



EXperiential TOurism for sustainable RurAl development



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LU.1 Rural tourism: key concepts & challenges at local/EU level

An innovative approach for vocational education and training (VET) in rural tourism



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What is rural tourism?

- Rural tourism is a tourism activity that takes place in non-urban areas, characterized by low population density, agricultural and forestry landscapes, and traditional social structures.
- It is closely linked to activities based on nature, agriculture, rural lifestyle, and local culture.
- It promotes a unique connection with agricultural environments and contributes to the economic and social well-being of rural regions, with a focus on sustainability, authenticity, and personalized experiences.



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The role of rural tourism

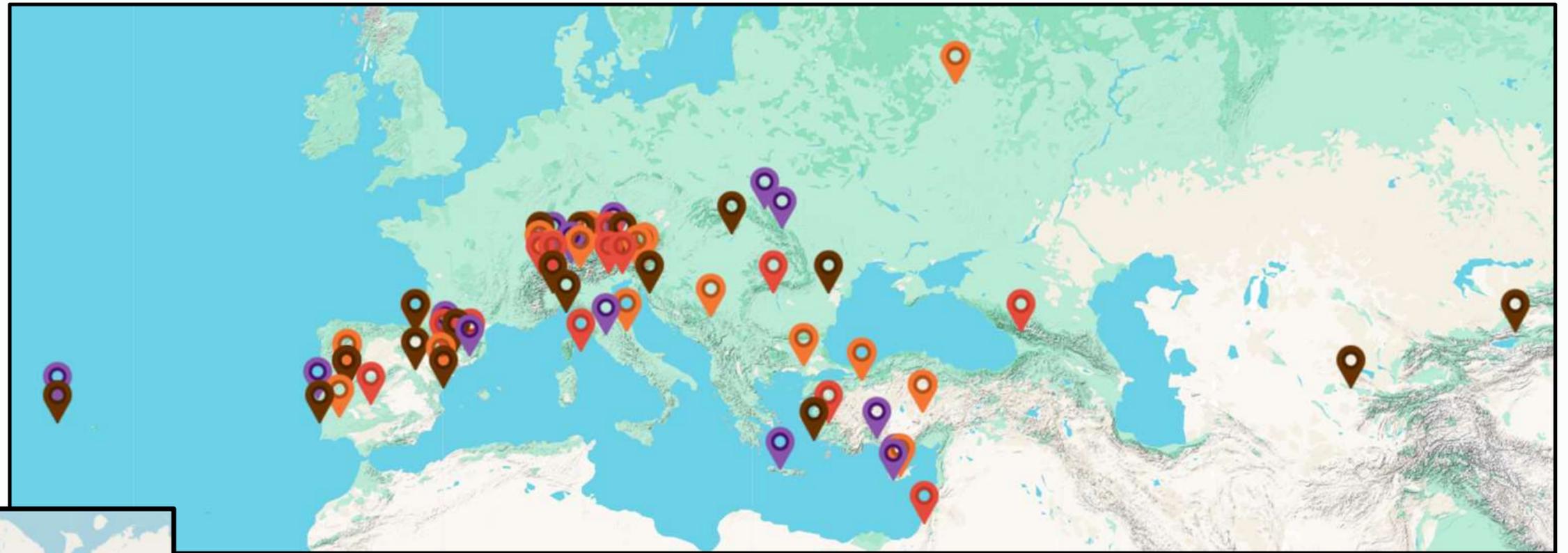
- Rural tourism is an important driver of economic growth, cultural preservation, and sustainability.
- It has demonstrated remarkable resilience after the COVID-19 pandemic, with an increase in popularity among local travelers.
- It contributes to GDP, job creation, and income diversification in rural communities.
- It helps to combat depopulation and maintain services in rural areas.



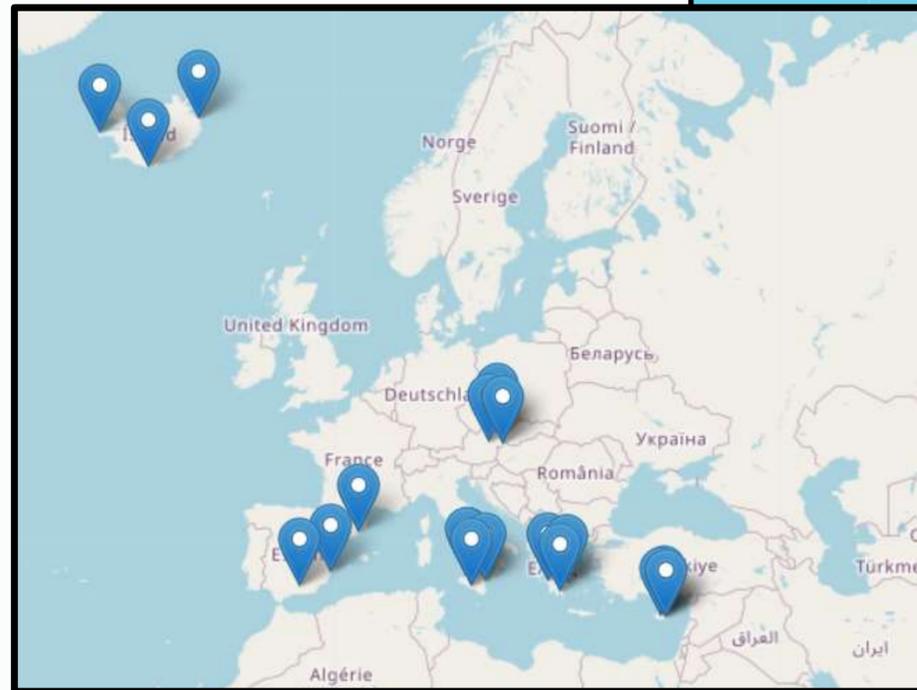
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Maps showing the growth of rural tourism in Europe



Map of Best Tourism European Villages by UN Tourism Initiatives.



The EXTOR Interactive Map

STAR, Digital self-assessment tool for local public authorities in tourism destinations in rural areas.



Key trends in rural tourism

- Increased demand for **authentic experiences** that allow visitors to learn about local cultures, traditions, and cuisines.
- Growing interest in **sustainability and eco-tourism**, with a focus on conservation and low-impact activities.
- **Digitalization** of the tourism sector, with an increase in online bookings and the search for digital information.
- Greater attention to **health and wellness tourism**, with rural areas ideal for relaxation.
- **Diversification** of activities, including hiking, cycling, cultural festivals, and gastronomic tours.



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What defines a rural area?

- Low population density.
- Land use for agriculture, forestry, and other natural activities.
- Economy based on the primary sector (agriculture, fishing, forestry).
- Distance from urban centers and limited access to infrastructure and services.
- Smaller communities with strong social ties and a more traditional pace of life.
- Administrative and policy definitions based on population density and the proportion of the population living in rural areas.



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Summary table on useful elements for defining rural areas.

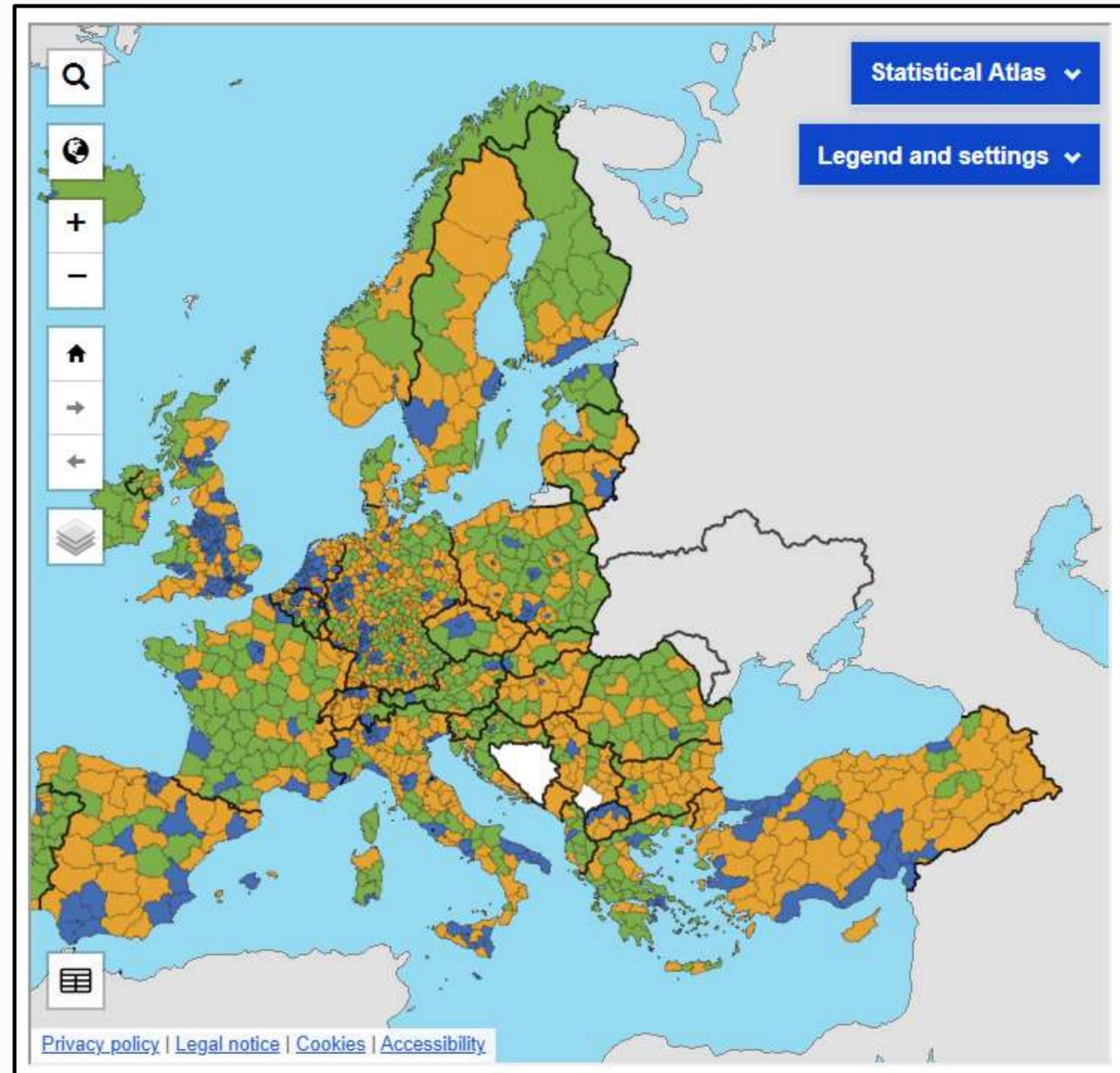
Aspect	Details	Source
Population Density	Rural areas typically have lower population densities compared to urban areas. Thresholds vary: <150 inhabitants per sq. km (OECD) or <1,000 people per sq. mile. These criteria highlight dispersed populations with less density than urban regions.	OECD, 2018
Land Use and Development	Land in rural areas is primarily used for agriculture, forestry, or natural purposes rather than residential or commercial development. Housing is scattered, reflecting the land-use pattern that supports rural economies and shapes their environmental and social characteristics.	European Commission, 1999
Economic Activities	Economies in rural areas often depend on primary sector activities like farming, fishing, mining, and forestry. Industrial and commercial activities are less prominent, with a strong reliance on natural resources and primary production defining the rural economy.	FAO, 2017
Distance from Urban Centres	Rural areas are typically geographically isolated, located far from urban centres or major transportation hubs. This results in limited access to urban amenities, infrastructure, and essential services like hospitals, schools, and shopping centres.	UN-Habitat, 2020
Cultural and Social Characteristics	Rural communities are smaller and more close-knit than urban areas. They often exhibit stronger social ties, a slower-paced lifestyle, and more traditional values. These aspects contribute to the identity of rural areas and influence policy design and implementation.	UNESCO, 2019
Policy and Administrative Definitions	Rural areas are classified by administrative boundaries, census data, or specific criteria. For example, EUROSTAT classifies areas as rural if >50% of the population resides in rural zones, intermediate if 20%-50% live in rural areas, and urban if <20% live in rural areas. OECD defines rural as having a population density of <150 inhabitants per sq. km. The European Commission also considers factors like low population density, expansive natural land, and primary-sector-driven economies.	EUROSTAT, OECD, European Commission



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EUROSTAT rural territories mythology map



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The importance of experiential tourism

- Experiential tourism focuses on offering unique, personalized, and emotionally engaging experiences.
- It is linked to *special interest tourism*, where tourists seek unique cultural, historical, and natural activities.
- It integrates daily life with tourism, with diverse visitor motivations and a growing focus on authenticity.
- It aligns with the principles of **sustainable tourism**, involving local initiatives that preserve cultural heritage and support local economies.
- Experiential tourism offers the opportunity to participate in the daily life of rural communities.



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Cultural and natural preservation

Cultural tourism highlights the traditions, customs, and heritage of rural areas, offering visitors experiences such as local festivals, crafts, and traditional cuisine.

Eco-tourism focuses on the conservation of biodiversity and natural areas.

- Ecotourism is promoted by the United Nations to combat poverty, protect the environment, and promote sustainable development.
- Ecotourism encourages tourists to respect cultural and natural heritage.
- Ecotourism and cultural tourism have economic, educational, and employment benefits.



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Community development in rural tourism

- Community development is a process aimed at improving people's quality of life and promoting inclusion and social justice.
- Approaches based on needs, participation, assets, and rights.
- It is important to clearly define the needs and interests of local communities to target policies and tourism activities.
- Tourism can contribute to community development by attracting visitors, investors, and new residents.



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Community development in rural tourism

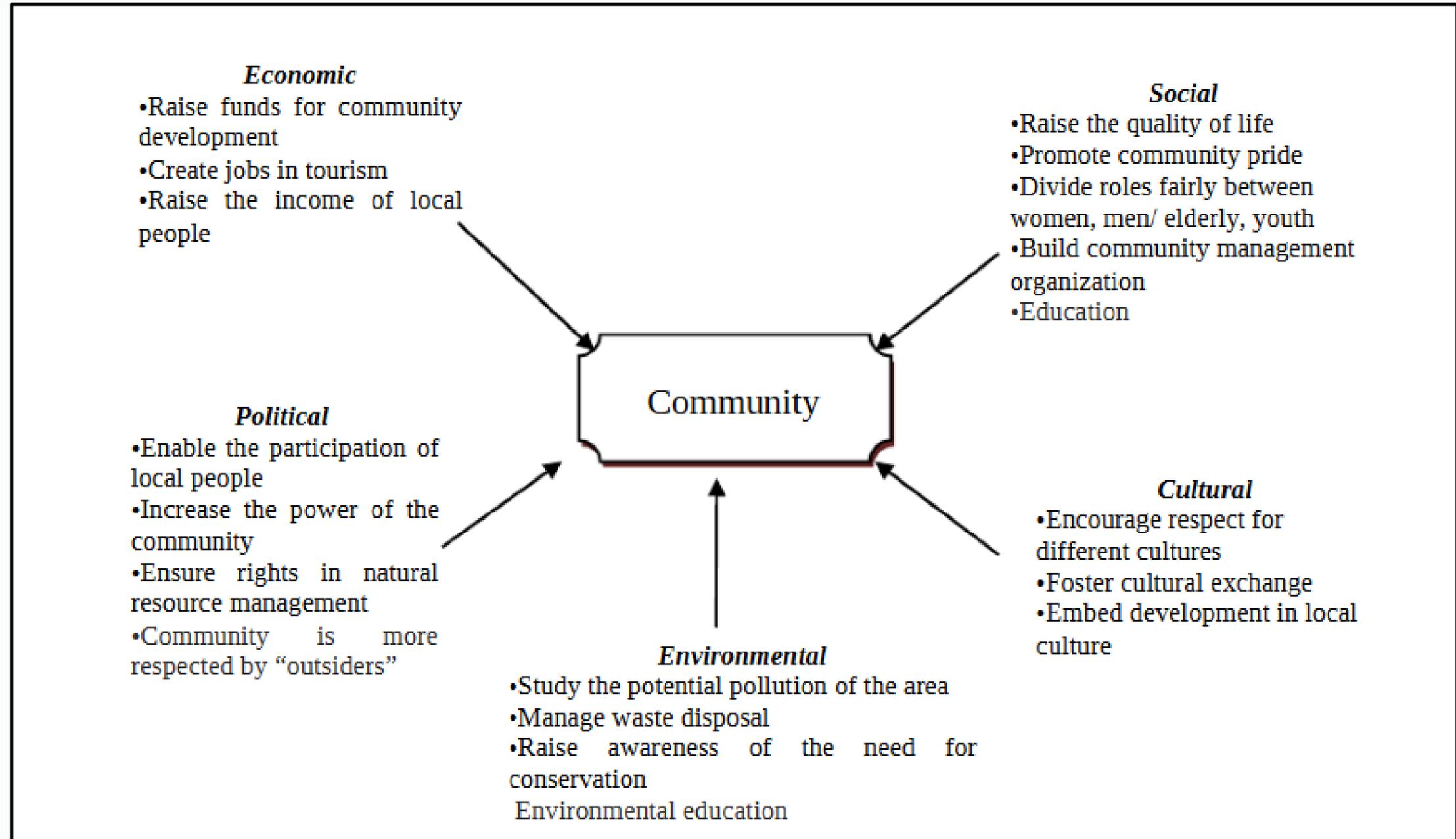
- **Needs-Based Approach.** Identifies and addresses deficiencies within a community by providing external support and resources. This traditional deficit model focuses on existing needs and problems.
- **Problem-Solving Approach.** Uses diverse strategies to create solutions for community issues. This method emphasizes adaptability and practical problem resolution.
- **Participatory Approach.** Encourages community involvement at every stage of development, from initiation to evaluation, fostering a sense of ownership and collective action.
- **Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD).** Focuses on utilizing existing local assets and resources to drive sustainable community development. This approach emphasizes the strengths rather than the weaknesses of a community.
- **Power-Conflict Approach.** Aims to resolve conflicts that hinder progress and development by promoting peaceful coexistence and social harmony.
- **Welfare Approach.** Seeks to improve community well-being, happiness, and overall prosperity by enhancing their capacity for development.
- **Rights-Based Approach.** Ensures the protection and enforcement of human rights within communities, addressing abuses and promoting social equity.



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Contribution of tourism in building communities



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Challenges of rural tourism at the local and European levels

- Inadequate **accessibility and infrastructure** (roads, public transport, internet connectivity).
- **Seasonality** of tourism, with activities dependent on specific times of the year.
- Concerns about **environmental sustainability**, with risks of pollution and degradation of natural resources.
- Difficulties in **marketing and awareness**, with limited resources and little digital training.
- **Funding constraints**, labor shortages, and regulatory obstacles.



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How to address the challenges

- Invest in **adequate infrastructure**, including transport, digital networks, and basic services.
- Develop tourist attractions and activities that can be enjoyed year-round, such as cultural tourism and wellness retreats.
- Adopt **sustainable practices**, such as waste management, conservation programs, and responsible tourism policies.
- Improve marketing strategies, both offline and online.
- Collaborate with local, national, and European bodies for resources and expertise.
- Promote **community initiatives** to ensure the participation and empowerment of residents.



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EXERCISE: PLANNING AND CREATING THE TOURISM PROJECT EXERCISE



The planning and creation of a tourism project require a structured approach based on insights gathered from the **preliminary study**. This phase focuses on analysing the general map of results to define clear goals and strategies. A **SWOT analysis** is an essential tool in this process, allowing for the identification of key factors that influence the project's success.

1. **SWOT Analysis Framework:**
2. **Assessment of the Preliminary Study:**
3. **SWOT Analysis Implementation**
4. **Defining Goals and Strategies:**
5. **Developing a Roadmap for Implementation**
6. **Sustainability and Long-Term Viability**

By applying a SWOT-based planning model, the tourism project can be structured effectively, ensuring a strategic and sustainable approach that maximizes strengths and opportunities while mitigating weaknesses and threats.



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2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)



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Conclusions

- Rural tourism is a growing sector with great potential for economic development, cultural preservation, and environmental sustainability.
- Rural tourism requires a collaborative and sustainable approach to address challenges and maximize benefits.
- Involving local communities in decision-making processes is essential to ensure responsible tourism aligned with the needs of residents.
- Digitalization, investments, and sustainable policies are crucial for the future of rural tourism.



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