



Project “BEYOND” – Rural Communities pushing BEYOND COVID-19

Results from the interactive survey on Day 1 Event 5 in Usseaux, IT Held on Monday, May 13th, 2024

I. Introduction

On the first of the event in Usseaux, Italy an interactive survey was held with the participants in order to create discussion among the participants about how life actually is in small towns. All of the partners come from rural areas (towns with populations less than 10.000 persons). Usseaux, IT is the smallest town in the consortium (population of about 200 persons) and it could also be considered the most isolated due it being tucked deep in the heart of the Italian Alps. As it is small and far off the marked path, Usseaux’s residents face challenges that other towns don’t, such as access to public services, keeping critical infrastructure functional, and providing citizens (men, women, boys, girls, etc.) access to healthcare, education and other public services.

By implementing this survey with a group of 50 participants (41 participants online) on Day 1, participants were able to share their perspectives about the standards that they want on the local level in rural areas.

The interactive survey was held via Slido.com which allowed the participants to participate via their mobile phones. Other participants who could not access the survey via their phones participated in discussions and provided their inputs about living in a small-town question by question in-situ. The next section provides a summary of the survey results and a conclusion is provided in order to summarize how the group felt about living in small rural areas.

II. Findings per survey question

The **first question** was “What words describe my town in the best way?” The purpose of this question was to have participants provide a simple straight forward answer about what is good in their town. The participants could quickly reflect on what their town is like. 30 online responses were received for this first question and surprising not a single negative word was expressed. “Friendly”, “beautiful” and “active” were the main words used to describe their communities. In the discussions, it was also mentioned that in each of the communities in the partnership promote the EU principles of equal opportunity (in terms of gender, age, race, sexual orientation, etc.), mutual understanding and cultural diversity in all of their public actions (in terms of education, employment, civil society development, healthcare, etc.). It was also mentioned by the participants that for the most part, they are happy where they are living.





The following screenshot below provides a summary of the responses.

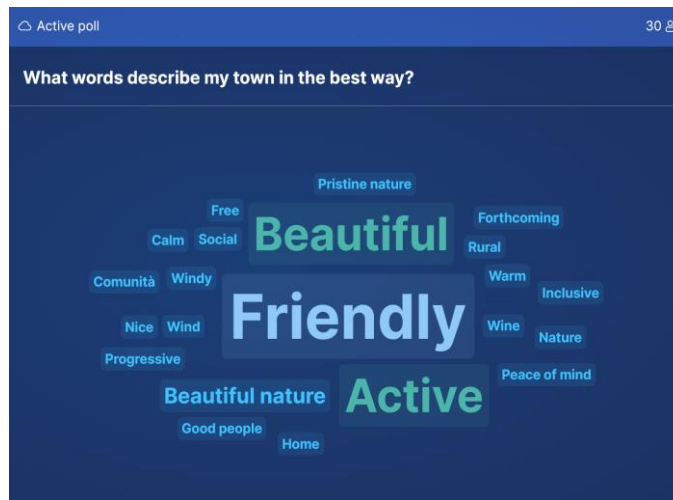


Fig.1. Responses to question 1

The **second question** was “What POSITIVE words come to mind when you think about small/rural areas?” This question complemented the first question by having the participants focus on the general notion of living in rural areas. The main word that came to mind for the participants was “peace”. Other words such as “community”, “friendly” and “silence” were also expressed. Safety was also considered a plus of living in a rural area. Overall, the responses indicate that rural areas are appealing due to their isolation, which oddly means that this weakness (for some) could also be considered a strength for many. The following screenshot below provides more information on the responses provided by the participants:

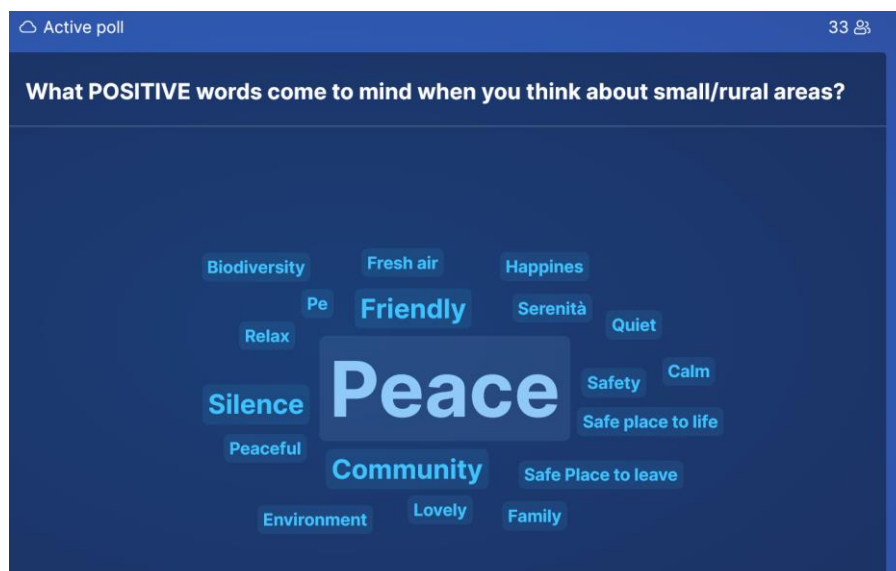


Fig 2. Responses to question 2





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As question 3 came around, it was already becoming obvious that the majority of the participants had similar views about rural areas (i.e. they are good places to live in). Nonetheless, there is no such thing as a perfect place, and the partnership wanted to identify the weaknesses of rural areas. The **third question** was “Which **NEGATIVE** words come to mind when you think of small/rural areas?” This question was asked in order to determine what can improve in rural areas in terms of living conditions, public services and creating conditions for equality. 29 participants responded online. The participants emphasized that the biggest problem in rural areas is the lack of services. “NO SERVICES” was the main response.

Other answers indicate that rural areas lack the perceived diversity and openness of cities. It was mentioned by some participants that residents in rural areas tend to be “closed minded”, especially towards new trends and policy goals in Europe (e.g. digitalization, LGBTQ+ rights, COVID-19 pandemic regulations, etc.); have access to fewer opportunities (re: education, employment, civil society, etc.) and are isolated. In comparison to the first two questions, there was quite a contrast in the answers. The answers indicate that despite liking the place where they live, the participants would also like to see improvements in terms of public services and civil society development. Comments such as “closedminded people,” “gossip” and “close(d) mentality” indicate that EU messages such as “solidarity in diversity” are missing their mark. Many residents added in the discussion that when it comes to the EU, the towns are largely unaware of how the EU supports the development of community services via EU funding programmes and policies. Many stated that positive changes mainly occur in their communities as result of taking a grassroots approach to development. In other words, many communities take a “I’ll do it myself” approach to solving their problems without reliance on outside support.

The following screenshot below shows the responses to question 3 from the participants.



Fig 3. Responses to question 3

The **fourth question** had the participants focus on the alternative to rural areas, i.e. urban areas/cities. The participants were asked “Which words come to mind when your think about cities?” the participants could provide positive or negative answers; whatever came to mind. 32 responses were received online, and the vast majority of participants mentioned that cities were not their preference. The only positive words expressed were “party” and “shopping.”



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The main words that were expressed by participants were “stress”, “traffic,” “noise” and “pollution.” In the discussion, participants mentioned that access to public services was much better in urban areas, but that was the only real advantage. Most of the participants did not want to give up living in rural area due to the number of new (perceived) problems that occur in cities.

The screenshot below shows the main answers to question 4.



Fig 4. Responses to question 4

To finalize the survey, the participants were asked outright, “Is it better to live in a city of small/rural area?” 32 participants provided online answers. 84% of the participants stated that would rather live in a small town; meanwhile, 9% mentioned that they would rather live in a city. The remaining 6% stated that they had no preference. The answers to question 5 are shown below in the screenshot:

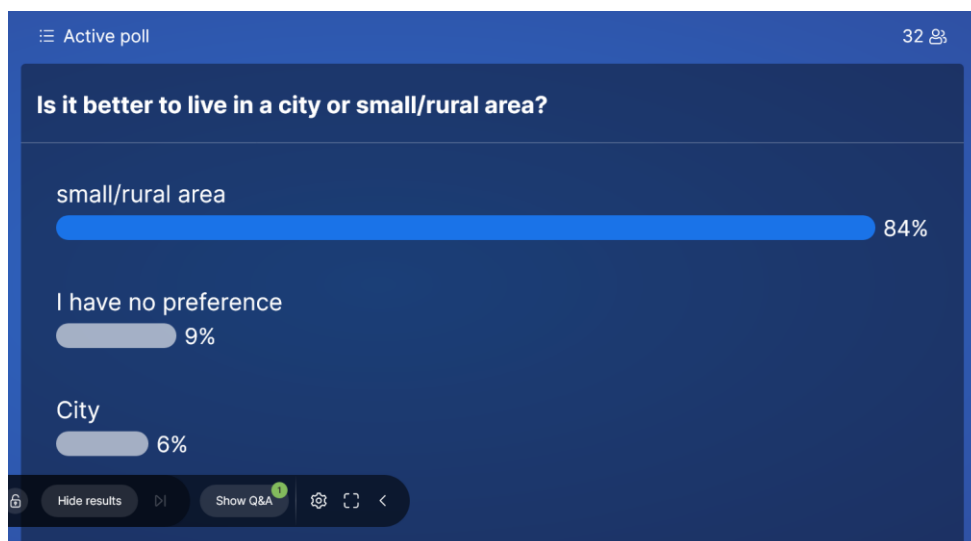


Fig 5. Responses to question 5



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III. Conclusions

As a result of the survey, the partnership was able to more deeply understand how citizens of rural areas perceive their living situation in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite rural areas being isolated and lacking public services, it was perceived by the participants that rural areas are a better option than cities. The participants emphasized that the safety, peace, calm, connection with nature, etc. in rural areas exceed the benefits that any city could provide them. All of the participants mentioned that cities represent stress, pollution, noise and even chaos.

Through the discussions, it was mentioned that the EU connection to rural areas has been lacking. In other words, it is not well-known in rural areas what benefits EU programmes and policies bring to communities. In order to ensure that the benefits of EU principles, strategies, and policies are understood and accepted, it is recommended (based on these findings) that the EU makes a more concerted effort to reach out to rural communities, engage with them and demonstrate clearly to them why EU integration is the best approach to development. Without such an approach, support for EU policies and integration throughout the Union may decline over the long-term.

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May 31st 2024.



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