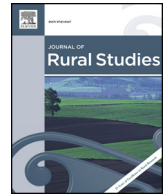




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Journal of Rural Studies

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jrurstud](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jrurstud)

## Theatre and sustainable territorial communities: A case study in Northern Portugal

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Arts in rural territories  
Sustainable development  
Theatre  
Local cultural policies  
Portugal

### ABSTRACT

To consider culture as the fourth pillar of sustainability implies new intellectual and political debate at both the theoretical and the empirical level, revisiting knowledge already established within economics and the sociology of development on the centrality of culture as a framework, a resource and a strategy for local and community development. When considered in the context of rural sustainability, rural territories pose specific problems. On the one hand, demographic and socioeconomic imbalances represent hard restrictions on the ways that resources and agents can be mobilized as part of development processes. On the other hand, the richness of material and non-material heritage, the vividness of oral traditions, a strong sense of community and cultural identity, are important local assets that can be transformed into effective instruments for development via appropriate policies and programs.

This paper discusses the challenges and opportunities for applying culture as an instrument of rural sustainability by exploring the specific case study example of a long-term artistic and cultural intervention project in Northern Portugal. The project involves a professional theatre troupe delivering performance-based, creative and educational activities within a number of rural communities. The project is itself a partnership between a group of professional artists and five municipalities in Northern Portugal; its aim is to use the rich non-material local heritage as a basis for collective involvement in a sustainable culture-driven development strategy. The paper traces the evolution of the project over a 10 year period since its inception in 2004 and reveals empirically the ways in which it has impacted upon local development, highlighting the potential of culture as an instrument in rural sustainability.

### 1. Introduction: the issue of culture and development

In their recent text on cultural policies, Bell and Oakley (2015) distinguish three main scales at which such policies are currently put into practice: urban, national and international. They point in particular to the key role of urban spaces as centres for political innovation in this regard, along with a growing appreciation of the role of geography and territory in the successful design and implementation of cultural policies. Their research serves to draw attention to the need for similar inquiry into the significance of cultural policy and intervention at the scale of the rural region, for example, by placing a stronger focus on the potential of cultural resources to leverage positive development outcomes, and on ways of connecting them to regionally and locally based community and social development strategies.

From quite diverse experiences and disciplinary perspectives, this

rural regional focus is becoming more visible, although still lacking wider recognition, systematisation and operationalisation. Exceptions include the work by Azzopardi (2012) and Ledwith (2012), both arguing for a contextualised community engaged research agenda for culture in development, along with the recent review by MacDowall et al. (2015), who also argue for the embedding of cultural policy in rural specific contexts (see also Duxbury and Campbell, 2009; Bell and Jayne, 2010; Cruickshank, 2016). There remains, however, a tendency to overemphasize the connection between culture and economy in development discourses, reducing the cultural economy to a creative and urban industries focus. This problematic tendency ignores the global nature of development and also presents a rather unilateral perspective on economic dimensions of culture (see, e.g., Greffe, 1986; Dessein et al., 2015; De Beukelaer and Freitas, 2015). This unilateral perspective and limited appreciation of the complexity of culture are especially

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2018.04.004>

Received 9 March 2016; Received in revised form 4 April 2018; Accepted 4 April 2018  
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counterproductive to advancing processes of sustainable development in low-density territories. Linking culture solely to marketable goods and services overlooks the richness and centrality of resources such as traditions, arts and crafts, natural and cultural heritage, and leisure and non-professional performances, that are not valued or valuable in strict economic terms, but are crucial to the definition of local identities (Grefe, 2010).

In regions that are deprived of financial, physical and human capital for the very reason that they are also defined as peripheral (ageing population, depopulated, unattractive to private capital investments, problematic from public administration and political perspectives) the cultural background and sense of community can be the very basis of mobilisation and engagement of people in social development processes (Grefe and Pflieger, 2005; Azzopardi, 2012). Since the 1980s, a range of sociological and economic studies of the multiple and reciprocal links between culture and development have been advanced. UNESCO (1984a, 1984b, 2015; Grefe, 1986; Henry and Kossou, 1986) has paid particular attention to the political and methodological implications of some, summed up as follows.

If the concept of development denotes the process of expansion of social capacities and improvement of people's well-being, then culture, as the ability to access information and knowledge and to experience aesthetic emotions, to consume and participate in artistic events and works, and to express one's beliefs, sentiments and ideas, is a crucial dimension of development goals. The rephrasing of development as “human development”, from the 1990s onwards, succeeded in extending its scope from economic growth to wealth distribution, education, health, and social and gender equality (see, for instance, United Nations Development Program, 2014). It could also include the cultural dimension, which, although stressed and gradually included in the UN programmes, still lacks proper awareness and implementation (Maraña, 2010; De Beukelaer et al., 2015).

If social agents – real people, groups and institutions – are key players in the development process, one has to understand the values, attitudes, beliefs, know-how and common sense that characterize those agents, in order to better analyse and use their capability to undertake or participate in this process (Lacour et al., 2014; Ledwith, 2012; Dunphy, 2009). Development strategies cannot avoid the careful consideration of the cultural patterns of behaviour that are implied in human and social action. Since these patterns are variable according to historical, geographical and social circumstances, the basic assumptions of the so-called modernisation theory must be called into question. Instead, the multiplicity of routes to human development and to sustainable, local and globally-linked sustainable futures must be fully recognized as a natural follow-on to assumptions about cultural diversity (Azzopardi, 2012). As a pattern of individual or collective behaviour, culture is not just a framework for social action. It is also a resource, at all its levels, i.e. as a way of thinking, a way of life, as art and heritage. One particular community may be incredibly poor in terms of natural resources, demographic vitality or economic assets; however, every community, by the mere fact that it is constituted through history by its inhabitants, is culturally rich. Cultural goods, like material and immaterial heritage, working traditions, religious beliefs and other symbolic components may be the main set of resources from which a development process can be launched.

Finally, linking the development process to such cultural resources and to the community's sense of collective identity can also be a productive means to encourage and structure social participation. Endogenous development methods imply the use of existing local resources; participation of the local population; and partnership arrangements among its relevant institutions. To effectively do this, development approaches must also be sympathetic to the main sets of values and beliefs on which the community bases its identity. Working closely with local populations in either a rural or an urban community context, and the social institutions and networks that they constitute, also requires working within the cultural identities that define them

and capitalizing on them as valuable assets (Hickey and Mohan, 2004; Grefe and Pflieger, 2005; Duxbury and Jeannotte, 2011; Lacour et al., 2014; Ledwith, 2012).

The aim of this paper is to illustrate the ways in which culture is (i) a crucial dimension of human development; (ii) a formidable resource for development; and (iii) a productive means to improve social participation in development. It shows how, in a rural sustainability context, this role of culture is not necessarily bounded by the more conventionally-identified constraints of territorial peripherality or other historical material deficiencies and weaknesses; that it can produce effective development outcomes in the most challenging of territorial circumstances. As such, it cannot be ignored in policy terms and it cannot be reduced to an instrument, as in functionalist approaches. In this sense, “culture is the place for thinking about development”, that is to say that the relation between culture and development goes far beyond analytical and operational units; it must be thought about as a totality that reflects the intertwining of human processes of sensing, thinking and doing (Santos Silva, 2000: 144–145). This paper draws on a case study example of a cultural project taking place in a rural peripheral region in Northwest Portugal to illustrate this phenomenon of culture as an actual process and mechanism of development as much as cultural development as a goal of development in itself. Methodologically, the project can be regarded as a living laboratory to reflect on prospects for the interrelationship between arts, culture and development that have the capacity to reimagine possibilities for rural sustainability.

## 2. Culture as a process of development in a peripheral rural region – the case of Comédias do Minho

In 2003, five municipalities of the Minho-Lima region of Northwest Portugal and a professional theatre company, the Teatro do Noroeste (Northwest Theatre) cofounded a new theatre company, called Comédias do Minho (Minho's Comedies), with a view to initiating a unique approach to local rural development that would capitalise on the particular strengths of the region (Comédias do Minho, 2009; Domingues and Vaz, 2014). The region is bounded by two rivers, one serving as the boundary between Portugal and the Spanish autonomous community of Galicia (Fig. 1). All five municipalities have small and dispersed populations, ranging from 8859 inhabitants (Melgaço) to 18,579 (Monção) (2013 figures). Since 2003 they have each been under Socialist Party (PS) administration. The Teatro do Noroeste was established in 1991 in Viana do Castelo, the main city and the administrative capital of the Minho-Lima region. This was an entirely bottom-up initiative, i.e. it was not initiated through national policy, nor was it funded by any national or European body. Two partners with different experiences – i.e. five local political leaders, looking for common projects, and an artistic entity seeking opportunities to become better established in the area – converged in an attempt to maximize resources. Two years later, in 2005, when the Teatro do Noroeste abandoned the project, a new professional company, the Comédias do Minho, was already at work, employing a small group of actors who were commencing their professional careers.

Institutionally, Comédias do Minho is supported by the association of the five municipalities and a local bank specializing in credit to the agricultural sector. This association is the legal owner of the theatre company, and it is run by elected leaders and senior officials of the municipalities. Since 2005, it receives €100,000 euros per year from a private organization – a very high value grant by Portuguese standards of arts' subsidies. This important sponsorship was one of the conditions negotiated by the municipalities and that organization which installs wind turbines in the region. Since 2004, the theatre company has also been funded by the Government, through the Directorate-General for the Arts; until 2012 it received a grant of approximately €69,000 per year (ranging from €50,000 in 2006 to €105,000 in 2011). Since 2013 it has received a four-year subvention of almost €190,000 per year

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