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### THEMING IN SMART VILLAGES CONTEXT

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The paper discusses the possibility of smart thematic village development and presents the results of qualitative research aimed at determining why some smart thematic villages are developing while others are not. The grounded theory approach was used for semi-structured interviews. This empirical study investigates four thematic villages in Lithuania, which have an official status and are currently operating and one non-developing thematic village. The structured grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, Corbin & Strauss, 2015) was employed to analyse the collected data using open, axial and selective coding techniques. The grounded theory of the thematic village development was built around the core category (a critical success factor of the development of a smart thematic village), i.e. weighed involvement of thematic village actors in thematic village activities context. The main condition of thematic village development is context for thematic village actors weighed involvement. This is context for theming, digital solutions to facilitate collaboration, communication, accessibility and problem-solving at various levels in the thematic village. Thematic village actors get involved in thematic village activities only when they have specific context – Global, National, Local institutional, Village Community and Individual. The more favorable the context, the more weighted involvement is and the more benefits thematic village actors and other stakeholders get, the more possibilities they create for sustainable smart thematic village development.

*Keywords: Smart thematic village, village development, weighed involvement, context.*

### INTRODUCTION

Smart villages are communities in rural areas that develop smart solutions to deal with challenges in their local context. They build on existing local strengths and opportunities to engage in a process of sustainable development of their territories. Smart villages communities learn new skills and attract resources to their village, also develop innovations and digital solutions to deal with challenges. They rely on a participatory approach to develop and implement their strategies to improve their village economic, social and environmental conditions (Vazonis & Čiūtaitė, 2010; Atkočiūnienė & Vaišnoraitė, 2012; Dombrowicz, 2013; Kloczko-Gajewska, 2013a, 2014b, 2018c; Szczesna & Welosowska, 2015; Idziak et al., 2015; Wachter & Wyrzens, 2016; Atkočiūnienė & Kaminatė, 2017, etc.). Smart thematic villages promote social innovation and / or mobilize solutions offered by digital technologies. Smart villages benefit from cooperation and alliances with other communities and actors in rural and urban areas. The initiation and the implementation of smart village strategies may build on existing initiatives and can be funded by a variety of public and private sources (European Commission, 2019; Komorowski & Stanny, 2020; European Union, 2021).

Given the characteristics of a smart village listed above, a thematic village is one of the smart village strategies. Thematic village - is a thematic object in a rural settlement, locality or homestead where a creative, entrepreneurial, collaborative and innovative community or family, which creates, develops and enhances a unique theme united offer of experiences and senses for visitors through village cultural, heritage, natural, infrastructural, digital and knowledge resources. This offer is presented to visitors in the form of a set of local products and services that can be sold profitably. Digital solutions are used to facilitate integrated communication and problem-solving between thematic village actors, stakeholders and visitors. Thematic villages providing value not only to visitors but also to local people in particular and contributes to sustainable village development.

After visiting the smart thematic villages, conducting interviews and analysing the obtained data, it was noticed that the application of the smart thematic strategy in villages, is not all that creates the conditions for the development of the thematic countryside. So it is wonder, why are some smart thematic villages developing towards sustainability and others not. The paper discusses the possibility of smart thematic village development and presents the results of qualitative research aimed at determining why some smart thematic villages are developing while others are not.

**The aim of the research** is to find out the main factor that brings success in the smart thematic village development, to understand how this factor work, and to map the complexity of this factor context. The research question stated above requires qualitative answers based on subjective data, thus case analysis has been based on the grounded theory approach.

**Research objectives:** 1) to identify the critical factors for the smart thematic village development; 2) to define the specific context of the critical factor determining the smart thematic village development.

## RESEARCH METHODS

**Research method:** A structured grounded theory study approach was chosen to explain the essence of the analyzed phenomenon - the critical and other related factors, contextual, causal and intervening conditions determining their control, the used control strategies, and their consequences (Corbin & Strauss, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This methodology was chosen because it enables to develop a data-driven theory about the phenomenon. Especially this method useful when the phenomenon under study is not clearly defined in the scientific literature. This research is based on the philosophical approaches of post-positivism, symbolic interactionism, and pragmatism (Santos et al., 2018). Qualitative research allows to understand the context of the investigated phenomenon including decisions and actions, to explain the reasons thereof (Myers, 2013), and to give meaning to the analyzed data (Bhattacharjee, 2012).

**Research sample** is based on the principle of theoretical selection, that means, that interviews are conducted if new data capable of saturating the emerging theory become available (Žydzūnaitė & Sabaliauskas, 2017). This empirical study investigates four thematic villages in Lithuania, which have an official status and are currently operating and one non-developing thematic village. Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with thematic village leaders and actors and other stakeholders. The survey data were collected using a semi-structured interview method. Since, according to methodologists, everything is considered Grounded Theory data, the researcher chose to use legislation to identify the external context. Qualitative research software MAXQDA was used to transcribe and code the interview texts. Following the coding processes used in the version of the structured grounded theory. Throughout the coding process, codes, concepts, or categories were regularly compared to each other. Memo writing was used to describe codes, concepts, and categories, which serve to justify properties and dimensions as well as links between categories and subcategories.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

Strauss, Corbin Structured Grounded Theory procedures revealed, that the core factor of smart thematic village development is **Weighted involvement of Thematic village actors in smart thematic village activities**. Thematic village actors - village citizens directly and permanently involved in the activities of the thematic villages, who create, implement and develop the thematic village with their involvement, activities, ideas, knowledge, participation and cooperation (Vazonis & Čiūtaitė, 2010; Atkočiūnienė & Vaišnoraitė, 2012; Dombrowicz 2013; Kloczko-Gajewska, 2013a, 2014b, 2018c; Szczesna & Welosowska, 2015; Idziak et al., 2015; Wachter & Wyrzens, 2016; Atkočiūnienė & Kaminatė, 2017, etc.). Weighted involvement - the deliberate choice of active participation, determination to make great efforts for the benefit of the organization and a strong desire to be in the organization in order to realize personal, community or organizational expectations and values (Passarelli, 2011; Cambridge dictionary; Pedagogical terminological dictionary; Porter, 1974; Ferris, 1983; Patalano, 2008; Bar-Hayim, 1992; Petkevičiūtė & Kalinina, 2004). When are involved, thematic village actors become more socially active, interactive, and collaborative. They create, learn new things, increase their self-confidence and self-fulfillment. Also, they have sense of alliance, have possibilities to promote well-being in the village. For all thematic village citizens, thematic village is communication and collaboration platform for events, education, and leisure. They have reason to pride of living in the countryside and have their village identity and visibility. The economic effect on the smart village area arises through increased demand for local products and services, involvement in the tourism sector, business opportunities. The environmental effect manifests through opportunities to improve, beautify and change village infrastructure, landscape, and nature, and to conserve resources. So, if there are weighted involved people, there are enough human resources in thematic village and possibilities to attract enough visitors, to have demand of the thematic village and to have all possibilities for sustainable development of village in which thematic village is. The study revealed that a specific context is required to create the conditions for weighted engagement. The following thematic village actors weighed involvement in smart thematic village activities context that promote the development of thematic villages are shown in figure No. 1 and discussed below.



Source: model based on the author survey results (2021) and Corbin & Strauss methodology (2015)

Figure1. Model of the smart thematic village development context

Following the recommendations of Corbin & Strauss (2015), in order to develop a central category and better understand the conditions under which the weighted involvement of TV actors in the TV occurs, it is necessary to focus on the context. Linking contextual macro, meso, and micro conditions will reveal how TV actors deal with the challenges of engaging in TV when exposed to them. The following article provides detailed discussions of the components of the context of the weighted involvement of TV actors in the TV, based on quotations from interviews, legislation, and scientific publications.

## DISCUSSION

**Global context:** The one of dimensions of global context is **the values of the modern global world**. They influence the weighted involvement of TV actors in the TV and the development of thematic villages. The fact that the modern user is **Experience-oriented** is confirmed by the authors who analyzed the thematic objects, who state that theming is one of the main methods for creating opportunities for the use of experiences, which are especially sought after by modern users (Pine, Gilmore, 2011; Stromberg, 2015; Astrom, 2017; Wong, Cheung, 1999; Sinha et al., 2018). Village theming provides opportunities for modern users to find the experiences they are looking for. This is also emphasized by the TV actors who took part in the study, who see that visitors come to TV hoping for a new thematic experience. „S1: *And there the dusty things stand only .. now people no longer want to go to those museums, just watch. And here they come and get the attractions.*”. Modern society is characterized by **Consumerism**. Stronberg (2015) and Meng and Choi (2018) identify the theme as a marketing strategy for a postmodern consumer society. The participants of the study also notice the consumption needs of the visitors of the thematic villages and provide a package of thematic goods and services in response to them. „DS13: *for a person, the theme is easier to understand and easier to eat. This is purely for consumers, so to speak, it is easier to use.*”. The orientation of society, and especially the younger generation, towards **making money** also manifests itself through the reasons that informants identify as largely determining the population's non-involvement in TV. „L3: *says ... and why should I go here for nothing?*”. **Turning to thematic rural tourism** is a value of the modern global world that influences the development of thematic villages. Theming is used when there are difficulties in adapting places and objects to tourism. The other of dimensions of global context is **Pandemic situation**. It influences the weighted involvement of TV actors in the TV and the development of thematic villages. In recent years, the world's population, and thus the actors in the thematic villages, have faced a new challenge: the COVID 19 **pandemic**. „PA11: *Well but there was a corona, we wont not work, we were afraid. They were scared. <...> people didn't visit.. that we were outside, but few were there*”. On the other hand, the global pandemic has greatly boosted local tourism. People unable to travel abroad started to travel more in their own country „PA12: *Let's share last summer was very good. Because no one went abroad, everyone ran around Lithuania*”. The other of dimensions of global context is **Global legislation**. For example, the **United Nations (2015) Agenda for Sustainable Development until 2030** and **The KORKO 2.0 declaration “Better life in rural areas”** stated that the *potential of rural areas should be supported by providing innovative, inclusive and sustainable solutions to current and future societal challenges*. A thematic village is one way to develop and employ the potential of rural areas through the sustainable use of local resources to meet the economic, social and environmental needs of current and future generations of rural residents and visitors.

**National context:** The implementation of the requirements of international law in specific countries is detailed in national documents. Therefore, the following hemisphere of the conditionality and consequence matrix represents the national thematic context of rural development. Lithuanian strategic documents, such as the Lithuanian **White Paper on Rural Development and Agriculture 2030**, and **The National Progress Program for Lithuania's Progress Strategy "Lithuania 2030"** indicate: *To develop various types of tourism in rural areas; strengthen rural communities; strengthen the vitality of rural areas*. It is also envisaged that in Lithuania the aim is: *to promote the diversification of farm activities, to promote businesses in rural areas; promote the consumption of local products and improve the image of the countryside*. Thematic villages are one of the ways to strengthen and activate rural community activities and business in rural communities. **State requirements**, such as food hygiene requirements, activity permit and certificate requirements, and strict accounting requirements, make it difficult for thematic village actors to engage and residents to sell their products to visitors to thematic villages „L3: *if we make those jams, we could start selling them as a source of income. But again, permits, cash registers, checks ...*”. Rural people, when faced with bureaucratic requirements, withdraw. A preferential tax system, a simplified accounting system and a simpler, more convenient process for obtaining various permits and certificates would facilitate the development of thematic villages.

**Local institutional context:** The **Attitude of the district municipality** to the development of rural tourism also influences the development of thematic villages. PA11: *sluggish, sluggish ... don't do, well don't use, well to have tourists here. So we will all live better. and every tourist is a cafe, it will be inspected ...*”. The approach of the district municipality to the thematic villages as well as to the generators of rural development opportunities and contribution to the creation of more favourable conditions would provide opportunities not only for the improvement of the quality of life of the thematic villages but also of the surrounding rural population. **The eldership** is closer and more accessible to the rural population, the community and the actors of the thematic villages, both physically and emotionally. The close ties between the eldership and the TV actors are based not only on the territorial location, but also on the fact that often the same people work in the eldership, community and thematic villages, or people are connected by neighbourhood or kinship ties. However, often, no matter how positive the employees of the eldership is towards the thematic village or what is written in national rural development legalizations, they do not have enough power and **formal obligations to influence the**

**development of the thematic villages.** So they help not only with what they can in terms of duties, but also as residents who are interested in the well-being of the countryside: “L4: *I am an elder, so I have to worry about such things. It is not written in the job description for me, but here it gets by itself*”. Another institution that is very important in the life of the rural population is the **Church**. If a thematic village is also established in the village and its activities are combined with the activities of the church, these two organizations can become an integral tandem. The interests of rural well-being, it must be ensured that they do not compete with each other and that TV actors and residents can also participate in the activities of both. „S1: *if they want a weekend ... you know, in the summer we celebrate all the holidays ... the church, then we, the community, do not break up. After all, the same people in the church ... we leave those days in reserve.*”.

**Village context:** The development of thematic villages and the involvement of the population in them are greatly influenced by the **Demographic situation** of the countryside. It is precisely the fact that the rural population is small, that they are far from each other in terms of place of residence, leading to a growing need to come together, solve common problems, carry out joint projects. „S10: *The community includes a wider range of participants, as that community was created in more than one village.*” Rural communities, which unite the inhabitants of several villages, accumulate all the potential of a rural area, from which there are opportunities to create such community initiatives as a thematic village.

Another important component of Village contextual conditions is the **Social situation** of the rural population. In those villages where the critical mass of socially disadvantaged people has little chance of creating thematic villages because they are not interested in taking initiatives, they are accustomed to living on benefits and do not want to change anything. DS13: *Nobody even wants to think about business at all. Think only of how to get some kind of benefit, social ..* And most importantly, the rural population must have the motivation and willingness to get involved in the activities of the thematic village. **The lifestyle and values of the village population** also have a significant impact on the development potential of thematic villages. **Communality** - nowadays, face-to-face communication and collaboration has been replaced by a variety of techniques, social networking. The lack of a culture of community, shopping from each other, care for the rural environment, and interest in rural affairs reduces the opportunities for rural residents to get involved in thematic rural activities. L4: *Well, people don't get hooked. I would say this is the biggest cause of all this trouble - it is that people no longer need that kind of social activity.* The community-oriented habits, way of life and values of the rural population are one of the necessary contextual conditions for the development of a thematic village.

**Community context:** Village development, representation of the needs of the village population, transfer to the authorities and implementation body – **village communities**. Only thanks to communities, villages do not die and the quality of life in them gradually improves L6: *Thanks to that nucleus, something else is happening in the village. And if there is no such core in the village - that's all. And the village is dead.* The participation of the communities in **projects** also provided the impetus and basis for other communities or families to build their own thematic villages. **Cooperation** between thematic villages and rural communities based on territory, place of residence, neighbourhood, kinship ties and common aspiration for one's village and love for one's country provides favourable conditions for the development of thematic villages. L3: *It seems to us that our location is the most unique and the best. And nowhere else in the world is it better. We want to convey that to my viewer.* The main function performed by the **thematic village leader** - mobilization determines the development of the thematic village. The generation of ideas, tolerance, charisma and, in particular, the ability to earn the respect of the rural population and to attract the rural population to thematic villages facilitate the development of thematic villages. The leaders of the thematic villages are usually known to everyone, so they are willing to set an example for thematic village actors, motivate them and mobilize them S2: *If she didn't work and work for yourself, there would be nothing here.* A thematic village is often created in villages that are emptying in order to **prevent the village from disappearing** S5: *in order for that village not to disappear it was necessary to come up with something like that.* Thematic villages focus on **Creating village well-being**, their income is reinvested in improving rural infrastructure, the environment, meeting the other needs of the rural population, and this makes the thematic rural actors happy to contribute to rural well-being S2: *To that work, to that action, to the hall was bought so that everything in the church and .. and in the cemetery and everywhere, everywhere.*

**Individual context:** The individual context of the rural population is a set of micro-contextual conditions that reveal through the individual opportunities of the rural population to get involved in the development of the thematic village, the expectations in terms of involvement and the characteristics that determine the involvement in the development of thematic villages. As one of the most important conditions for the involvement of individual thematic village actors in the study of the **conditions** for the involvement of thematic villages, the participants **simply the desire** S5: *But those people come, everyone understands. And those who do not want to, do not go.* Those who want additional activities, self-realization villagers get involved in the activities of the thematic village regardless of whether they make money there or not L6: *I'm about myself. Definitely not for the money.* Involves those who **don't have enough of their daily routine** S2: *I have, well I can't be closed at home, just watching TV or weeding the garden.* **The territorial remoteness of a place of residence** in a village, the absence of close neighbours, in particular, encourages the need to engage in community activities. S2: *Because I'm single, for example, if my already neighbours I interact with are a mile away. So you're crazy man alone if ..* **The need for employment and activity** is also one of the motivations for the involvement of thematic village actors in PE9: *they just wanted activity because I am an activity person.* **The need to be valued** among the villagers and guests S2: *That's right, they're just grateful. Well, that's enough for us. That alone is enough. It means that we appreciate this work we do. Just happy.* **The individual opportunities of TV actors** also influence their involvement in the activities of the thematic villages. First of all, in order to engage in such activities if you must have not only the desire but also certain abilities. The activities carried out in the thematic villages are of various types, they require **the acting skills of the characters**. Also TV actors need to have some **knowledge needed for the**

**theme.** Being able to perform and show certain crafts or food production methods to others *S1: It has been said that whoever wants to or is able to do something, join. Not everyone can either turn or swell.* One of the important conditions for the involvement of **thematic village actors is health.** As older villagers are often involved in thematic villages, quite often health problems prevent them from being actively involved or become a reason for withdrawal. *S2: It used to be more people, there are already three dead from our team.* It is also important **to have time to get involved in the thematic villages.** To be able to combine activities in the thematic village with daily duties at work, on the farm, in the family. *S1: There are still farms in each, it can't be very much either. You still need to get out here. Another and has cows yet, it adjusts to that time.*

**Supporting and encouraging the families of thematic villagers** is also a very important condition for long-term involvement. Involvement in thematic village activities is also influenced by the **acceptability of the distance between the place of residence and the thematic village object.** The actors of the thematic villages, especially if they come from different villages, live a considerable distance from each other and from the thematic village *S1: No, so we are scattered everywhere. For example, I live seven kilometres away.* Therefore, opportunities to frequently come to the activities of the thematic village must be provided. The villagers involved in the thematic villages have certain **personal characteristics.** One of the most important is **communication.** *PA12: And the hired person will just hand over the ticket and say - go there and that's it. And for man it is small. That communication. It is va, the hardest part is finding a person who loves animals so much and can tell about them.* **Charisma and artistry** are relevant to those who perform the roles of thematic village characters and interact with visitors in order to be able to attract the attention of visitors and provide an experience. *PA11: You have to be half an actress, as I say.* Since theme villages, and especially community ones, do not generate personal income and are designed to create a common good and provide an experience for visitors, theme village actors must be **altruistic** *L3: because indeed the people we are are altruistic. We can afford to do it for something.* When communicating with visitors, various situations arise from which the characters of the thematic villages must be able to escape, here the ability to **improvise** *PA11 comes in handy: it happens spontaneously you have to change everything, because here or according to the weather conditions.* The strong business organization skills of thematic villages are particularly useful for generating income for the community and rural development. **The love for our country** and the desire to develop it, to show its advantages, to protect it, to unite and move forward the actors of the thematic village, to strive to strive *L3: We are empathetic to our area here and it seems to us that our area is the most unique and the best. And nowhere else in the world is it better. We want to convey that to my viewer.*

## CONCLUSIONS

The grounded theory of the thematic village development was built around the core category, a critical success factor - **weighed involvement of thematic village actors in thematic village activities context.** The main condition for thematic village actors and stakeholders weighed involvement is context for theming, digital solutions to facilitate collaboration, communication, accessibility and problem-solving at various levels. Thematic village actors get involved in thematic village activities only when they have specific context – Global, National, Local institutional, Village Community and Individual. Stronger involvement brings more benefits. Thematic village actors enjoy the highest benefits manifesting themselves through self-realization, communication, and creation of prosperity in the countryside. Although village residents and authorities involve passively, they enjoy the benefits created by thematic village actors, which are reflected in the vitality of the countryside. In order to encourage the involvement of thematic village actors, a government support mechanism for thematic villages needs to be set up, including legalization, income generation and the empowerment of local authorities to take care of the well-being of thematic villages. They act as a lever that enables smart villages to become more agile, make better use of their resources and improve the attractiveness of rural areas and the quality of life of rural residents. As well as these factors make thematic villages more attractive and more accessible to visitors.

The results of the research revealed that the weighed involvement of thematic village actors in the thematic village development helps satisfying the needs not only of the visitors but also the villagers and other stakeholders. Community-based activities lay the foundation for thematic village activities. This would enable the activities of a thematic village to be transformed from a hobby into an income-generating job and enable the needs of the residents and visitors to be met through the development of thematic village.

Weighed and active involvement of thematic village actors ensures optimal flows of visitors by attracting them to the thematic village and by adding value that the visitors are looking for. Implementing a village theming marketing strategy gives the village opportunities to strengthen its competitive position in the markets of tourist destinations, helps communities to find ways to make the village more attractive to residents, investors and tourists. Implementing a smart village theming strategy has an economic impact on the village area through increased demand for local products and services, involvement in the tourism sector, business opportunities, job growth and revenue. The social impact of smart theming is felt in the behavior of the people involved in smart thematic village development activities. They become more socially active, interact and collaborate, create, learn new things, increase their self-confidence and sense of community social identity. The impact of the environmental dimension of village smart thematic activities manifests through opportunities to improve, beautify and change village infrastructure, landscape and nature, and to conserve resources.

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