art, capable of crafting new worlds and instilling hope in places where it may be lacking. It possesses the ability to **reimagine** a more equitable and sustainable future. Imagination becomes a transformative tool, altering the structures and mental paradigms of the individuals and, in turn, shaping reality.



# Research problem

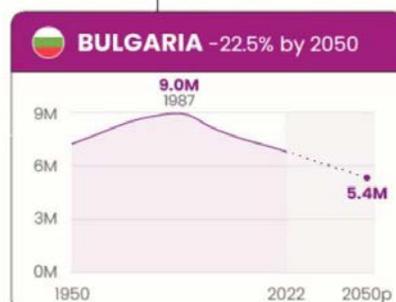
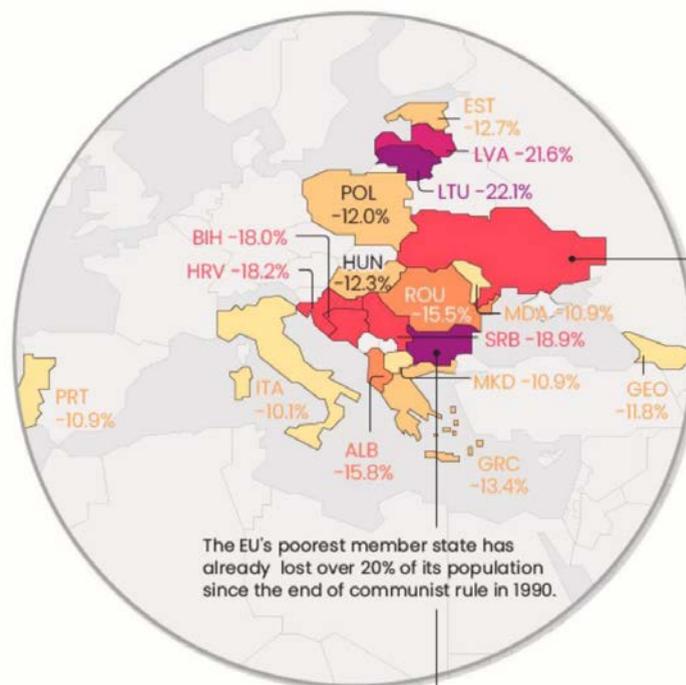
## 2. RESEARCH PROBLEM / CHALLENGE

### 2.1. Social inequality

In many of the villages we visited in Bulgaria, including one of our research focus - Oslen Krivodol, we observed the challenges of rural life. This region is identified as the least-developed and most impoverished area in the EU according to data from EEC. The newly released recommendations from the European Commission emphasised that rural depopulation is a pan-European problem, presenting these communities with significant obstacles. (Eurostat, 2023) One of the pressing issues is the lack of easy access to essential infrastructure and services such as healthcare, transportation and cultural initiatives. In some villages, public transport is non-existent or operates just once **a day**. This depopulation has further reduced job opportunities, causing the local economy to stagnate. However, the challenges aren't solely economic. The consequences lead to a dwindling sense of community and many residents feel isolated and disconnected as they do not have access to events and social exchange. These villages represent a **microcosmos** of a larger issue prevalent in rural areas across the **continent**.

## 2.2. Demographic challenge

Dealing with demographic challenges is essential for a region's long-term well-being. It is vital to balance different age groups in society, ensuring generational fairness and **societal stability**. A diverse age demographic makes society more cohesive. Rural areas in Bulgaria reflect both historical challenges and current struggles. Experts believe the latter half of the last century, particularly the 1950s and 1960s, posed significant challenges for Bulgarian villages (Tzekov, 2020). People were uprooted from their ancestral homes, prompting **migration** to urban areas. Eurostat and the European Commission highlight the severity of the situation, noting that the Northwest region of Bulgaria is facing the **fastest population decline** in Europe, severely impacting smaller settlements (Visual Capitalist, 2022). Additionally, a concern arises from the migration of younger individuals to cities: those remaining are aging. This aging demographic poses issues for the overall vibrancy of these communities. Moreover, **improving** the living conditions for young couples and families can foster positive demographic growth. Meanwhile surprising data appeared showing that many Bulgarians have moved from cities to the countryside in the last year and trends **start to change**. (National Statistical Institute, 2023) .



### 2.3. Regional disparities

Recent recommendations from the European Commission to the European Parliament (Joint Research Centre, 2023) shed light on the **urgent need for change**, especially in Southeast and East Europe, as highlighted in a survey of regions facing territorial disparities. We've witnessed the depletion of land resources by large corporations and entities in places like India and Africa, displacing small-scale farmers and contributing to environmental degradation. In Bulgaria, we grapple with the over-concentration of huge agricultural lands due to a practice called "land leasing". Besides regional territorial disparities, there are glaring disparities related to access to culture. We view the absence of remedial measures as a violation of civil rights, invoking Article 20 of the **Constitution**, which stipulates, *"The State shall establish conditions conducive to the balanced development of the different regions of the country, and shall assist the territorial bodies and activities through its fiscal, credit, and investment policies"* (Constitution of Bulgaria, 2015). Currently, the reality is that the majority of resources, for example, from the National Ministry of Culture's fund for culture primarily **benefit the capital**, with approximately 80% allocated there.

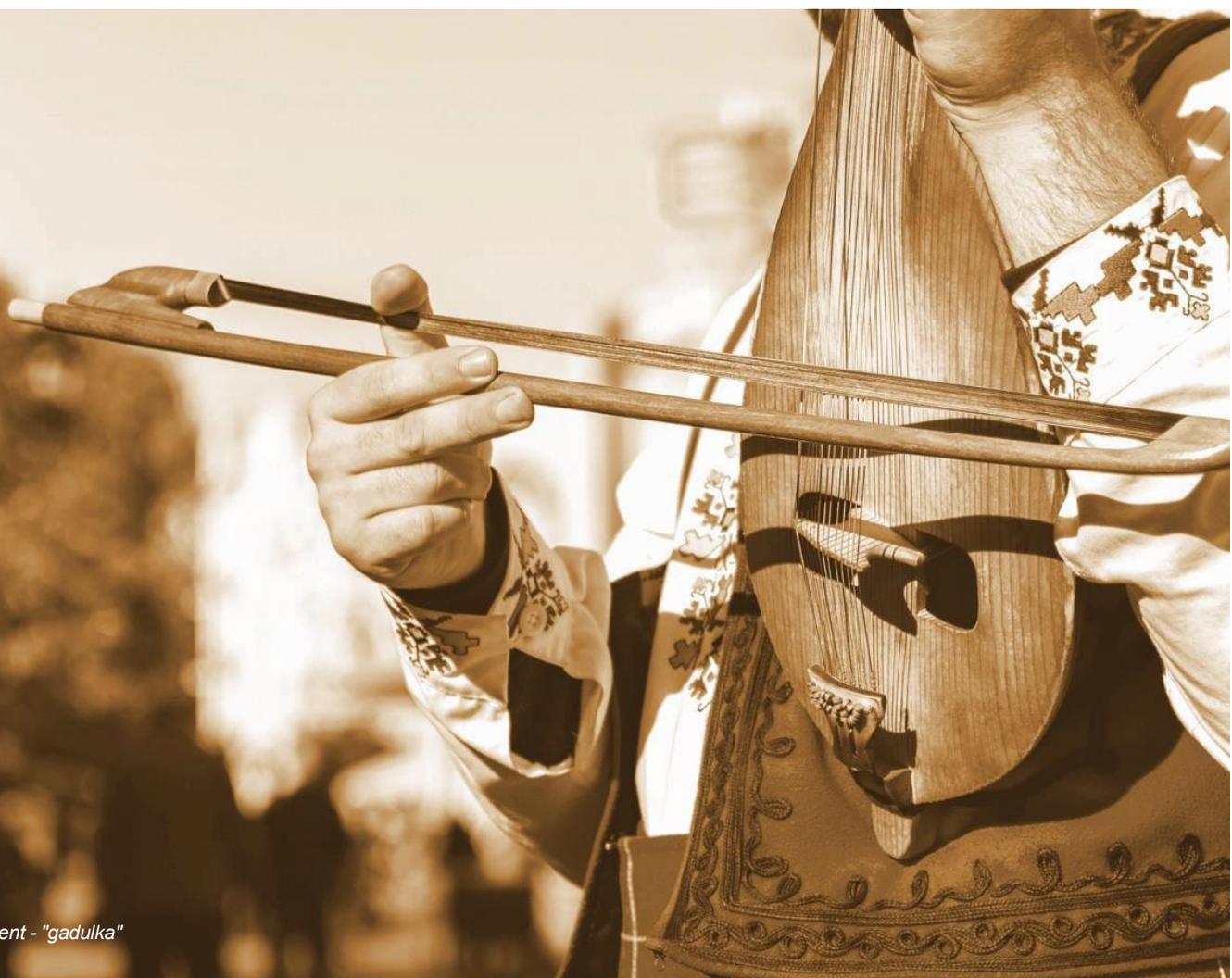
(in grey) the least developed regions in Europe - Vratsa, Vidin, Montana (map of Bulgaria)



## 2.4. Cultural erosion- Loss of cultural heritage

The latest representative national [survey](#) 2023 highlighted a marked cultural rift between Bulgaria's urban and rural regions. Evidently, rural regions grapple with substantial limitations in accessing cultural amenities compared to cities. Prominent figures within the culture domain have echoed these sentiments, recognizing this as a persistent dilemma that remains unaddressed by the state (Sofia Municipality, 2023). Delving deep into the data presents an irrefutable truth: cultural public investments often lean towards benefitting individuals with similar geographical, and socio-economic **markers**. Yanina Taneva from Ideas Factory Association underscores this pattern as an undue centralization devoid of equilibrium.

Hearteningly, several impactful endeavours are emerging, although most trace back to grassroots non-profits and volunteers rather than a synchronized governmental strategy. Such disparities in cultural accessibility can trigger cultural dilution in hamlets, which are treasure troves of age-old crafts, insights, and expertise on the brink of obscurity. Guarding these cultural jewels is imperative not just for the fabric of these hamlets but for the expansive legacy of European nations. Cultural depletion does not just dent the essence and legacy of countryside locales but resonates on a bigger scale, diminishing a country's cultural vibrancy and identity.



Typical bulgarian instrument - "gadulka"

## 2.5. Climate change

Corporate-dominated farming, resembling monopolies, greatly challenges many village areas and **small farmers**. "Small farmers" here also means regular families nurturing their gardens, a **tradition** in villages in Bulgaria. These challenges show in biodiversity reduction, heavy chemical use, and market and land control by few. In Bulgaria, existing policies appear to favour large agricultural entities, which in turn discourage many local residents from engaging in gardening.

Supporting small, organic farming could counteract climate change and boost sustainability. Such farmers use **green practices** like carbon soil storage, avoiding damaging chemicals, and planting diverse crops. They're also pivotal in forming local food networks by cutting down carbon footprints and minimizing long-distance food transport. Combining small-scale organic farming with **cultural events** can facilitate the sharing of valuable knowledge and practices, even among children. This approach provides a blueprint for a future where we prioritize the environment, well-being, and sustainable living.



## 2.6. Health problems

The Health and Environment Alliance's 2021 report highlights the health differences between urban and rural living. City dwellers often face issues related to the **respiratory system**, heart, and nerves, primarily due to inhaling pollutants like fine particulate matter. These tiny particles can enter the bloodstream and pose health risks. (Health and Environment Alliance (2021) Alarmingly, Bulgaria is third globally in **air pollution**-induced fatalities, with over 100,000 victims, as stated by the World Health Organization. Constant exposure to urban pollution and noise can lead to stress and mental ailments. In contrast, rural areas generally boast cleaner air and reduced pollutants, promoting both environmental and health benefits. Additionally, the tranquil lifestyle in villages offers a respite from the city's hustle, potentially decreasing stress levels.



## 2.7. Mental health

Historically, humans have gravitated towards **communities** and small groups, a preference steeped in our traditions and past. **Cultural gatherings**, such as festivals, play an important role in strengthening community ties. Artistic endeavors have been vital outlets for individual expression and creativity. When denied access to such platforms, many find it challenging to convey their emotions, resulting in heightened stress. Art forms such as theatre, music, and visual arts provide emotional release and stimulate contemplation. Their absence could trigger mental health concerns and weaken communal bonds, heightening **feelings of isolation**. Being part of a community inherently promotes mental well-being by providing strong support, reducing stress, and nurturing a **sense of belonging**.



## 2.8. Educational gap

A 2022 report by the EU's Joint Research Centre highlights that the waning of certain EU municipalities is mainly down to issues like **inadequate education**, limited job prospects, and poor access to public amenities and infrastructure. (Joint Research Centre, 2022) The educational gap in dwindling rural areas presents a complex problem marked by limited access to schools, a dearth of trained teachers, **scarce educational options**, and a paucity of extracurricular offerings. Culture stands out as a powerful tool in mending this educational rift in the EU's underpopulated rural sectors. Organising cultural events can be linked to innovative education, experiential learning in natural settings, lectures, forums, and events that address and promote local educational issues. These events **create new opportunities** for development in a single location while also attracting relevant staff and educators.



## 2.9. Infrastructure

The infrastructure in the villages is crucial in making them appealing to young people and fostering community gatherings. We've observed that there's often a lack of spaces like pavilions, hubs, or even simple benches for people to **come together** and exchange ideas. As the population shrinks, so does the tax revenue, which makes it harder to keep the infrastructure in good shape. It leads to deferred **maintenance**, where necessary repairs are postponed due to budget constraints. The consequences are evident: declining infrastructure quality can result in economic stagnation and regression in rural areas. Infrastructure serves as the essential **foundation**, providing the environment and vessel where the community, movement, or content can be **held and thrive**. The **once-amazing** cultural centres in Bulgaria, known as "Chitalishte," are sadly being left in a state of abandonment, leaving behind echoes of past inspiration and vibrancy.



# The process

## 3. THE PROCESS

Over the course of **six months**, we undertook a comprehensive research and creative process to understand local contexts in rural depopulated areas. This involved *lab approach, design thinking, exploring potential partnerships, conducting ethnographic, historical, and economic research, mapping out local resources, doing on-site visits, conducting survey, and interviewing people*. Alongside these activities, we incorporated best practices, created events, engaged in volunteer work, used the "Futures work" method, and emphasized active involvement and co-creation with the community. Navigating rural realities requires careful preparation and cultural **sensitivity**. Rural communities are close-knit and steeped in tradition, demanding a respectful and **trust-building approach** from researchers. This project intertwined with our own lives, giving birth to profound friendships and heartwarming tales that we'll forever cherish. As a creative researcher, I found that an entirely new, unexplored field of work emerged during the process of learning. It is a field where communication is needed on multiple **levels**, involving people from different contexts and archetypes - from government officials to shepherds. It requires the ability to seamlessly integrate into the local dialect, perhaps even singing a heartfelt song to connect with someone in the village, while simultaneously maintaining a neutral stance, conducting surveys, and handling paperwork. I learned that **flexibility** and **adaptability** are paramount in this context.

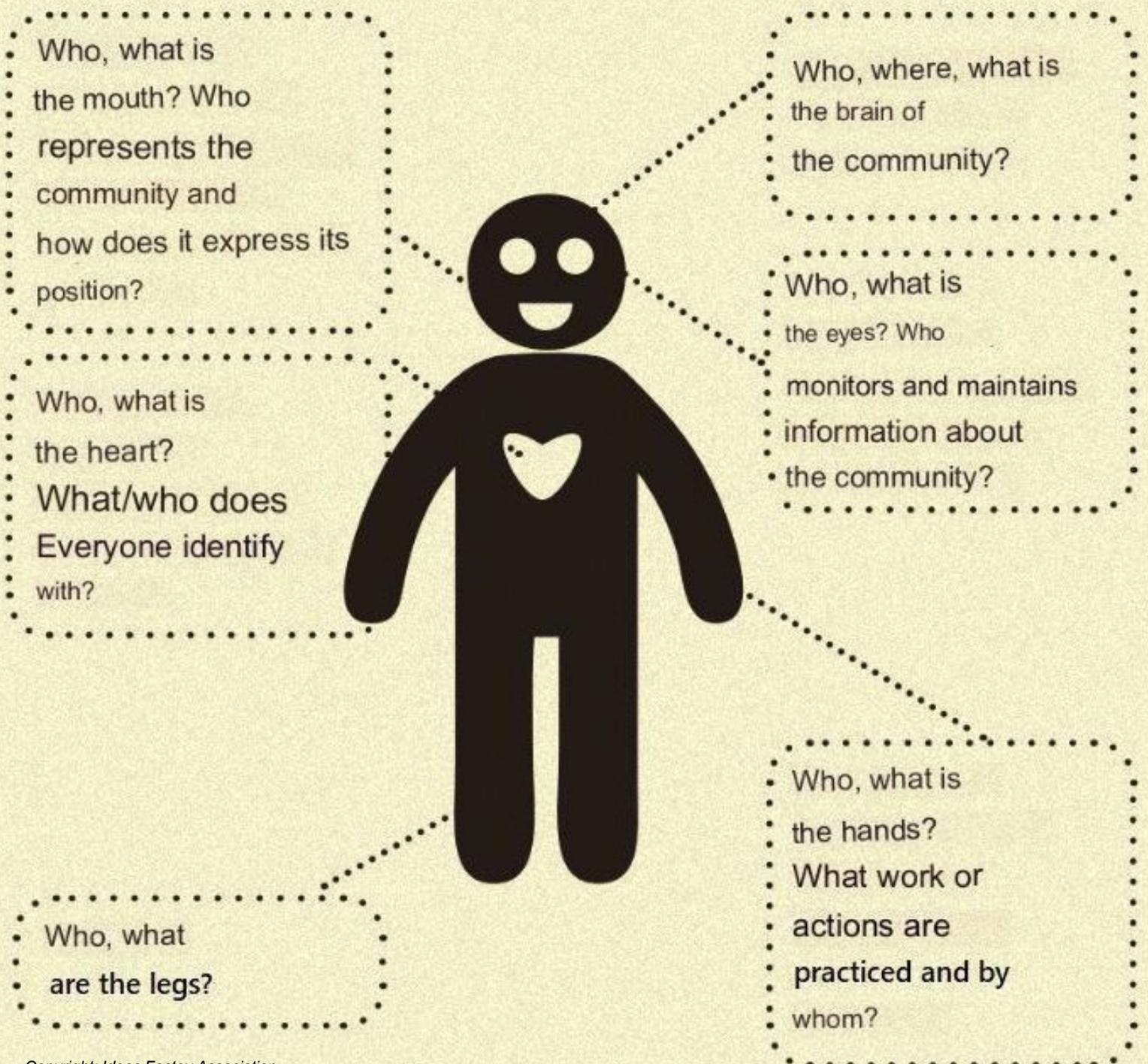
### 3.1. IDEATION

How did it all start? Our journey began when we realised that we **all** share a **responsibility to ensure a promising future for the next generations**. Driven by a vision of a world characterized by greater fairness, sustainability, and interconnectedness, we recognized the potential of culture to address substantial challenges. As we contemplated the **legacy** we wanted to leave behind for them a beautiful idea began to blossom. We made the decision to initiate a project that centres around sustainable living, combating social inequality, preserving culture, bridging the urban-rural divide and tackling environmental concerns. The model involves the transformation of a depopulated village into an **Artistic social campsite "Avalira"** — a creative enterprise and a platform for cultural exchange - enriching the quality of rural life.

### 3.2. PLANNING

#### \*LOCAL RESEARCH\*

Exploring the local reality and engaging with organisations and individuals who share similar objectives was essential for immersing ourselves in the local context. During our research, we discovered and used a highly valuable resource provided by the proactive organisation in the field of rural development [Ideas Factory](#) — a manual titled "Baba Resident's Handbook.



### 3.2.1. Ethnographic research

Northwest Bulgaria is **rich in folklore traditions**, encompassing a diverse range of folk songs, dances, and culinary customs. Although major festivals take place in the cities, smaller villages, like Oslen Krivodol in the Vratsa district, keep the traditions alive with **intimate** celebrations. Historically, the region was known for trades such as pottery, ironwork, stonework, silk and loom weaving, grape picking and goldwork. The region is notable for its distinct "vratchanski" dialect, which is an essential facet of national identity and adds to Europe's cultural diversity. During research in the village, the team learned about ancient fertility rituals, most notably the "peperuda" ("butterfly") ritual. This tradition entails a unique dance, song, costumes made from specific plants, and invocations, believed by the locals to invoke rain. Our ethnographic research opened the door for a fruitful collaboration with the local historical museum. This bond later paved the way for their active participation in our events.



### 3.2.2. Historical research

This village is steeped in historical richness. It is home to an expansive yet lesser-known **megalithic sanctuary complex**, which dates back to around 13,000 BC. The site was initially investigated by the regional museum's team but due to insufficient funds, the investigation had to stop. There are also Thracian burial mounds, a mysterious cave, and an ancient church adorned with once-vibrant frescoes that are now slowly fading. Distinctively in Northwest Bulgaria, the village features four enigmatic stones (called obrok), each engraved with symbols and positioned at the village's cardinal points. Historically, these stones stood as **protectors** of the village, drawing villagers for reverence and prayer. Rediscovering these historical gems became a crucial asset when showcasing them to curious **newcomers** and families. Moreover, the village prides itself on its "Chitalishte", a traditional Bulgarian community centre, that was built over a century ago and witnessed a revival in 2022.



### 3.2.3. Economic research

Most of the village's residents are elderly. There are a handful of **artisans**, including a carpenter, a honey maker, vegetable farmers. The few younger residents have mainly online jobs. The village has two stores and a restaurant. Nearby villages offer guesthouse accommodations. While the village grapples with economic challenges, it is perfectly poised to develop cultural and creative tourism, given its untapped potential.

### 3.2.4. Partnerships

We reached out to cultural hubs and a [biodynamic farm](#) in the nearby villages, forming **alliances** with local and national non-governmental organizations to organise events, and nurturing connections with a wide spectrum of local figures. These included community leaders, entrepreneurs, supportive individuals, as well as local authorities and media representatives.

Essential collaboration was made with association [“Ideas Factory”](#). Over nearly a decade, this remarkable organization has been dedicated to enriching the lives of more than 40 Bulgarian villages. Among their standout initiatives is the [Baba Residence project](#), which acts as a catalyst for interactions between urban youth and elderly villagers. This unique exchange has borne innovative products and services that draw deeply from the well of traditional wisdom. Mentorship, advice, and essential access to vital resources were applied from their expertise.



### 3.2.5. Mapping the local potential

We researched on the village's local resources and found a decreasing number of artisans, product makers, and older community members skilled in **traditional crafts** such as breadmaking, knitting, embroidery, carpentry and storytelling. These individuals, though modest about their talents, play a critical role in preserving cultural heritage. If these skills are not passed down to the younger generation, they could fade away. These insights informed our project's direction, underlining the importance of working with residents. We also discovered an abandoned school, constructed voluntarily by the community years ago for their offspring—a scenario typical in many overlooked Bulgarian villages. Such structures offer the chance to be transformed into vibrant community centres. Furthermore, we noticed a large open field at the village's entry point, making it an **ideal location for the future artistic campsite.**



*Large open field suitable for Artistic campsite*

### 3.2.6. Survey

We conducted an **online survey** and **in-person interviews** to investigate the rejuvenation of rural areas in Bulgaria. Engaging 372 participants across all 28 Bulgarian regions, the online survey offered a view of rural challenges and revitalization possibilities. Complementing this, interviews with figures from national organizations, local governing bodies, and village residents provided additional depth and varied perspectives. A Futures Work workshop “(Re)imagining the collective far future of Oslen” drew valuable discussions and conclusions as well. The data from our research helped us in planning future events in the village.

**Central to this survey** was the exploration of strategies and initiatives conducive to the revitalization of Bulgarian rural areas. By drawing on the collective knowledge and experiences of a diverse range of stakeholders the research aimed to develop solutions that are both effective and attuned to the needs and values of rural communities.

**The primary objectives** of the survey were to investigate the obstacles hindering youth relocation to rural areas, identify factors for the sustainable revitalization of rural regions, and examine community attitudes towards revitalization initiatives in villages.

The chart below labelled “**Revitalisation Measures**” amalgamates data from the survey and the interviews, offering a visual representation of the respondents' beliefs regarding effective strategies for the sustainable preservation and revitalisation of Bulgarian villages.

Read more about the questions, inquiry process and insights here:

[Analysis of the survey "Revitalisation of the bulgarian villages"](#).

*“Culture and education are a prerequisite for a large group of people to start living in the village.”*

*Quote from the survey “REVITALISATION OF THE BULGARIAN VILLAGES”*

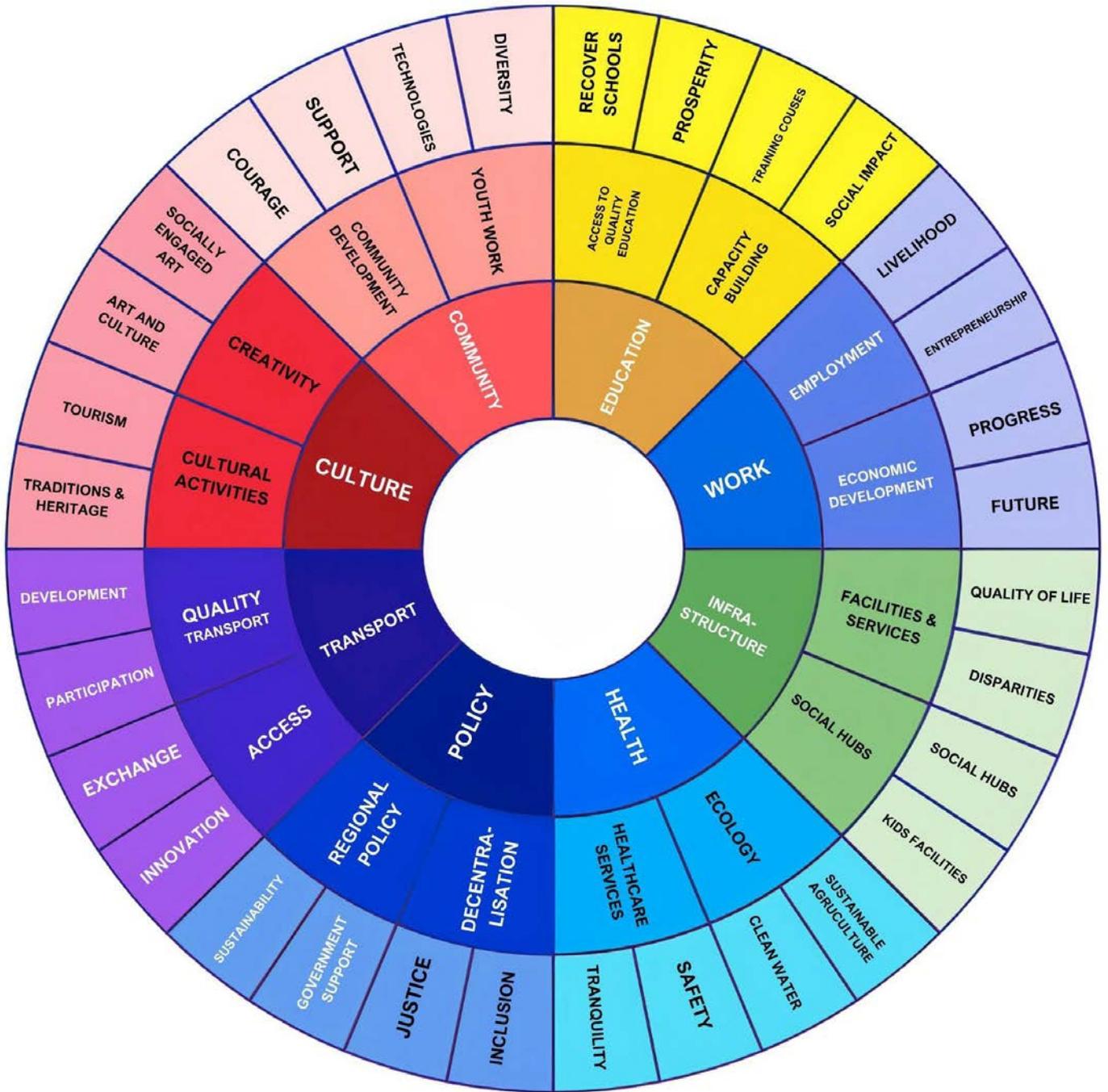


Diagram "Revitalisation Measures"

### 3.3. PROTOTYPING

#### 3.3.1. Building trust and community

A crucial component in the rejuvenation of a village is building trust and creating robust ties with its residents. It involves **immersing oneself in the community: partaking** in genuine dialogues, helping in local people homes and gardens, joining in community-led activities, such as clean-ups, celebrations, and more. A prime example of our engagement was our involvement in cleaning local springs, which are cherished for their healing waters. These springs hold a special place in the hearts of the villagers due to their cultural and historical significance.

**Furthermore**, we took on the responsibility of tidying the cemetery, began refurbishments at the old school, and joined various projects in adjacent villages. We played an active role in supporting their celebrations and also extended our support to the local cultural centre and town council.



### 3.3.2. Mind map - Focus group

Collaborating with a group of passionate locals, we developed a mind map and established a focus group that convened monthly. Employing this tool facilitates a cohesive vision, ensuring all involved parties understand the objectives and the subsequent steps. Central themes outlined on the mind map encompass educational hubs, cultural venues, biodynamic farming, energy independence, community gatherings, project oversight, and financing. Alongside this, we have been **analyzing** data and the development of every initiative, creating an **improvement plan** for the next one.

### 3.3.2. Events and co-creation with locals

A central aspect of the village revitalisation process was **building a bridge between the two worlds: urban and rural**. We began by inviting artists and members from our network to participate in the small events organised within the village. We then progressed to hosting our own events, involving local residents as participants or assisting in the organisation. Our target audience for these invites included young individuals, couples, and **families** sharing values centred on **sustainable living**. In such communities, it's vital to host two types of events: those that are entirely free, and open to everyone, and those that have a donation-based entry or fee. The latter ensures support for the local community and promotes sustainability.



### 3.3.3. Dissemination and media

In such endeavours, excellent marketing **strategy** and effective **communication** is paramount at every stage to bolster and magnify the desired outcomes. It is imperative to **spotlight successful initiatives**, particularly since they are seldom in villages like these. These success stories can act as beacons of **inspiration** for other areas. Adopting this strategy **casts light** on pressing village concerns that otherwise might be overlooked. Our efforts encompassed setting up a [Facebook group](#), leveraging various social media outlets, partnering with a few national TV stations, routinely partaking in interviews across [radio](#), [television \( #1, #2 \)](#), digital [platforms](#) and sharing our story in [forums](#) and [festivals](#). At this juncture, our selective approach was instrumental in drawing the interest of a particular demographic. We aren't merely courting event-goers or passive observers - our goal is to engage individuals genuinely committed to enriching village life. We sought after those keen on co-creation, relocating, and championing sustainable principles. Moreover, to further our reach, we are in process of creating a website:

[www.rural-renaissance.eu](http://www.rural-renaissance.eu)



НИЩО ЛИЧНО

СЕЛСКИ РЕНЕСАНС

8:30

Невена и Кирил, които се борят за събуждане на българското село

### 3.3.4. Volunteering initiatives

Drawing in individuals and artists from Bulgaria, France, Sweden, Canada, the UK, and the USA revitalised the once-abandoned village. We coordinated the camp via the platform [workaway](#). In a collaborative span of 14 days, 20 participants readied a meadow for a festival that we were preparing at the campsite - Oslen Fest ( as the village name Oslen Krivodol). Together, we introduced **essential facilities** and artistic contributions, a notable feature being a sensory route crafted by a representative from [Sensory Theatre](#) Sofia. This camp imbued the village with a rich blend of culture and art, igniting passion and bolstering community participation. Our joint endeavours successfully established a stage, workshop areas, shaded places, a food outlet, showers, toilets, and other necessary amenities, all anchored by a shared vision for rejuvenating the village.

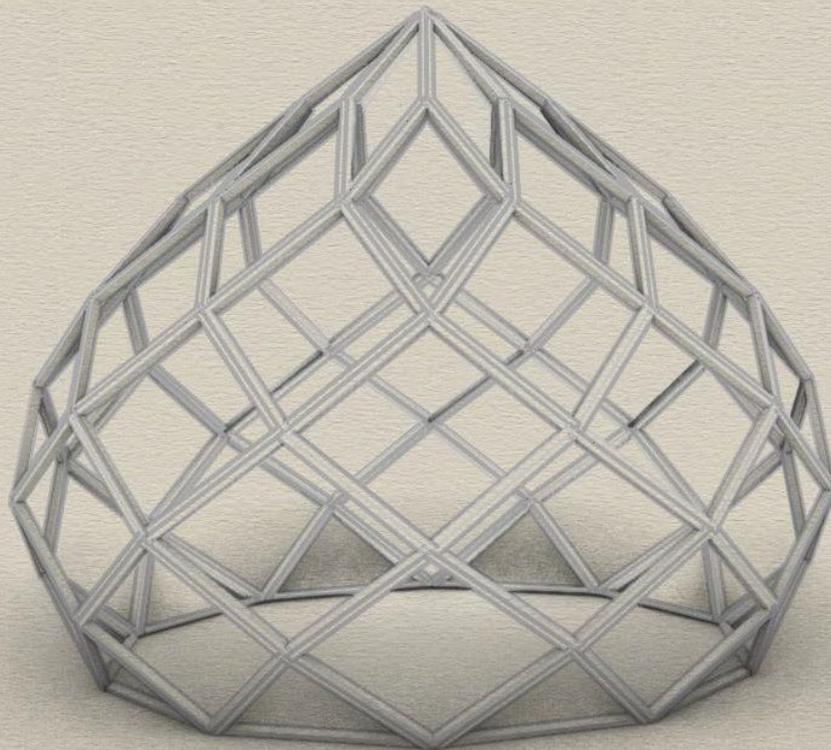


Part of the volunteer camp - preparing Oslen Fest

### 3.3.5. Spaces

We began creating spaces that could facilitate and inspire meetings and exchanges. There was an increase in the visits from younger individuals to the village. We started developing several **prototypes**, including a workshop space, zome structure, and a visual representation of the campsite.

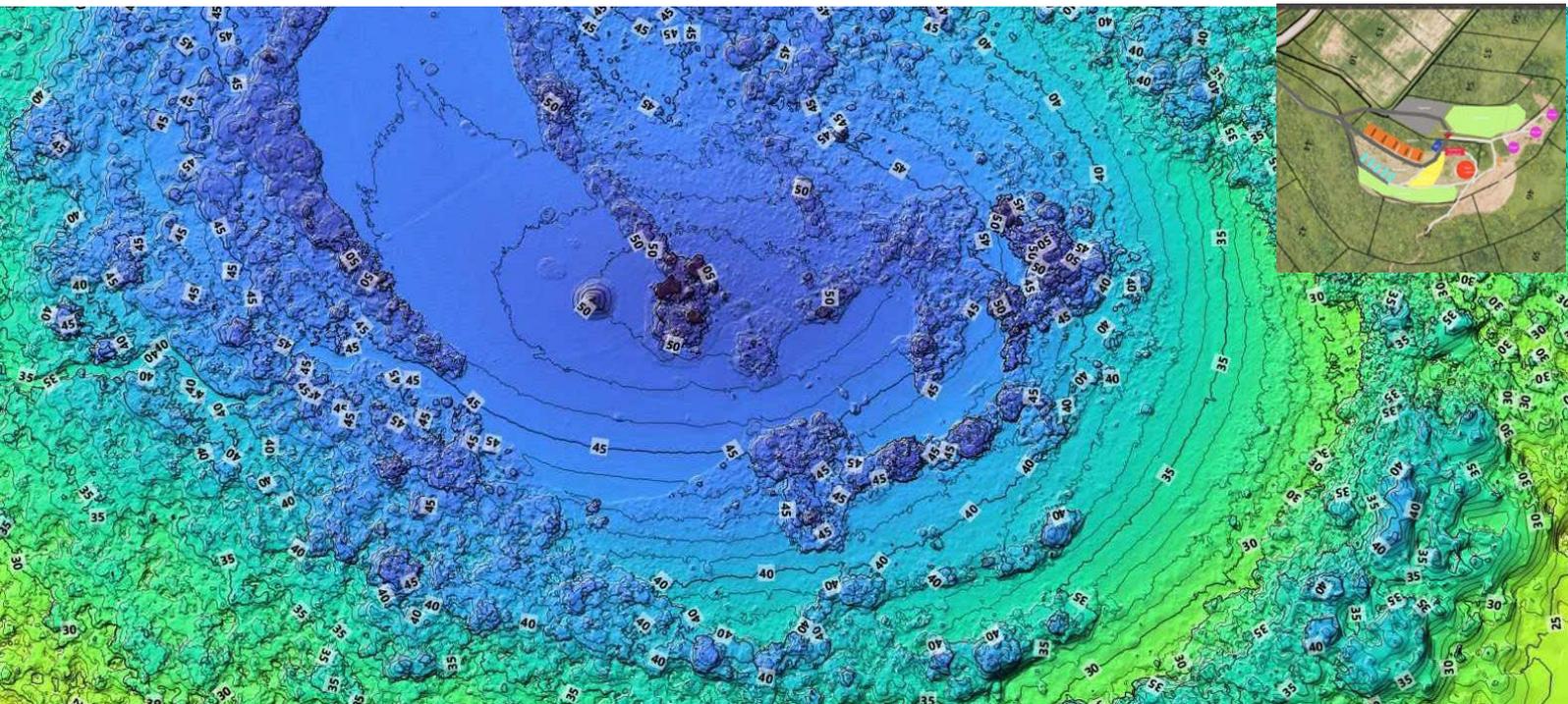
A '**zome**' refers to an artistic architectural form based on the golden ratio, which is intended to be the foundation for constructing small structures within the campsite in a further stage of the project. This process was overseen by an architect and designer.



Additionally, we embarked on 3D modelling for a workshop space crafted in the style of a Gothic arch, designed to host events and activities.



We also created a visual prototype for the future campsite, showcasing its anticipated layout and zones, further enriched by a 3D topographical survey.



Successfully, we built a tipi from eco-friendly textiles, complete with a fireplace. This served as a designated space for workshops and meetings.



### 3.4. IMPLEMENT

#### 1. Village Festival Oslen fest and Oslen weekend events

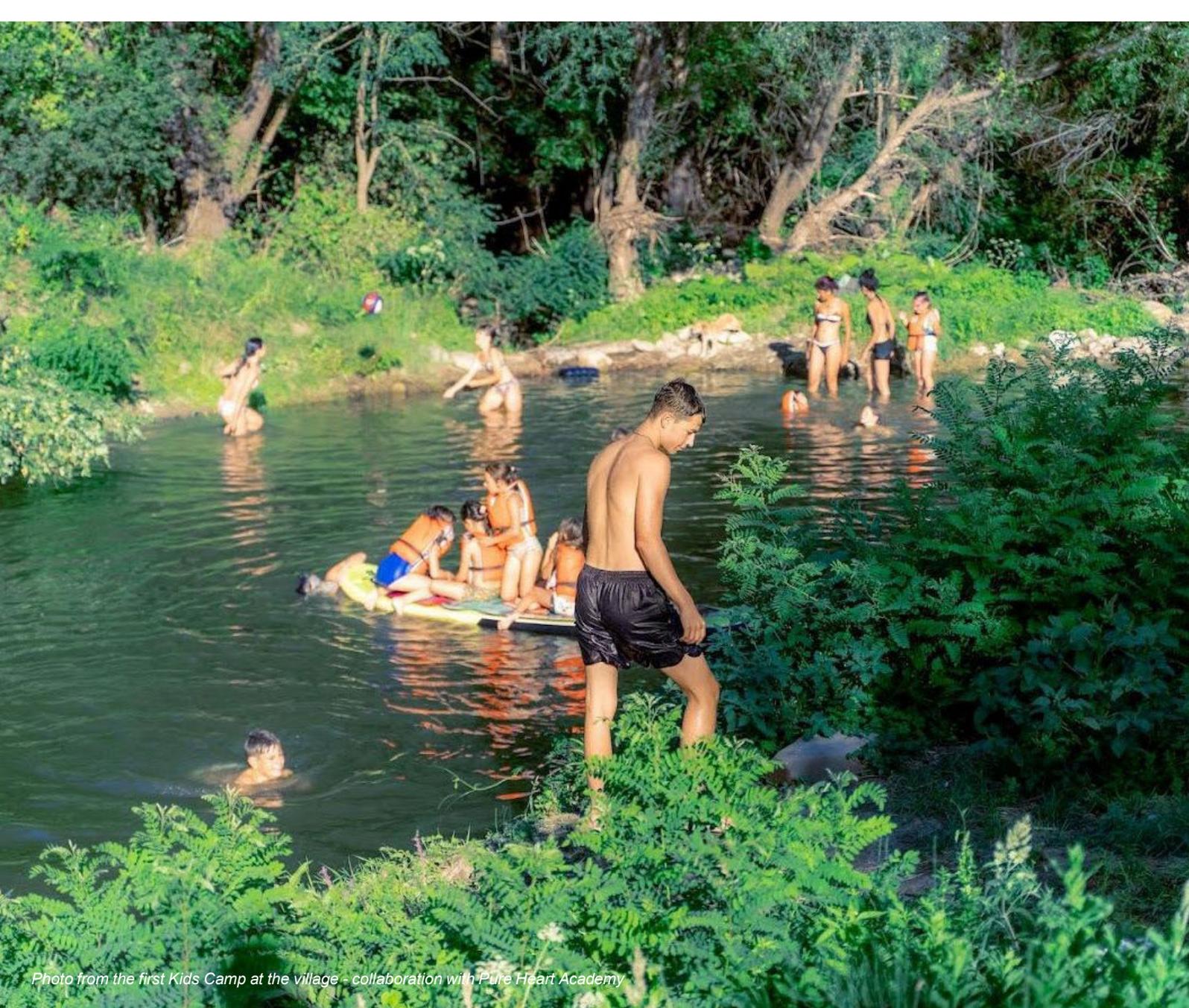
We expanded our ties with active community members, collaborated with folk music groups, and deepened our bond with local authorities through active involvement in communal activities. The festival we organised, named 'Oslen Fest - Rural Renaissance' was launched and became a hub for locals, artists, stakeholders, and a blend of Bulgarian and international attendees. By involving local people in artistic endeavours, we connected the community's core values with the youth's desire for traditional wisdom. At the same time, contemporary artists and approaches had their contributions. Running from June 15-18, the festival featured practical workshops, art displays, and conversations centred on revitalising the village and children's program. Visits to the biodynamic farm were organized, where the visitors actively participated in its activities, gained inspiration, and acquired knowledge. A collective idea for a **community vegetable garden** emerged as a result. Drawing in about 300 people, the event boosted both community spirit and the local economy. Acknowledging its significance, we linked OSLEN FEST with the [European Festival Association](#) (EFFEA), enhancing its stature as a primary cultural event.

Following this, we introduced regular "[Oslen weekends events](#)", centred on varied themes: building a robust community, humane education and musical events. During these occasions, we consistently incorporated children's activities and reached out to local marginalised groups. The aim of these events is to maintain a continuous flow of cultural projects, gradually creating a community and drawing like-minded people to the village. Local residents participated by opening their own workshops, and visitors attended these on-site.



## 2. Family and kids activities

The recent unveiling of the ["Tents Camp" programme for children](#) in collaboration with [Pure Heart](#) Kids and Youth Academy has injected a fresh vibrancy and hope into the village. It stands out as the region's premier kids' camp in recent memory. By hosting family-friendly activities, the village has become more **enticing to young families** who might have previously bypassed rural settings due to a lack of child-oriented activities. This initiative also helped refresh the village's demographic by attracting a younger crowd, addressing the concern of a predominantly older population. These programmes have not only attracted families from nearby regions but have also boosted patronage of local eateries and businesses, positively impacting the **local economy**. In addition, families visiting the kids' camp often become keen explorers of the wider region's cultural, natural and historical heritage.



*Photo from the first Kids Camp at the village - collaboration with Pure Heart Academy*

### 3. Spaces for gathering

We have successfully crafted and revitalised several integral spots in the village, vital for establishing a space where people can assemble, interact, and co-create. Set against a sprawling green meadow, these locales unite to shape the "Avalira Artistic Campsite." We made a research on **eco-friendly materials** and we sought the expertise and advice of professional designers and architects who provided valuable insights. We also used **recycled** surfaces for the construction of the "Gothic arch".

**\*Gothic arch - workshop for craft ateliers, cooking, common gatherings**



Gothic Arch workshop space- process and implementation

**\*Zome prototype pavilion for small circle gatherings**



***\*Restoring authentic village house ( in process)***

Recognising the need for suitable accommodation for us, our team, artists, and volunteers involved in the project, we faced the stark reality of **limited housing options** in the underpopulated village. We undertook the restoration of an abandoned house, a significant emblem of local cultural heritage, ensuring its authentic style was maintained. This rejuvenated space, which we named "Hayaraya" (translated as "radiant gratitude"), is envisaged as a hub for accommodation and co-creation. Despite time and resource constraints, we established very basic accommodations, allowing us to host people contributing to the initiative.





*Restoring an abandoned house in the village - we kept the swallow's nests which were in every room as an art sculpture (up right)*

#### 4. Introducing the village context to newcomers and vice versa

A growing number of couples and families searched help from us in finding a house in the village after we started hosting events more regularly. When a couple arrived, normally we organised a day to introduce them to the local community and culture. We arranged meetings between them and village residents, and they quickly felt **accepted** and welcomed. For example, the first couple were musicians, and after they explored the area, we invited them to perform an improvised harp concert. This allowed the local community to have an opportunity to get to know them, to feel **safe** and calm.



*Harp concert in the abandoned school in the village*

## 5. Futures work

In August 2023, we formed a collaboration, and researchers from the Fellowship program by CIRCE - [Nyangala Zohlo](#) and [Anna De Mezzo](#) led a Futures Work workshop in Oslen village that gathered 50 diverse participants, including artists, innovators, musicians, parents, and children. The workshop “*(Re)imagining the collective far future of Oslen*” fostered collective discussions about the future of rural living, focusing on resilience and sustainability. Participants, some already living in villages and others contemplating the move, explored the **challenges and opportunities of rural life** and began considering potential actions to create a more sustainable and resilient future for rural communities. [Read the workshop findings and recommendations here.](#)



## 6. A sustainable eco-conscious business model

The business model of "Artistic social campsite Avalira" envisions a future in which the needs of the so-called peripheries are adequately recognized and addressed. In the 6-month period, we conducted a [market research](#) about the campsites in Bulgaria and visited key points - [#1](#), [#2](#), [#3](#). Our findings reveal promising prospects for our camping [concept](#). There's a noticeable increase in demand for "glamping" amenities, alongside a growing environmental awareness among campers who prioritize sustainability and cultural activities. However, developing sustainable infrastructure in remote camping areas poses significant challenges. On a positive note, the construction of a new highway in this area is underway, which will enhance accessibility to the northwestern region of Bulgaria.

The full process of establishing a campsite proved unfeasible within the 6-month **time frame** due to the need for a more intricate administrative procedure which requires on one hand, around one year in arranging all necessary documents for official launching. **On the other hand**, it became evident that more financial resources were required to initiate a camping site. We have taken the **initial steps** by acquiring land (which, in this region of the country, is equivalent to the cost of an iPhone) and initiating permit applications. In 2024, we will be in a position to **continue** the project if we secure the necessary funding. Our introduction of a donation-based entry fee at events has been a success, with proceeds supporting local community members who lead workshops and contribute to these gatherings. This approach has shown potential for self-sustenance and revenue generation, which is a good basis of further development. The village still holds untapped opportunities that could enhance our business model and potentially create new employment prospects for local residents. For our project, achieving **long-term** sustainability is paramount, and we are actively engaged in searching funding opportunities to facilitate the next-level development of the initiative.

# Insights

## 4.INSIGHTS

### 4.1. COMMUNITY DRIVEN IMPACT

*"Groups have more resources than individuals. They can bring together diverse perspectives, experiences, and insights." Jacob Levy Moreno*

Adopting a holistic approach was a fundamental aspect of the work in the village where we conducted the research. A close and **lasting bond** was established and upheld with the community and its residents. Many individuals took part, while others voiced their views and engaged in dialogue. The locals have in-depth **understanding** of the community's strengths, weaknesses, and goals. Building and strengthening **social ties** within the community are pivotal components of community-driven impact. Trust and social cohesion are indispensable. Community-driven projects are **flexible** and can adjust to **changing circumstances and the community's shifting needs over time**.

Inspired by the positive changes **four young families** made the meaningful decision to invest in properties within the village. They specifically stated that their decisions were swayed by the village's transformative movement, reawakening, and positive alterations. This renewed vigour and community spirit drew them in. Two of four families have bravely relocated to the village and are now integral parts of the community. The other two families dedicated themselves to the renovation and construction of derelict houses in the village.



## 4.2. CONNECTING CITY AND VILLAGE

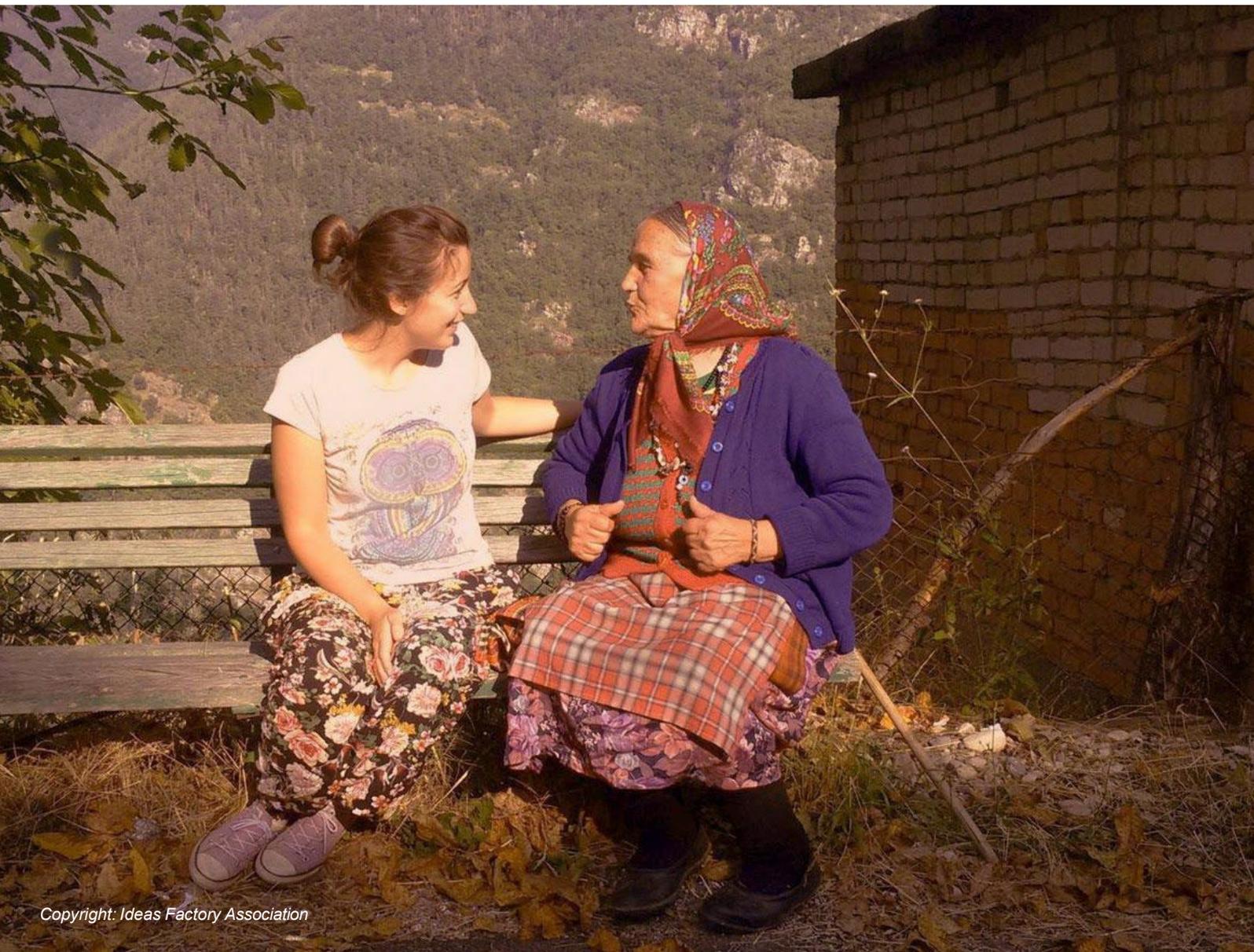
Connecting cities and villages indeed serves as a bridge, not just spanning physical distances but also bridging the divide between distinct lifestyles. Through our organised events, we've realised the crucial significance of this connection. Urban residents frequently **long for** the treasures, authenticity, and traditions harboured in villages, whilst, in turn, dwindling village communities are **keen to** share their time, wisdom, and expertise. Culture and creativity emerge as **potent catalysts**, infusing new life into dormant landscapes and connecting people. By championing cultural **exchanges** and artistic partnerships between urban and rural communities, a rich mosaic of traditions, thoughts, and innovations emerges.

This blending of urban and rural existence fosters a mutual **sense of identity and purpose** with city inhabitants **actively contributing** to the renaissance of underpopulated villages. Culture and creativity spark **economic opportunities**, enticing urban artists and entrepreneurs to invest in and revitalise these overlooked spaces. Furthermore, these connections lay the **groundwork** in the exchange of knowledge and craftsmanship, resurrecting local arts and native practices that might otherwise fade.



### 4.3. CONNECTING GENERATIONS

Building connections between urban youth and village elders introduces a fresh dimension to intergenerational relationships, fostering a robust network of **solidarity**. Bridging these age groups through culture and art stands as a linchpin in village revitalisation, yielding a myriad of invaluable benefits. This endeavour nurtures empathy, strengthens the fabric of community ties and leaves a profound and lasting legacy. This intergenerational connection **represents** an investment that spans the village's **past, present, and future**. It acts as a bridge, preserving time-honoured traditions whilst propelling the entire community towards a thriving future. With many traditional skills and crafts on the **brink of extinction** due to the retirement of older artisans, it becomes essential to encourage the seamless transfer of these skills to younger generations through artistic and cultural activities.



#### 4.4. INTRODUCING PROGRAM

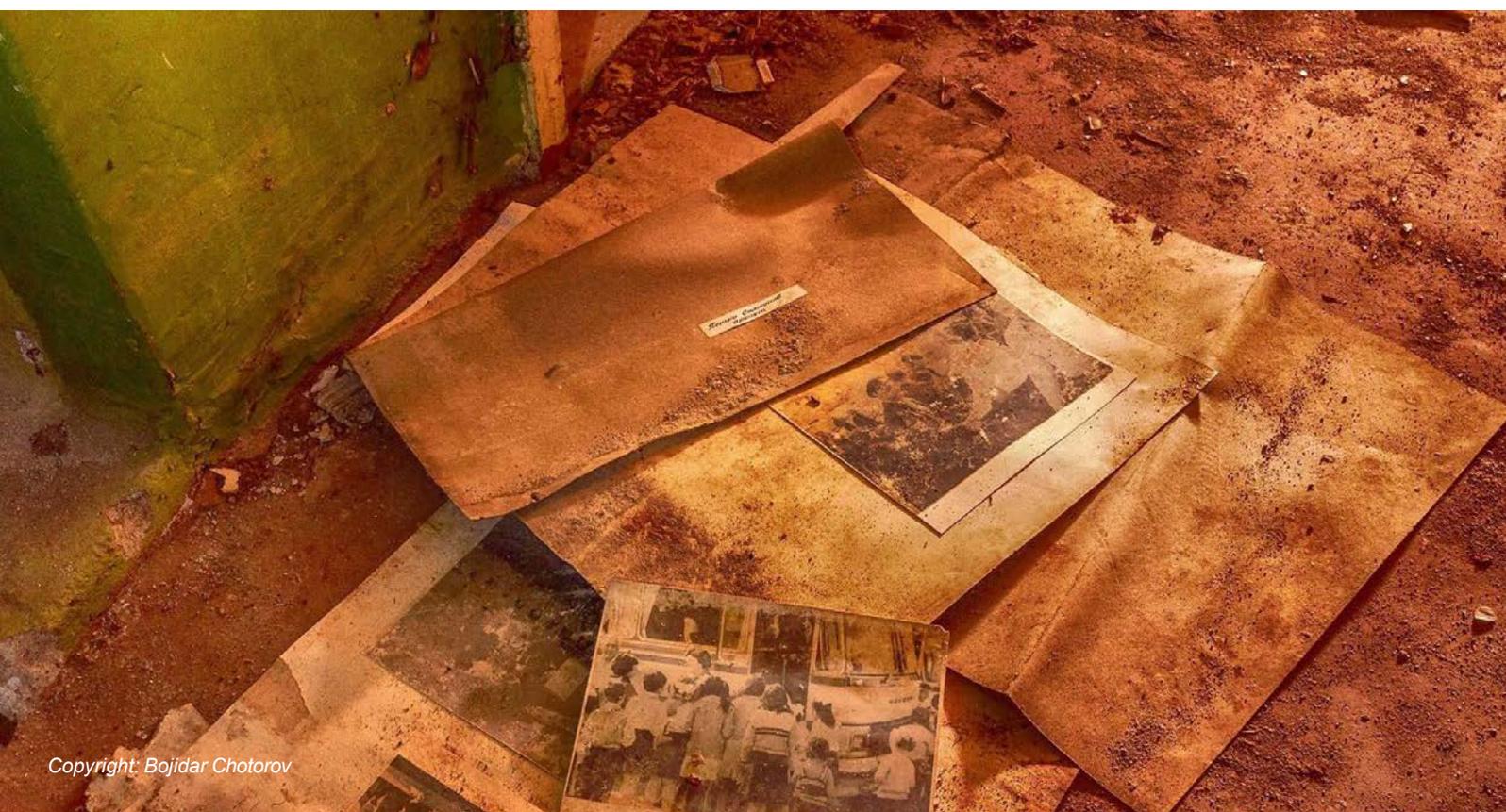
As mentioned earlier, many young couples have expressed interest in the village. It became clear that introducing people to the village and helping them integrate is vital. It is influencing various aspects of their motivation to stay in a village, their life in the village, their relationships with the locals. When individuals from urban or other backgrounds show interest in residing in a particular village, it is crucial to have someone acquainted with the local scene to guide them through the nuances.

This assistance benefits newcomers by making them feel welcome, helping them foster a sense of belonging, and **facilitating** their involvement in community gatherings. It also accelerates the establishment of **connections** that might otherwise take considerable time. We introduce them to the mayor, to key figures in the village, offer invaluable advice, and more. Moreover, it's essential for the local residents, many of whom haven't seen an influx of younger individuals in years, to have a **bridge builder** between generations and backgrounds. Often, the elderly need the assurance that a **trusted** individual is introducing them to newcomers to feel comfortable. This underscores one of the primary takeaways: the movement towards the village should encompass stages of transition, **communication**, and assimilation. These insights derive from the collective experience of the several families who moved to the village and from conversations with locals.



#### 4.5. BUILDING CAPACITY IN the small cultural village centres

Community Village Cultural Centres, or '*Chitalishe*' called in Bulgaria, hold a unique position not only within the Bulgarian framework but also on the **international** stage. Since 2017, Chitalishte has been recognised and listed on **UNESCO's** Good Practice Register for its exemplary role in supporting the preservation and promotion of intangible cultural heritage. (Velev, 2018) Founded 160 years ago, Chitalishte remains the most pivotal public institution in Bulgaria, symbolising an integral part of the nation's cultural heritage. These centres are **omnipresent**, found in every village, and have been instrumental in safeguarding and championing Bulgarian folk traditions, encompassing music, dance, and crafts and have also functioned as a hub for **social discourse**, offering a space for public debates and **civic rights** during times of political unrest. Currently, there are approximately 1,200 Chitalishte throughout Bulgaria, but sadly, many face neglect or limited activity, largely due to rural depopulation. Recommendations from the Observatory for Cultural Economics and the "Ideas Factory" both emphasise the importance of the **revitalisation** of these community centres. They still form a network but often do not reach their utmost potential. (Dnenik 2023) Industry experts suggest a thorough analysis and bolstering of the infrastructure of Chitalishte across the nation. Yanina Taneva, founder of Ideas Factory, underscores these centres role as a **nexus between classical and contemporary art**, addressing the evolving intricacies of our times. She accentuates the significance of a cultural mediation, arguing that Chitalishte, originally devised for identity cultivation, now can not act as **cultural intermediary** and should be bolstered in this **capacity**. Additionally, it's crucial to spark the interest of **young individuals** in the role of the *Chitalishte* and **how** they can engage in its activities.



ПОСТОЯНСТВОТО ПОСТИГА ИДЕЯТА

ОБЕ  
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УМРИ!!

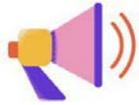
СВАДИ



#### 4.6. THE IMPORTANCE OF KIDS AND FAMILY ACTIVITIES

A pressing demographic challenge in small and dwindling rural areas is the notably ageing population. That's why our primary target group comprises **families or couples** poised to start a family, seeking a locale to lay down roots and build their homes. Typically, these are people hunting for a wholesome environment for their offspring, nestled in nature, with access to pure resources, organic fare, proper infrastructure, sustainability, places apt for growing vegetable gardens. Such families require an environment filled with quality activities for their children. That's why in our initiative, we put a **spotlight** on engaging with children. Alongside our monthly Oslon weekend gatherings, we've been hands-on with events for the local kids called "Lessons of virtues". As touched upon earlier, in August we hosted a Tents Camp for 16 younglings aged between 7 to 14, encompassing locals and those from underprivileged backgrounds. Moreover, we created a little **play area** for the kids as part of the campsite.





#### 4.7. NECESSARY CONDITIONS

Proper transport and venues for community meet-ups are fundamental prerequisites for a community to flourish. Spaces for dialogue, chats, and festivities are pivotal in nurturing social interactions and forging bonds among folks. Moreover, infrastructure can entice businesses and industries to rural locales, subsequently creating job prospects. Community halls, sports centres, kids' areas, nature retreats, and leisure zones play a significant role in sparking a lively social scene in rural settings.



#### 4.8. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NETWORK

One primary lesson we have drawn from our journey is the undeniable significance of collaboration. Our partnership with CIRCE members, local and national NGOs, local individuals, the enriching workshops the fellows researchers conducted, and the fruitful cross-disciplinary exchanges that took place during the weekends reaffirmed this. It is clear that by championing teamwork and valuing a multitude of perspectives, we can draw upon the collective ingenuity and skill of people from varied backgrounds. This approach not only enhances the effectiveness and sustainability of community projects but also broadens the network of potential **future partners** and opportunities, ultimately contributing to the long-term success of initiatives aimed at revitalizing depopulated rural areas.



#### 4.9. THE ROLE OF CIRCE FLEXIBLE FUNDING

CIRCE's adaptable form of funding, often characterised as process-oriented or process-driven funding, has been pivotal in the success of our project. This funding methodology recognises and values the journey, trial-and-error, and continuous learning that unfold throughout the project or initiative. It champions versatility and encourages **creativity** in chasing the project's aims, thus nurturing innovation and an ability to adapt to changing scenarios. It has granted us the flexibility to shape our endeavours to the distinct needs of the target demographic and remain attuned to revelations accrued during the project's roll-out. Also, it has enabled us to embrace change and make adjustments to our initial project plan where necessary. This adaptability and openness to **learning** and evolution have been crucial in making our project more effective and relevant to the community it serves. In essence, CIRCE's process-oriented funding has empowered us to continually refine and improve our approach based on real-world experiences and feedback.

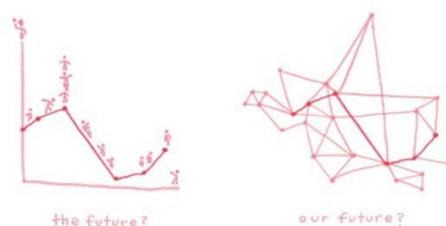


## 5. CREATIVE IMPACT RESEARCH CENTRE EUROPE - CIRCE

*"Cultural activities are fundamental means to promote democratic values such as tolerance, opposition to discrimination, solidarity, freedom of expression, and respect for human dignity. Participation in culture provides an opportunity for shared social experiences, allowing different communities to contribute to social interactions." Kalanova (2021)*

In reviewing the landscape of rural renaissance and the revitalisation of villages, we are confronted with a spectrum of challenges, ranging from pervasive social inequality to the gradual erosion of cultural identity. The findings of this report accentuate the necessity of a systematic, holistic approach deeply rooted in community values, inclusivity, and the harnessing of indigenous potential. The insights offered resonate with the goals of CIRCE, reinforcing the instrumental **role of creativity in rejuvenating local communities**, and championing diversity within the creative and cultural sectors. Their role especially in the face of current and anticipated crises, is brought to the fore.

A **possible future study** would aim to produce guidelines and digital interactive handbooks to assist other rural areas. Given Bulgaria's alarming rate of depopulation, the most rapid globally, the strategies developed here could pave the way for interventions on an international scale. As these strategies bear fruit in Bulgaria, they could potentially be **adapted and replicated** in other regions in Europe with similar challenges.



Graphic: Tandem Europe

# Reflection

## 6. REFLECTION

This **practice-oriented research** delved into addressing and critiquing the challenges facing the EU's least developed region, which included issues like *social inequality, demographic crises, depopulation, regional disparities, cultural erosion, educational gaps, poor infrastructure, health problems, climate change, and the lack of adequate policies.*

Reflecting on the insights gained, the project has **reshaped** our understanding of rural areas by demonstrating that, with the right approach, they can thrive, challenging the prevailing narrative of rural neglect. This project stands as a beacon of hope, illustrating how rural revitalization can contribute to the preservation of world cultural heritage and the reinvigoration of **local economies**. It positions these rural areas as rich in potential, meriting attention and investment.

Addressing depopulation, a critical concern, the project actively and successfully **worked to attract** young families and individuals back to rural areas. At the same time, the rural environment has proven to be healthier, sought after, and sustainable for families, thereby contributing to improvements in physical and mental well-being. Educational camps and initiatives for children **provided access** to activities previously unavailable in small communities. Cultural events not only drew young people but also **potential** skilled workforce from educational and business sectors, sparking discussions about **future plans** in the region. This entire movement attracted media attention, shedding **light** on infrastructure and accessibility challenges in rural areas.

The project followed a structured **sequence**, including identifying challenges, ideation, planning, prototyping, implementation, insights, and reflection. It conducted various types of research, established partnerships, mapped local potential, conducted surveys and interviews, organized voluntary actions, facilitated focus groups, created physical spaces, engaged in dissemination and media activities, organized a Rural Festival bridging generations, hosted cultural events with the locals, introduced programs to newcomers, all guided by the principles of building trust and community.

By connecting generations, blending modernity with tradition, and creating a robust network between the village and the city, a model was formed in a way that successfully sets a positive **example**.

The project's implementation has provided a framework for the development of economic initiatives with the **potential** to create jobs in **subsequent project phases**. Key findings from the conducted surveys emphasize the critical importance of **nurturing existing cultural community** centers and enhancing their capacity, along with the revitalization of non-functioning educational institutions. Recommendations include improving healthcare access, preserving traditional crafts and folklore, and enhancing infrastructure. Furthermore, there is a strong emphasis on family-oriented activities and attracting young families, supported by social programs to bolster farming-related endeavors.

**Government policies** and supportive legislation are regarded as essential for successful revitalisation efforts. The report highlights the need for a polycentric model and underscores a significant discrepancy between Bulgaria's constitutional mandate for balanced regional development and the actual allocation of cultural funding. **Despite the constitutional call** for balanced investment policies, the majority of cultural resources are concentrated in the capital, with around 80% of funding allocated there, potentially hindering the intended balanced regional development.

To address these challenges effectively, there is a call for a rural-focused policy **based on real research**, with active participation from **local communities** who possess the most profound understanding of a region's specific needs and characteristics.

The report indicates that actions triggered by research and engagement with local communities are the most suitable approach and yield tangible results. Culture should not only fall under the purview of the Ministry of Culture but should also be integrated into the strategies of other ministries, such as the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, within the broader context of combating demographic crises and fostering **regional development**.



By adopting a multifaceted approach, the project **successfully** prototyped and laid the foundation for the sustainable eco-conscious **business model, "Avalira Artistic Campsite."** This model not only served as a platform for cultural exchange but also transformed a depopulated village into an artistic hub, complete with a campsite, stage, and workshop areas. It hosted cultural events showcasing the sustainable village lifestyle, simultaneously boosting the local economy.

This initiative opened up new opportunities for rural areas and integrated cultural events into areas where access to culture was once limited. A significant focus was on combating social isolation, and the project excelled in **fostering community bonds**, a sense of belonging through social activities, and addressing the needs of marginalized groups in so-called peripheries. The project **validated the hypothesis** that bridging urban families with locals through cultural activities can have a profound impact on rural revival.

By effectively mapping existing and potential local resources, the project initiated events that provided fair compensation to both locals and families working in the creative sector. The creative enterprise not only boosted the local economy of the rural area but also served as fertile ground for the future of **one of the many** abandoned villages in Bulgaria and other European counties facing similar challenges. This promising future should not be limited to just this area - the implementation of a **fair policy strategy** has the capacity to transform the reality of these forgotten treasures of our tangible and intangible cultural heritage, which are the essence, the identity and DNA of countries like Bulgaria.

**The "Rural Renaissance" research stands as a testament to the transformative power of culture.** In culturally underserved places like Oslen Krivodol village, Bulgaria, this approach provides proactive responses to potential future crises, demonstrating cost-efficiency and effectiveness. The practice-oriented research has contributed to a more equitable, diverse, and sustainable future, resilient in the face of crises.



“If not us, then who?  
If not now, then when?”



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*Photo from the volunteer camp at the village*

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