

A Toolbox for Introducing Co-design Processes in Rural Areas with Social Innovation Hosting Initiatives

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Abstract *With the COVID-19 crisis, even though the phenomenon had already started before, increasingly more urban residents started to consider leaving cities and moving to or even moving back to rural areas. Young members of the creative class have particularly felt this crisis in increasingly gentrified cities with fewer work opportunities, feeling more dissatisfaction with mainstream design, economy, and society. At the same time, many rural areas have been in a state of crisis for several decades, caught between the reduction of economic opportunities, emigration, and lack of services and infrastructures. For these reasons, many rural areas have been increasingly felt as left-behind places and accordingly have protested politically. Two different worlds, each in crisis in different ways, have found a meeting point in an increasingly prevalent phenomenon of social innovation hosting initiatives that are called “Village Hosts”: emerging, distributed grassroots design initiatives for social innovation, experimenting with new economic and social models while connecting these places with larger-scale networks. These are informal and grassroots design and creative practices that are slowly emerging. The objective of this paper is to investigate how design could improve the meeting of these two worlds in crisis towards experimenting with alternative futures. How could Village Hosts co-design initiatives with local rural communities? We thus present and document a co-design toolbox, developing on and recontextualizing an already existing open source toolbox already adopted by grassroots communities for policy making. In this paper we document the toolbox, its developmental process, and the relevant literature and previous practice behind it, reflecting on its contributions to design practice, literacies and research.*

Author keywords *rural areas; remote areas; sustainable tourism; co-design processes; toolbox*

1. Introduction

With the COVID-19 crisis, even though the phenomenon had already started before, increasingly more urban residents started to consider leaving cities and moving to or even moving back to rural areas. Young members of the creative class have partic-

ularly felt this crisis in increasingly gentrified cities with fewer work opportunities, feeling more dissatisfaction with mainstream design, economy, and society. At the same time, many rural areas have been in a state of crisis for several decades, caught between the reduction of economic opportunities, emigration, lack of services and infrastructures, and increasing urbanization. For these reasons, many rural areas have been increasingly felt as left-behind places and accordingly have protested politically. Two different worlds, each in crisis in different ways, have found a meeting point in an increasingly prevalent phenomenon of social innovation hosting initiatives that are called “Village Hosts”: emerging, distributed grassroots design initiatives for social innovation, experimenting with new economic and social models while connecting these places with larger-scale networks (Thackara, 2022). These are informal and grassroots design and creative practices that are slowly emerging. The objective of this paper is to investigate how design could improve the meeting of these two worlds in crisis towards experimenting with alternative futures. How could Village Hosts co-design initiatives with local rural communities? We thus present and document a co-design toolbox, developing on and recontextualizing an already existing open source toolbox already adopted by grassroots communities for policy making. In this paper we document the toolbox, its developmental process, and the relevant literature and previous practice behind it, reflecting on its contributions to design practice, literacies and research.

2. Literature Review

With the COVID-19 pandemic, there emerged a small trend of migration towards rural areas, going against all prejudices about rural life (González-Leonardo et al., 2022). Many urban residents, having the choice, have opted for a remote working mode that allows them to live, where possible in terms of connectivity and digitisation, in rural areas far from the city. The reasons driving this wave include environmental sustainability, well-being and health, and social impact. Precisely related to this, many are choosing to support small businesses over large retail chains and to encourage new practices against consumerism. In addition, living in a small reality allows one to connect more with the place and practice voluntary work, community activities or new business models that help the local and social economy. With respect to health, we know that rural areas favour a close relationship with nature, agriculture and healthier food. In terms of climate change, we think about mobility and the possibility of reducing one's impact on the environment. In more remote areas, investments have been made to recruit people willing to move to these places. But these marginal and remote territories are exposed to risks that are changing over time. Analysing many rural policy reports (S.N.A.I. National Strategy for “Inner Areas”), on one side we have the ‘characteristic’ risks that have been investigated for

a long time—from hydrogeological instability to depopulation (Lucatelli et al., 2013); on the other side, we have the importance of controlling and directing some future trends because, if not mitigated, they could lead us to the phenomenon of ‘climate asylum’ towards mountainous and rural areas (Mercalli, 2023). But the greatest risk of these territories, linked to the phenomena mentioned above, is to be caught unprepared, and we already have some evidence for this, for example, with the digital divide. The gap with urbanised cities has grown strongly over time, from the digital divide to the lack of digital literacy and skills. The authors and researchers of the issue 5 (November 2021) of *TerritoriALL*¹, a journal published by EGTC ESPON dealing with EU development policies and their impact on regions, informs us that European policies are increasingly encouraging planning in rural areas, as many of these places are characterised by fragile infrastructure, few essential services and reduced socio-economic opportunities. Design, in particular design for the territory, can take several shapes: designing in the territory (focusing on the territorial distribution of design industries, their strengths and specificities), design of the territory (focusing on enhancing local cultural products, as well as environmental, historical and cultural resources) or for the territory (focusing on the role of communities in their territories and their dealings with stakeholders) (Parente & Sediti, 2017). In terms of the latter, design can also focus on the task of designing bottom-up processes that actively involve communities and stakeholders who are interested in living in these places and who want to build new forms of entrepreneurship through doing together and sharing. In fact, starting from Community-Centred Design (CCD) as an approach evolved from User-Centred Design, it is possible to build a network of exchange involving the entire community, and not the individual user, to foster local development and change (Meroni, 2008; Meroni & Manzini, 2014). Moreover, this approach to design, can transfer the value, systems and processes of other case studies/community phenomena that have achieved positive and lasting results over time.

Time is another risk component when it comes to rural areas. Many projects, although of quality, vanish in a very short space of time. These territories, already characterized by ‘exploitation’ during the warmer months and ‘abandonment’ in the winter months, need constancy and continuity. In respect to the connection with urban centres, it is necessary to change the cultural approach and, first of all, to rethink that marginality “*is not only a state, but mainly a process (the process of marginalization) influenced by socio-economic changes that can affect a particular region either in a positive (mitigation of marginality) or negative way (deepening of marginality)*” (Máliková et al., 2016, p. 94).

Designers could thus work on supporting the meeting of these two different rural and urban worlds, each in crisis in different ways, which have found a meeting

1 <https://territorial.espon.eu/magazine/reader/222384?pageNumber=1>

point in the phenomenon of social innovation hosting initiatives which are becoming more prevalent. These are, as mentioned above, emerging distributed grassroots design initiatives for social innovation, experimenting with new economic and social models while connecting these places with larger-scale networks, thus improving localities and networking them (Manzini & M'Rithaa, 2016). These initiatives use resource mapping, which is a strategy for identifying and analysing existing resources such as people, services, natural resources, and technologies. A common feature of these projects is the presence of a person who is based in the community and who identifies opportunities, connects local actors and stakeholders, and develops projects. Creative Communities (Meroni, 2007) encompass a wide range of possible initiatives and people involved, also called “professionals of the everyday”, who deal with a very wide range of issues: work, food, mobility, socialisation, and learning. Through the role of the designer, new scenarios of Creative Communities can direct collective action and help develop a shared understanding that can positively influence the future, also transforming social and cultural factors. Among the many potential cases of grassroots creativity in dealing with social issues, one of the most recent cases that has emerged is the concept of the Village Host. Developed by John Thackara, Village Hosts are grassroots initiatives in rural areas that combine hospitality, tourism and positive social impact activities: *“New projects, and new livelihoods, are sprouting up among Europe’s multitude of small villages. These activities range from positive-impact tourism, nature reconnection, and ecological restoration – to adventure sports, farm-shares, learning journeys, wellness retreats, heritage trails, and more [...] Village Hosts seek out and connect assets that may already exist in a community – but are unknown, or isolated: people, places, buildings, and skills. They connect these neglected assets in events, services and enterprises.”* (2022). Defining the concept of Village Host is still not an easy task, as there are many different profiles that may fit into the way it is described. Village Hosts can be people who were born in the village and have always lived there, people who moved to the city to pursue their studies and have come back, or even newcomers who are moving to a particular village to start village hosting. Moreover, they can work as an individual or as a group, and village hosting can be their primary source of income or a side project. The types of initiatives they run can also vary and can be considered extensions or innovations in rural tourism, an important trend for peripheral areas (Salvatore et al., 2018): co-living and co-working spaces, art residencies, maker spaces, co-farming, eco-tourism initiatives, rural sustainable development initiatives, etc. The authors, therefore, examine the close relationship between “rural peripherality” and aspects of “tourism transition”, experimenting with new processes that foster economic and community change.

The concept and profiles of Village Hosts has been addressed by the the Open School for Village Hosts (OSVH)² project, co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme

2 <https://www.villagehosts.eu/>

of the European Union. OSVH aims at identifying the core skills that a Village Host would need to design a pilot training programme with Village Hosts from different parts of Europe and teach them these competencies via a collaboration platform to collect and publish Village Host stories, support and enable a community of knowledge exchange and provide tools for it. Finally, it also has the objective of publishing a OSVH manifesto to advocate for the work done, and a handbook for future Village Hosts. Even though the roles of Village Hosts are wide, they also share some common characteristics. The OSVH project identified five areas of competence needed to be a Village Host: (1) Envisioning and mapping opportunities; (2) mapping actors and resources; (3) storying the place; (4) making service prototypes & curating activities and outcomes; and (5) assembling cooperation platforms and designing new business models (Radošā partnerība, 2022). The second point, mapping actors and resources, implies skills such as maintaining and sustaining relationships with the local community, engaging with people and organizations, organizing community and civic participation, and outsourcing and delegating responsibilities. All these skills involve different stakeholders which village hosts must work with, using co-design processes to create an open dialogue between themselves and the rural community.

3. Methodology

Because village hosts need multi-stakeholder and community co-design and facilitation skills, within the context of OSVH, we developed a toolbox for co-designing Village Hosting initiatives fostering collaborations among village hosts and the local communities (Figure 1). One of the OSVH project's goals was the design and implementation of a training programme, which was attended by 40 participants from all over Europe and which included online training. The aforementioned pilot training programme aims to identify the range of key competencies that a Village Host could need to design yet another pilot training programme with Village Hosts from different parts of Europe to teach them said competencies. The online training took place from the 2nd of March to the 24th of April 2023, and consisted of five modules that were related to the five competence areas discussed above. The second module, titled "Map Actors and Resources", included our two sessions, called "co-designing" and "co-creation", which were held on the 21st (Village Hosts, 2023a) and 28th of March 2023 (Village Hosts, 2023b), and which were assigned to the authors. The initial goal was to support the teaching of co-design in such sessions and to provide a tool for experimenting and testing it. Considering the limited time and resources and the need for links to established frameworks and experiences to be shared with participants of the training, we decided to build the toolbox on top of an existing and open source (and thus freely reusable and modifiable) framework. As one of the authors already

worked on it in the past, we based the OSVH Co-Design Toolbox (Figure 1) on the one developed in the Horizon 2020 research project 'SISCODE, Co-design for society in innovation and science'³, which produced a final co-design toolbox (Menichinelli et al., 2019; Real et al., 2019; Rizzo et al., 2018). SISCODE aimed at stimulating the use of co-creation methodologies in policy design, using a bottom-up co-design approach within 10 co-creation labs spread around Europe, giving policymakers the opportunity to co-design and test new and more open ways in conceiving policies that reconnects policy design with grassroots initiatives and citizens. The SISCODE Toolbox for Co-Creation Journeys supported this task while also trying to reuse existing tools and frameworks, adapted to the development of co-design journeys with existing design tools.

The initial toolbox was thus already focused on planning co-design processes while also adopting existing resources, and the OSVH toolbox proceeded in this direction, translating it from the context of policy design to the context of rural village hosts. Within this methodological framework, the OSVH toolbox wants to be an extension and sees the co-design approach and tools as a concrete response to the rural context. Furthermore, the methodology used aims to provide users with a democratic tool. In the case of OSVH, it was an inspiration to train practitioners and provide them with a toolbox to test independently, together with the different stakeholders of their rural project. In fact, the toolbox systemically but creatively involves users co-designing solutions for new forms of local entrepreneurship through a meta-design approach with the aim of helping users to analyse the data, the figures involved and the whole process. After a first version (Menichinelli & de Spirito, 2023) was designed by the authors building from the SISCODE toolbox and with tests and prototypes, the toolbox was then adopted in the online sessions, shared and discussed with participants.

3 <https://siscodeproject.eu/>

Figure 1: The OSVH Co-Design Toolbox.



The topics of the sessions were (a) an Introduction to Co-Design and to Community-Centred Design, (b) Co-Creation with Communities, (c) Communicating and Discussing results with communities and, finally, (d) how to Co-Design a Village Host initiative. For that, the OSVH toolbox was introduced, and the participants digitally tested it simultaneously via Miro.com. The overall feedback was positive, participants stated the need for such a tool, but asked for some refinements and for an example of application. This feedback was taken into account and a second iteration of the toolbox was designed (Menichinelli et al., 2023), which included an example of a Village Host project based on a place familiar to one of the authors. We started thinking about how a rural house in the hometown of one of the authors' in Northern Spain (Navarra) can be transformed into a point of encounter between local literature and the production of local dairy products, as we identified both as the most relevant resources at the local level. To get started and be inspired, we tried to imagine and visualize this initiative through an AI deep learning, text-to-image model, Stable Diffusion. We thus mixed both tradition and local settings with digital and innovative tools, as Village Hosts often do, by trying to represent views of the Village Hosting initiative as if it were painted by the Spanish painter Joaquín Sorolla (Figure 11). After that, we used the images and the toolbox to Co-Design a new Village Host initiative (Figure 2) developing a specific layout for using it on a wall (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Part of the design teams testing how to use the toolbox on a wall.



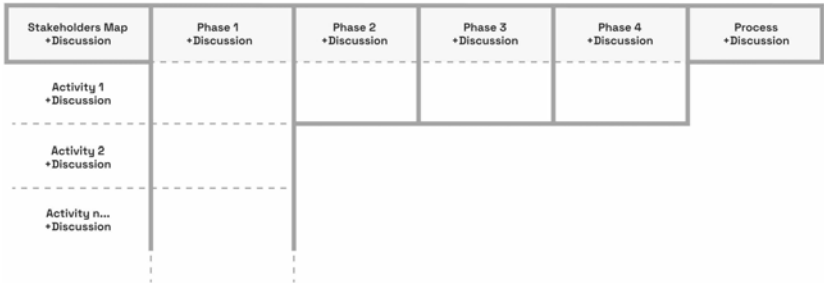
This second iteration was then uploaded to and shared with participants on the OSVH digital platform⁴ and also delivered in person to the Village Host community in the second part of the OSVH training programme, which consisted of a five day in-person training in Grottole, Italy (OSVH, 2023a, 2023b). We were able to show the toolbox to the participants directly and had discussions on how to use it in each of their Village Host initiatives specifically.

4 <https://platform.villagehosts.eu/>

4. The OSVH Co-Design Toolbox

Working for and with the local communities of an area implies, among many other actions, getting to know that specific place through those who have always lived there or who have moved there for a certain time (Menichinelli, 2023). For this reason, therefore, it seemed necessary to emphasize how participatory actions, through a Community-Centred Design approach, and Co-design are essential to generate a concrete and tangible impact, achieving innovation objectives on different scales, from local to global, so that one can support the other. Here, the role of design researchers and practitioners, as a first step, lies in the creation of a toolbox as a kit to explore social innovation processes in a way that is shared with others.

Figure 3: How to use all the A4 canvases on a wall.



Co-design is a non-linear process that enables the analysis and organization of products, systems, or services. It is divided into several stages, from the analysis of resources and problems to the conception of a prototype to be tested with the help of available methods and tools. In this vision, the OSVH toolbox is a support for the organization of a community-centred co-design process for the development of Village Hosting initiatives together with local communities and larger international village hosts. The toolbox is divided into three sections (A, B and C) to enable village hosts to co-design a place-based hosting initiative based on resources, potentials, and limitations. Section A is a completely new addition to the SISCODe toolbox and customized for Village Hosting initiatives, section B extends the SISCODe toolbox and focuses on the (meta) design of the co-design process with stakeholders. Each canvas is followed by a Discussion Canvas (Figure 4), which enables participants to leave comments in a thread-like fashion about the canvas to which it is attached, as a way for leaving a lasting documentation of the co-design discussions. Section C contains an example of an application developed by the authors for testing and explaining the toolbox.

Figure 4: Section A – B: Discussion Canvas, for discussing the previous canvas to which it is attached.

DISCUSSION

Insert your name
before you comment!

IVAN

Write your
comment
in the box!

● Comment n. 1

Comment n. 2

Comment n. 3

Comment n. 4

Comment n. 5

Comment n. 6

Comment n. 7

Comment n. 8

Comment n. 9

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Section A “Co-Designing for Village Hosting initiatives” is dedicated to identifying available or missing local resources and, consequently, to determine what a Village Hosting initiative could be based on to foster, exploit, or redevelop area-based resources. It is made up of two canvases: the Village Canvasses (Figure 5) and Hosting Canvasses (Figure 6), each with a Discussion Canvas (Figure 4). Through the Village Canvas, it is possible to analyse local cultural and social resources/initiatives, those linked to production and agriculture (local production, handicrafts, farming, livestock), infrastructure and services, geomorphological aspects, or climate-related risks. Once users understand the local context of their own activity, they can start discussing the details of their Village Hosting initiative with the Hosting Canvas: what types of activities are carried out, who and what skills are involved, the target host, what are the costs and the reference business model, and where do the activities take place. Each section of the tool includes in-depth analysis and discussion phases open to all stakeholders.

Figure 5: Section A: Village Canvas.

VILLAGE





CULTURE & SOCIETY

What are the available or missing local cultural & social resources initiatives?

+

-



PRODUCTION & AGRICULTURE

What is available or missing in the local manufacturing, craft, agriculture, livestock?

+

-



SERVICES & INFRASTRUCTURE

What are the available or missing local services & infrastructures?

+

-



FLORA & FAUNA

What are the relevant local flora & fauna, and what are their risks and problems?

+

-



GEOMORPHOLOGY & CLIMATE

What are the relevant local geomorphology & climate, and what are their risks and problems?

+

-



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Date: ____/____/____

Authors: _____

Project: _____



Source: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/351111111>

Figure 6: Section A: Hosting Canvas.

HOSTING

ACTIVITIES
What are the activities for your Village Hosting?

LAND & BUILDINGS
What are the lands and buildings available or necessary for your Village Hosting?

PARTNERS
Who are the partners supporting and providing to your Village Hosting?

BUSINESS
What are the costs, revenues, and business model of your Village Hosting?

GUESTS
Who are the guests you are addressing your Village Hosting to?

KNOWLEDGE
What are the necessary knowledge, skills and resources, for your Village Hosting?

Date: / / Authors: Project:

Hosted by Design Center for the Open Project
Based on: Normand et al., 2018

Section B “Co-Designing the co-design process” deals with organizing the over-all co-design process in such a way as to use a Community-Centred meta-design approach and begins with the Stakeholder Canvas (Figure 7), a tool for understanding the partners, community, and guests and how they might be engaged in the hosting initiative ecosystem. The OSVH Toolbox proposes 4 phases with different goals and results: (1) analyse the context, (2) reframe the problem, (3) envision alternatives, (4) prototype and experiment. The Phase Canvas helps understanding each phase, making sense of the necessary inputs and outputs, how to best define the necessary activities for the accomplishment of each phase, and how to manage them (Figure 8). For each phase of the co-design process, different activities could be realized according to one’s context: the Activity Canvas helps find the appropriate tools and discuss how to organize every activity (Figure 9). Finally, the Process Canvas (Figure 10) lets users organize all the activities within a time range from 1 to 12 months (users print and use more canvases if necessary to extend the number of activities or the number of months).

Figure 7: Section B: Stakeholder Canvas.

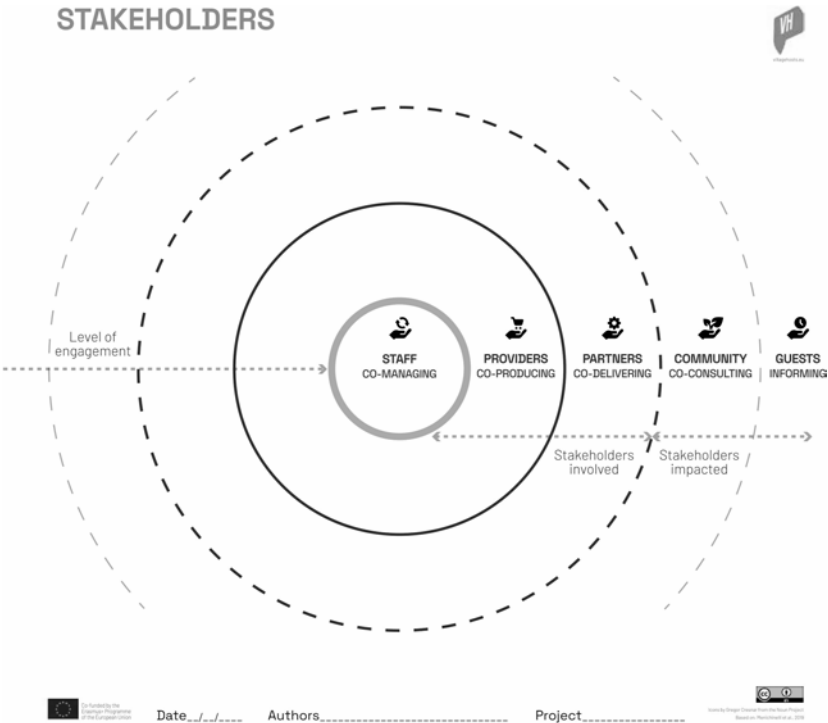


Figure 8: Section B: Phase Canvas.

PHASE n°

☐ 1. Analyse Context

☐ 2. Reframe Problems

☐ 3. Envision Alternatives

☐ 4. Develop and Prototype



 ACTIVITIES What are the activities developed in this phase?	 STAKEHOLDERS Who is involved in each activity?	 ROLES What are the roles of the stakeholders during each activity?	 OUTCOMES What are the desired outcomes of this phase?

Start
Date __/__/____

End
Date __/__/____



Date __/__/____

Authors _____

Project _____



Source: Project Canvas - Adaptation of the original
Source: Perreault et al., 2010

Figure 9: Section B: Activity Canvas.

ACTIVITY

☐ 1. Analyse Context
☐ 2. Reframe Problems

☐ 3. Envision Alternatives
☐ 4. Develop and Prototype



 OBJECTIVES What are the objectives of this activity?	 TOOLS What are the tools/methods used to achieve the objectives and how?	 OUTCOMES What are the desired outcomes for each objective?	 DURATION What is the time needed for reaching each objective / using each tool?

Start Date

End Date



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Date **Authors**

Project

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Horizon Research and Innovation, 2020



Figure 10: Section B: Process Canvas.

PROCESS

Each square corresponds to a month of activity.

Join the squares to indicate the number of total months.

PHASE
Number

ACTIVITY
Name

MONTHS
Select the weeks or months

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

half-month
whole month

Date_/_/ Date_/_/ Authors_ Project_

22

Figure 11: Section C: AI-generated images for brainstorming a possible Village Host initiative.



5. Conclusions

The OSVH toolbox was designed as a support for the organization of community-centred co-design processes for the development of Village Hosting initiatives together with local communities. Its design process has been a fruitful opportunity for reflecting on how to design co-design toolboxes with (a) the reuse and adaptation of existing open source projects; (b) the use of generative AI for brainstorming first ideas together with the toolbox; (c) the participation of stakeholders in the design process; (d) the design for ease of use at home and remote areas.

Reusing and adapting existing open source projects enable not only saving time, but also connecting projects and further extending them creating a longer research path (a). The SISCODE Toolbox (Menichinelli et al., 2019) and its related research (Menichinelli, 2020; Real et al., 2019; Rizzo et al., 2018) provided ready-made components that were also improved for the meta-design of co-design processes, here adapted for the context of social innovation grassroots initiatives in rural areas. Furthermore, the usage of open source icons (by Gregor Cresnar, Adrien Coquet) from the Noun Project greatly sped up the process of developing the toolbox even in a context where time and resources were limited by the rather small size of the task and overall project.

Rather than completely designing new projects, Generative AI could be used for sharing memories, concepts, ideas and creating a shared understanding of the background and context of a new project, that can be thus brainstormed later with the toolbox, mixing thus digital and analog technologies (b). The use of Generative AI by the authors during the test of the tool proved to be useful for engaging more deeply into the discussion and the context that had been proposed. AI made it possible, especially for those who were unfamiliar with the place chosen for the test, to better immerse themselves in the context, and to get in touch with the story and the images that came to life according to the parameters we assigned. The AI tool was certainly a good starting point for the brainstorming phase.

Stakeholders can also be integrated in the design process even if with just an on-line session, providing not only a validation but also a check for requests and thus an important resource for steering the design of a toolbox (c). Some of the stakeholders reacted very positively to the toolbox and asked for more details and an example of application, which led to a second iteration of the design. Since in the context of remote rural areas they are hard to reach, and because of the limited time available, full testing of the toolbox in the field was left to them beside the first test on Miro.

Most of the co-design toolboxes we examined were developed for workshops or professional use typically in urban and creative contexts with no lack of resources (e.g., printing A2 posters). We focused instead on how users at home and in remote areas could be using the toolbox (d) for example by printing it in A4 (more accessible) to be physically used on a wall, as a tangible documentation of the co-design process that could be observed by any stakeholder who passes by. Once again, this can merge digital tools (Miro) and physical places as a long-lasting documentation of design processes.

Due to the limitations of a short project and lack of resources in longer engagement with remote rural areas, planning future research is thus important not only for testing and improving the toolbox and the meta-design approach behind it, but also for uncovering new strategies for overcoming the limits of online education and of research projects, especially with remote rural areas which often lack infrastructures and knowledge necessary for running co-design processes. Among potential future directions, we envisage testing the toolbox in the context of university-industry collaborations in territories. Further research could also at the same time investigate the local rural stakeholders, typically under-considered and under-represented in design and social innovation initiatives, and how the gaps between them and urban ones could be filled.

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