# Place-based sustainability—act or wait-and-see?

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There has been a "territorial turn" in exploring sustainable development in the past two decades. Sustainability is increasingly seen as rooted in local resources, relationships, and values. Cultural and creative industries (CCIs) are a substantial local resource and participants of local development. One of the most important relationships of CCIs is with local municipalities, which usually have an overview of local resources, and a role of redefining national level policy ideas, including those pertaining to cultural and art activities. The paper examines place-based development in Valmiera County as a case of national cultural policy translation, grounded in interpretations of the availability of local resources for change. The paper argues that the trajectories of local cultural development are indeed strongly related to local development agents' interpretations of available local resources, including active CCIs. In negotiating the preferred development paths, the stakeholders tend to respond to one of two strategies carried out by the local municipality: Act (taking upon themselves the role of a cultural operator) or Wait-and-see (enabling other cultural operators, the private and non-governmental CCI sector). The paper also highlights the role of creative intermediaries in negotiation processes. The Wait-and-see approach is seen as preferable and more sustainable in the long run.

KEYWORDS

place-based, sustainability, policy translation, cultural and creative industries, intermediaries

## 1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, in exploring local, regional, and even national sustainable development, there has been a "territorial turn," which means, inter alia, a growing interest in place-based particularities and assets (Moriggi, 2021; p. 15). For instance, the EU Territorial Agenda has been in favor of a place-based approach to policy-making, urging local administrators to develop strategies tailored to specific territories (European Commission., 2015). Sustainability should be rooted in local resources, capacities, and the distinct nature of particular places (Roep et al., 2015).

Place-specificity entails making decisions by considering the natural and institutional resources as well as local needs and capacities, and grassroots knowledge and preferences (Markey et al., 2010). Sustainability is increasingly understood as a place-based phenomenon, grounded in people-place relationship (Pisters et al., 2019). This means viewing a place not as something spatially fixed, but as a relational space, re-made and re-configured through socio-economic relations (Paasi, 2009; Horlings, 2016).

When the view of sustainable development is relational, we have to presume that people can have the ability to shape places in new ways, to make them more liveable for present and future generations (Balvanera et al., 2017). The broad vision of regenerative ways of living (aka sustainability) manifests itself as a shared interpretation among all actors involved (Pisters et al., 2019). Thus, sustainability has an "inner dimension"—values, culture, and worldview (Pisters et al., 2019).

Previous studies (Olsson et al., 2017; Collins et al., 2018; Duxbury et al., 2021; the DISCE Horizon Europe project., 2022) have shown that place-based initiatives have proliferated in various regions and are important drivers of CCIs development through new alliances and collective narratives, albeit with support from external actors and new technologies. However, there has not been enough research about the way local place-based transformations unfold and how the "place" (with its specific resources) influences the trajectories of development (Moriggi, 2021; p. 16). In addition, there are no clear, direct empirical and testable results that prove that creativity fosters inclusive social development and sustainability (Klein et al., 2021).

Meanwhile creative industries produce "symbolic goods" (Markusen et al., 2008; Strielkowski, 2018) with symbolic value (Krisiukeniene and Pilinkiene, 2023) and are strongly connected with the particular place to create local amenities (Krueger and Buckingham, 2012; Della Lucia and Trunfio, 2018; Rodrigues et al., 2023) and using their own resources (Yum, 2020). Thus, policy-makers are looking for new ways to sustain the activity and growth of CCIs, believed to be a growing and potential-holding sector (Redaelli, 2019; Arcos-Pumarola et al., 2023). However, the support provided is not guaranteed to be effective, as the underlying understanding of the CCI needs may have substantial gaps.

The research carried out will allow the authors to identify place-based sustainability as an overarching goal and create a structure for a dialogue to analyse cultural policy, plot out the possible developments and explore actions in response to "sustainability" answering the following questions: How do non-urban governance agents translate the national level CCI policy into local policies? What approaches are used (Act or Wait-and-See), for the CCIs to be able to fully express their potential as promoters of place-based sustainability?

This analysis will contribute to the knowledge stock on trajectories of place-based sustainable development.

## 2. Literature review on places, CCIs and policy translation

Places are outcomes of deliberate actions and negotiations by local agents, with "sustainability" defined in terms of specificities of the time and the place. One of such local agents participating in redefinitions of sustainable development are cultural and creative industries, henceforth CCIs (Zemite et al., 2022).

Scholars stress that one of the key issues for territorial development is equitable distribution of cultural resources. Those resources are a prerequisite to nurturing creativity (Gustafsson and Lazzaro, 2021; UNESCO, 2022; p. 222, 46), and a strategic resource for innovation (Pratt and Jeffcutt, 2009; Grossi et al., 2019; Gerlitz and Prause, 2021), as well as a driving force for regional development (Lazzeretti et al., 2017; Cunningham et al., 2019).

Researchers emphasize the role of the local creative industries, accentuating that CCIs can foster place-based sustainability, if there is an organization offering a range of support and enabling services to the local creative industries (Komorowski et al., 2021), due to observation that the CCIs have become a key asset at the top of any kind of value chain (Sacco et al., 2018; Lazzaro, 2020). In addition, CCIs can be seen as an important driver of citizens' quality of life

from many perspectives, such *as local governance, social inclusion, community involvement, capability building and networking, hence significantly contributing to local development* (Sacco et al., 2013; European Parliament., 2018). Some scholars distinguish citizens as drivers of innovation due to the CCI power to foster societal values of identity, belonging, democracy and participation in innovative ways (Sonkoly and Vahtikari, 2018).

There are two different practical approaches to foster creative activity in communities in non-urban areas. The first approach is to place emphasis on establishing dedicated funds, grants, or innovative schemes, such as Regional Arts Fund (Australia), "*Comeback grant*" (Austria), tax credits for film shoots outside of key urban areas (Ireland) (UNESCO, 2022, 223). The results strengthen the argument that "*CCIs become crucial players for the uptake of regional economy, also strengthening competitive edge, cooperation and internationalization of CCIs themselves*" (Gerlitz and Prause, 2021). UNESCO emphasizes that the cultural and creative sector is an important resource for fostering dynamic growth and accelerating sustainable development (UNESCO, 2022; p. 45).

The second approach is connected with following the global trend to strengthen the skills of cultural professionals as intermediaries to foster more diverse cultural expressions in non-urban areas. This refers directly to UNESCO proposed vision "*policy-making is informed and involves multiple public bodies* (UNESCO, 2022; p. 45), where the involvement of stakeholders is crucial - *a whole-of-government approach and participatory leadership at the local, national and international levels* (UNESCO, 2022; p. 46). As CCIs is a human-intensive sector (Gustafsson and Lazzaro, 2021), persons involved in networks in which creativity can flourish, could create sustainability (Komorowski et al., 2021). This approach follows the direction of researchers who focus on networks and interactions more than the cultural infrastructure (Comunian, 2011). The creative networks are so important due to reason that they emphasize the unique character traits of the needs of the creative industries utmost highlighting the value of place and its competitive advantage (Rodrigues and Franco, 2018). To summarize, despite long lasting debates, CCI's potential appears largely untapped.

The idea of the value of CCIs is one of the policy ideas which has traveled widely in the last decades of the XX century (Rindzevičiute et al., 2015), and it has substantial appeal, especially for places where other economic resources are scarce. The process of transplanting foreign-born politics into local level policy is not always successful. For instance, a similar process in Lithuania demonstrated (Rindzevičiute et al., 2015) that specific creative industry strategies could not work in Lithuania as there were too few agents of the necessary kind (small and medium businesses in the creative industry sphere), and there was "*a huge alienation between artists and businessmen*" (Rindzevičiute et al., 2015; p. 8). Another example, from Australia, demonstrates that for small cities, the vibrancy of the creative economy may stem from non-capitalistic community resources (Clements, 2018) rather than institutional, human, and financial resources that can be found in metropolises. All in all, various examples point to the issue of non-linear transferability of the CCI policy. The concept that may explain this phenomenon is that of policy translation. The notion of translation cannot be reduced to replication but is a source of

innovation where the receiving end transforms the received policy according to the interests that have high value for the involved institutional entrepreneurs (Rindzevičiute et al., 2015). The new policy idea becomes a driver for policy innovation, in which actors proceed from the interpretations that they have, influence the ideas and practices of other stakeholders and re-shape the existing interpretations and practices in the process (Rindzevičiute et al., 2015).

Another study on the "*travel*" of the concept of creative industries set in New Zealand (Prince, 2010) analyses the process of "*assembling*" the concept at the receiving end both as a political and technical process, which includes the alignment of divergent motivation, translation of ideas and invention of new concepts and practices. In analyzing the adoption of another policy label, that of "*creative city*" the conclusion is that it "*facilitates a purposeful re-narration of urban politics, along with the adaptive reuse of available policy instruments* (*As a label, it just works.*)" (Peck, 2012; p. 479). They must, in other words, exhibit a certain quality of practical portability and adaptability in their associated formulations and frames, while enabling at least the impression of local political "*ownership*." Very often, these policies will define some readily visualized "*common ground*," in order to establish a novel language and locus of policy, and to reunite policy constituencies, stakeholders and tribes on some redefined terrain" (Peck, 2012; p. 479). While the analysis of Jamie Peck is highly critical, we may borrow from it the idea of "*readily visualized common ground*," and the ease of adaptability of the "*formulations and frames*" suiting the current challenges and realities of the local policy-makers and other stakeholders.

Similarly, to Peck, who stresses the role of individuals in the dissemination of ideas, the influential paper on translation of policy by Stone (2012, 2017) accentuates the "*soft*" transfer of ideas via various kinds of networks. All in all, the idea of policy translation focusses the researchers' attention on the local contexts of "*assembling*" the policy idea, the interpretations by various stakeholders and their alignment. The contexts of assembling may include various challenges characteristic of the late-neoliberal urban life: urban governance, flexible-labor markets, socio-spatial polarization, gentrified housing markets, "*all of which the creativity frame endeavors, in effect, to translate into either necessities or virtues*" (Peck, 2012; p. 479).

Enhancing sustainability means a process of social learning and the co-construction of a common language (Pisters et al., 2019; Gianelle et al., 2020). It is particularly important to consider the local-level transformations as "*deliberative*" and rooted in the agents' interactions and interpretations shaping and reshaping development decisions (Moriggi, 2021; p. 16). Thus, the current paper will focus on the ideas of non-linear translation of national level CCI policy into local one, in the context of support for local CCIs as a local resource for sustainable development.

## 3. Materials and methods

This article attempts to answer the research question by exploring two main ideas:

1) CCI are a resource for negotiating place-based sustainability.

2) Non-urban governance agents translating the national level CCI policy into local policy may follow different approaches (broadly defined as Act or Wait-and-see) based on their interpretations of local resources.

To identify the role of CCI as a resource the research team had to make a choice of the case study location and find out whether the CCIs are able to fully express their potential as promoters of place-based sustainability identified theoretically from the review of scholarly literature.

Qualitative research was done applying a case study approach. The authors selected an "extreme case," as the objective was to achieve the greatest possible amount of information on a given phenomenon, activating more actors and more mechanisms in the situation studied (Flyvbjerg, 2006; p. 229). The case of Valmiera County selected for analysis can be considered at a "turning point" toward seeing the CCIs as an important resource for the place's development. The time between 2020 and 2022 saw the development of the bid for the status of the European Capital of Culture 2027 (ECoC, 2027), which according to informants acted as a significant catalyst for generating a coherent new vision for culture in Valmiera Country and activated a broad range of stakeholders, including the public. As evidenced by the informants, local cultural processes have also been significantly influenced by another factor: the administrative–territorial reform that changed the range of stakeholders, necessitated new agreements as to roles, rules, and communication, as well as introduced a new structural entity—the Valmiera County Department of Culture.

The background on the case is as follows. There are 50,565 inhabitants in Valmiera county and 22,748 inhabitants in Valmiera city (Official Statistics Portal, 2023). Valmiera has been an industrial center since the beginning of 20th century. At the same time, one of the professional, state founded theaters—Valmiera Theater—is located there and it is one of the strongest elements of the city brand. This dual trait of the city has been stressed in the approach of the ECoC 2027 programme—the creative philosophy and at the same time a rationale that embraces industrial environments and rural areas and is able to successfully address the co-existing challenges in the different dimensions of societal life.

The research aims to explore the CCIs potential as a driver of place-based sustainability and test a structure for stakeholder dialogue, to analyze a choice of drivers in the possible developments and explore actions in response to those. The conceptual logic of the research is shown in Table 1.

Within the case study, the following methods were used: content analysis, semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews, and a scenario-based discussion.

Discourses of CCI development policy goals, perception of activities and connectivity of major local stakeholders (creative intermediaries) and the framing of development goals and approach were analyzed to unfold the content of the Latvian Guidelines for Cultural Policy (2021–2027), the bid for the status of the European Capital of Culture 2027 (ECoC, 2027) and Valmiera county Cultural policy. (2023).

Semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews were organized with identified 10 creative intermediaries from Valmiera city county during the period of January—February 2023. The results of the interviews were analyzed in the three main blocks—(1) Evidence of

TABLE 1 Conceptual logic of the research.

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|---|---|
| Place based sustainability—overarching goal | Theoretical background based on Roep et al. (2015), Pisters et al. (2019), and Klein et al. (2021)<br><br>• "Inner dimension"—values, culture and worldview, shared among all actors involved;<br>• The ability of future generations to access cultural resources;<br>• Cultural needs by protecting the tangible and intangible cultural capital;<br>• Sustainability rooted in local resources;<br>• Capacities and the distinct nature of particular places. |
| Cultural policy relevant to Valmiera County case | 1. The Latvian Guidelines for Cultural Policy (2021–2027)<br>2. The bid for the status of the European Capital of Culture 2027 (ECoC 2027)<br>3. Valmiera county Cultural policy. (2023) |
| Methods used to create vignettes (Act or Wait-and-See) | 1. The scenario analysis at the plenary sessions of the annual LAC conference (at the Latvian Academy of Culture Annual Multidisciplinary International Conference "Culture Crossroads XV" 2nd November, 2021).<br>2. Content analysis of the Cultural Policies relevant to Valmiera County case.<br>3. Semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews (10 interviews with creative intermediaries from Valmiera County). |
| Policy approach (Act or Wait-and-See) discussed in a scenario-based discussion | A scenario-based discussion with a Valmiera county policy-maker, an arts/cultural/community NGO and a Private entrepreneur. |

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the creative place; (2) The results of networking; (3) Preconditions for CCIs to flourish.

To identify how local governance actors see CCI as a resource, decision-makers had been addressed through the plenary session of the Latvian Academy of Culture Annual Multidisciplinary International Conference "Culture Crossroads XV" 2nd November (2021). A policymaker (Cesis county municipality), an entrepreneur (Kuldiga county) and a representative from NGO (Gulbene county) participated in the scenario analysis led by an innovation expert from Riga Technical University. The result of the scenario analysis of CCIs contribution and development in small cities highlighted two approaches used by local municipalities in Latvia– (1) Local government needs to stay out of the way, let things happen! (2) The crucial role of the political will which encourages place and people as enablers for creative industries to develop in small towns. The authors have followed this thread, summarizing it into two forms of approach taken by local policy makers—Act or Wait-and-See.

In order to understand how non-urban governance agents translate the politics of CCIs into local policies and what approaches are used, the authors analyzed the main CCI resources and future strategies of the Valmiera county and created two different scenarios. The scenarios were based on the content analysis of the Valmiera county bid for the European Capital of Culture 2027, where authors identified wishes highlighted by inhabitants of Valmiera county during the preparation of the bid—highlighting the wish for more active cultural participation, more contemporary art and more international events carried out in a sustainable and inclusive way. The collaboration during the process of the bid development facilitated recognition and formulation of the place based values.

To gain a deeper understanding of the roles of key local dynamics, the authors prepared two different vignettes. Those vignettes reflected the place based values expressed by informants and inhabitants of Valmiera county, and presented two different processes of the implementation. The vignette method consists of a set of systematically varied descriptions of situations presented

as scenarios in order to elicit respondents' beliefs, attitudes, or intended behaviors with respect to the presented vignettes (Steiner et al., 2016). The first vignette of the scenario emphasizes the role of NGO and private sector as a main driving force for the place development. The second vignette of the scenario was focused on the local government fostering CCI activities by direct involvement—initiating, programming, and financing from their own budget. A vignette exercise presents the choice of factors and factor levels that are systematically varied (Steiner et al., 2016).

A scenario-based discussion was organized with Valmiera county policymaker (representative from Valmiera County municipality), a creative entrepreneur and a representative from a cultural/community NGO to introduce and discuss the two different scenarios represented by vignettes. These informants were chosen due to their connection within the CCI sector and engagement in the process of the bid development for the European Capital of Culture 2027.

Scenario analysis is applied, as an opportunity for validating and synthesizing the findings and providing participatory opportunities for stakeholders to explore further development paths (Kosow and Gaßner, 2008). Scenario analysis is used both in its explorative function, to deepen accumulated understanding, as well as to generate communication among stakeholders and work out options for acting. Thus, it allows the voicing of basic assumptions with regard to cultural and creative industries, focus attention on their interconnectedness, and allow participants to discuss "alternate futures," as well as reveal ranges of developments in the case study locations with regard to place-based sustainability.

The main questions discussed in scenarios-based discussion were as follows: (1) What seems positive/negative in the first scenario and in the second scenario? (2) Is the cultural and creative sector a resource for Valmiera's development? Why? (3) What would be the optimal way for the municipality to help the local cultural and creative sector realize its potential? What could the local cultural and creative sector do to realize its

full potential? (4) What should be avoided regarding the future of Valmiera?

The interpretivism paradigm (Benton and Craib, 2001) is applied to this paper as an explanation of subjective meanings of individuals. Analysis of the content was based on thematic coding resulting in five key choices along which the decisions are taken.

# 4. Results and discussion

This section provides the results of the study along two main lines: the content of policy translation and the process. To demonstrate the link of the national-level and local-level policy, we first present the main ideas of the Latvian Guidelines for Cultural Policy (2021–2027). Then we reflect the key dimensions along which the stakeholders of the local cultural policy in Valmiera County are discussing their activities (4.1. to 4.5.). The roles of various stakeholders and the characteristic traits of the policy-making process are discussed in Conclusions.

The Latvian Guidelines for Cultural Policy (2021–2027) state that the overarching goal of the policy is development of sustainable and accessible culture that fosters individual development and the national state (the Latvian Guidelines for Cultural Policy, 2021–2027; p. 6). The key ideas include equal opportunities to use cultural services and participate in cultural processes, a balanced development of all cultural branches, high quality opportunities for cultural consumption and participation (the Latvian Guidelines for Cultural Policy, 2021–2027; p. 6).

Equal opportunities, a balance of all branches, and high quality—these are high-level abstractions, which need to be translated into cultural policies and practices of CCIs "on the ground." We will first examine the choices related to the content of cultural policies on the local level, and afterwards—the processes of shaping stakeholder interpretations and practices.

According to the interviews with stakeholders and the focus group discussion (see the Methodology and Background), there are five key choices along which the decisions must be taken, and where there are differing approaches among stakeholders. Based on their values of the place—rich cultural heritage, people-place relationships through the arts and culture, bringing in the international creative connections. In addition, we are taking into consideration network dynamics which combines established vs. new, local vs. international, with the significant role of creative intermediaries in the role of network facilitators.

Overall, the choice appears to be between safe and tried solutions for cultural programming vs. new paths. As noted in the Materials and Methods information section, at least two processes occurred in the recent several years to activate the stakeholders, their interactions, roles and rules: the administrative-territorial reform and the development of the ECoC bid. While the administrative-territorial reform is mostly about the process and its participants (including the newly established Department of Culture), the ECoC bid production is to a considerable degree about the content. As noted by informants, the ECoC process acted as a "catalyst" for stakeholder interactions and new ideas. Also, the produced bid, although it was not supported by the Expert Panel, contained a wealth of ideas,

many of which the Department of Culture was committed to seeing implemented.

## 4.1. "Masses and crowds" vs. professional art and niche cultural products

The legacy of the ECoC bid contained an important new direction of development: much more attention than before paid to contemporary culture. As expressed by the external partner of the Department, the goal was to "*pull in people, in a democratic and peaceful way, so that they do not get scared and start to appreciate (..).*" The attention to development of niche cultural products was in considerable contrast to the usual "crowd-pleasing" mass events, previously favored by the local cultural budget holders and providing clear economic profits. A rhetorical question was posed by the ECoC team member: "I*n what way can culture provide the most benefit? What if a contemporary art event really changes the lives of five people*?"

Interestingly, the survey of Valmiera inhabitants also demonstrated that at least a proportion of people are interested in having contemporary art events, and a more modern city environment with art objects—these were among the changes that the respondents wanted to see in the city. This corresponds to a survey done in 2021 by the authors within another research project, in which inhabitants of 21 small cities in Latvia expressed a preference for modern and fresh urban events and environments (Zemite and Hermane, 2022).

Thus, the national-level policy idea of equal attention to all branches to culture and art was translated into increased local attention to contemporary art which was felt to be previously lacking.

## 4.2. Polarizing the traditional heritage and contemporary art vs. achieving a new balance between the two

The champions of the idea of promoting the contemporary art events pointed out that they were not against *traditional* art, but rather in favor of a balance between investing resources into safeguarding heritage and introducing the city to contemporary art processes. "*We must respect our heritage and we also must have a new modern vision*," said one of the ECoC team. Representatives of out-of-city community cultural centers and libraries agree, although they also point out that their environment is more traditional and new ideas mostly appear from the outside.

We did not encounter evidence of direct polarization, however the champions of the contemporary art events had a clear assumption that the polarization idea is very much alive and should be worked with. Translation of the national local policy idea of equal attention to all branches of culture/art accentuated the latent existence of a polarizing discourse.

## 4.3. Staying in the usual "cultural" locations vs. meeting the audiences in unusual locations

The idea of meeting the audience wherever they are in their everyday lives seemed very topical in the context of the desired changes in Valmiera County. Examples were provided of *ad-hoc* exhibitions in deserted shops or touring the county on a bus to take pictures of inhabitants for a joint art project, displaying art objects in direct proximity to the most mundane infrastructure of everyday lives. "*If something happens 100 m from the usual path, I may be interested enough to have a look—what is happening there*?", says one of the champions of contemporary art.

The attempted expansion of the sphere of contemporary art is carried out in an experimental way, seeking to meet the public halfway or more. While the idea is not new, it involves a fundamental shift in practices of the local municipality and CCIs as to relationship with audiences for their work and is directly influenced by the configuration of local resources.

## 4.4. Staying in the local "bubble" vs. expanding to include international cultural trends/products

The ECoC team were very passionate about getting out of the bubble of the usual ideas, familiar partner interactions and the closed space of local ambition. One of the key arguments was that the undeveloped, barely alive cultural scene meant that young people (for instance, from the local art school) did not see a place for themselves in the city after graduation. The general feeling was that it is very hard to change routine practices and thinking, yet it has to be done. Examples were mentioned of creative people from the capital who would love to live in Valmiera, provided there is a more interesting cultural life. Thus, newcomers from outside were framed as a new potential resource which can be accessed if the local cultural/art scene is lively enough.

This aspect can be related to the translation of the policy idea of availability of opportunities for high quality cultural consumption. In the case of Valmiera County, this was posed both as a resource important by itself and with respect to the next generation of city dwellers, and as a means to attract new human resources to the city.

## 4.5. Local authorities as cultural operators vs. delegating the right to the private and non-governmental sector

One of the key distinctions discussed turned out to be about the practices of the local government entities as cultural operators. It was felt that the Department of Culture in Valmiera County was halfway from the top-down approach to a more desirable (for the informants) approach of indirect capacity building of other cultural/art operators, from the private or non-governmental sector. Effectively, the top-down approach was felt to stifle the initiative, provide unfair competition to commercial operators and overall, not serve any desirable ends. On the other hand, NGO participants noted that there is no mechanism to involve NGOs; the local government does too much by itself. "*We need to have a framework that we could fill in with our proposals, the local government needs to delegate responsibility for cultural product production*," said one of the cultural place-based NGOs. On the other hand, it was felt that the capacity "out there" is scarce, with some notable exceptions. The choice between top-down and bottom-up marks the current difference between the local government doing its own cultural event production vs. delegating the opportunity to act to other qualified operators.

To summarize place-based sustainable development trajectories in the context of support for local CCIs as a local sustainable development resource, one of the core concepts turns out to be local creative industries acting as intermediaries. "*There are just a few active, inspirational persons. We lack them*" highlights a representative from Valmiera County municipality during a focus group interview. The importance of local creatives acting as creative intermediaries by connecting, networking and creating diverse cultural life has been acknowledged before (Gustafsson and Lazzaro, 2021; Komorowski et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2022), but this research emphasizes that locally based creative intermediaries are particularly important, especially in non-urban areas due to (1) the existing focus on safeguarding heritage, rather than introducing diversity, e.g., in the form of contemporary art processes. "*We need this fresh view. Otherwise, we just keep rolling by the same model and repeating it year by year*" (creative intermediary Nr.6 from Valmiera County); (2) activities and projects are strongly sector-based and lack interdisciplinarity ("*If our entrepreneurs hear the word "culture," they disappear. They don't see the value of the culture sector*" (creative intermediary Nr.7 from Valmiera County); (3) the cultural and creative vitality of the non-urban area is more limited "*As an active cultural contributor, I'm bored here. There are limited options to experience high quality cultural events*" (a representative from a cultural/community NGO). To sum up, cross-sectoral cooperation in non-urban areas is limited due to the lack of a connector/intermediary; the environment is relatively traditional and there is a need to bring diversity. It is more important to create new initiatives and collaborations in non-urban areas, because the environment itself does not naturally provide these opportunities. That is why the creative sector has a greater role to play in place-based sustainable development.

The concept of the "*creative city*" was indeed seen as a "*common ground*" (Peck, 2012) and enabled the formation of a joint vision in Valmiera County. Valmiera policy makers are willing to give a more prominent role to local CCIs, and appear highly interested in fostering the diversity of cultural products. However, this orientation is mostly based on individual attitudes and visions; it is not an approach embedded in the system itself. "*We have strategies and will create new ones as well, but the question is who will use them on a daily basis?*" (representative from Valmiera County municipality). Local CCIs are supported,

but overall, the system is fragile because of the lack of human resources to work systematically.

Overall, the choices are about introducing new content and forms, achieving a new balance between the traditional and the contemporary cultural content, and expanding the reach of culture to new physical locations and new audiences. Participation is related both to the previously uninvolved groups of inhabitants and an increased role of NGOs, while the increase of accessibility is directly linked to the reinterpretation of the balance between the contemporary and the traditional art/culture. Overall, these thematic emphases represent the key goals of the Basic Guidelines for Culture 2021–2027, interpreted by the policy stakeholders of Valmiera County in accordance with their resources and interests.

# 5. Conclusions

"*Places*" and their "*sustainability*" are outcomes of negotiation. CCIs are considered a major development agent in non-urban areas (in scholarly literature). Also, considerable resources are controlled by the local authority. How do these (and other) agents interact to produce a local cultural strategy?

The current policy translation processes appear to have a certain bias toward the previously underdeveloped area of contemporary art, however in terms of the process itself no one appears to have certainty in knowing "*the right way*." Rather, the participants of the process employ vague descriptions like being "*in the gray zone*" and "*fumbling about.*" This seems to point at a situation when there is no party who would know what steps must be taken and in what manner. There is considerable uncertainty and only the most general feeling of "*going in the right direction*," and possibly "*being ahead of time by 5 years.*" In terms of the two approaches for action (Act or Wait-and-See), the two appear to be fluid, blurring and permeable.

Another trait of the process is that the local government is working in partnership with a strong external agent (a creative enterprise from the capital city), who is committed to implementing change "*with or without funding.*" There are benefits of being an outsider; in fact, the scholarly literature notes that social/policy innovation can be produced and championed more easily if the entity is to a certain degree autonomous and not a part of the general institutional set-up (Van Dijk et al., 2011). The external agent can be viewed as an intermediary, strengthening the local governments' *Act* approach, doing the pioneering work.

A trait that the focus group participants commented on is that the local resource of artists and active NGOs in Valmiera County is scarce. At the same time, there seemed to be an agreement that there is no real mechanism for delegating certain functions in the cultural life to local NGOs. In this environment, the *Act* approach by the local government is dominant. Only the strongest local NGOs can jostle with the local government for resources. In this respect, the existent active NGOs have an impression that they are "*pushing*" to be included in the current cultural processes, and that being represented in the cultural programming is solely the result of their strong insistence.

The participants noted the difficulty of engaging with local businesses, especially the large ones (e.g., the regional waste management company) who appear to feel that they have nothing to do with "*culture*" and "*would leave a meeting as soon as it is mentioned.*" The business sector representatives do not feel the need for engagement with the local cultural scene. This is a situation when the wait-and-see approach is not working without a knowledgeable intermediary, yet he/she cannot surface so far.

Overall, the vision that the local government has for itself, echoed by local stakeholders, is that of facilitator, linking together various stakeholders, although its available capacity for managing all the collaborations is felt to be lower than needed.

Thus, Valmiera is set to adjust the balance between the traditional and the contemporary culture/art, to move from the direct local authority activity as a cultural operator to a more indirect role of an enabler. The vision expressed for the local government by the more active participants of the cultural scene is that of a facilitator, moderator, intermediary.

In the current paper, we have analyzed two broad approaches by the local government with regard to cultural policy-making and translation, however there have been proposals of a much more nuanced typology of cultural policy roles (Duxbury et al., 2017). Further exploration of our case might be needed to determine the applicability of this typology. This remains our task for future research.

The current mode of action by the local government appears to be the outcome of the local place-based resources. The scarcity of active NGOs and local artists makes the *act* approach to appear more suitable in the short -term, with a wish to develop a more indirect, capacity-building approach in future. There is also a lack of intermediaries capable of bridging the gap between local businesses and the cultural operators in the broadest sense, which results in the existence of separate, unmingling worlds of these two with regard to Valmiera's cultural life. Simultaneously, there is a certain common ground, a vision for a greater role of contemporary art favored by a network of like-minded local and external agents. The situation is made more complicated by the broad scale of changes, where the more conservative agents tend to want to stay in their own "*bubbles.*" The interaction between stakeholders appears to be tentative, moving in the "*gray zone*," with no one knowing the "*right answer.*" Thus, the stakeholder interpretation of resources—both those that are sufficient and those that are scarce—influence the direction of development. Local resources include, among others, local cultural/creative intermediaries, who can be instrumental in overcoming the gaps between individual "*bubbles.*" These intermediaries can also be external to the place, but emotionally invested in its development.

The study demonstrates that the content of local government cultural policy decisions and the process of alignment of interpretations of key stakeholders is indeed dependent on perceptions of local resources, needs and capacities, and knowledge, i.e., it is place-based. A certain mode of action ("*Act*" as direct involvement of the local administration) may be found to be more feasible in the short term, while the more indirect mode ("*Wait-and-See*," relying on the capacity of the private and NGO sector) may be considered more desirable and sustainable. Thus, the opportunities for CCIs to express their potential is closely

linked to place-based interpretations of governance, sustainability and development.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Author contributions

Both authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

## Funding

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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