

# Artistic cosmopolitanism and sustainable territorial communities: the added value of a theatre company to a low-density region

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

In their very useful book on cultural policies, David Bell and Kate Oakley (2015) distinguish three main scales at which such policies are currently put into practice – the urban, the national and the international scales – and point out the key role of urban spaces as centres for political innovation. We agree with this well-informed synthesis, and do subscribe to its stress on the importance of geography and territory in the design and implementation of cultural policies. However, this should not prevent a complementary inquiry on the processes based on rural and regional scales and fostering the leverage of community and social development strategies by a stronger focus on cultural resources and activities.

From quite diverse experiences and geographies, this focus is becoming more visible, although still lacking wider recognition, systematisation and operationalisation. It is worth mentioning Azzopardi (2012) and Ledwith (2012), both arguing for a contextualised research agenda on community engagement; and the recent assembling on research questioning the effective consideration of culture within solid and viable policies (MacDowall *et al.* 2015), where the embedding in rural specific contexts is also argued for (see Duxbury & Campbell 2009). But there remains a tendency to overemphasize the articulation between culture and economy in dealing with development issues, and to reduce the cultural economy to creative and urban

industries. This is a dangerous tendency for two reasons: first, it ignores the global nature of development; and, second, it takes a rather unilateral approach to economic affairs (see, e.g., Greffe 1986; Dessein *et al.* 2015; De Beukelaer & Freitas 2015).

This unawareness of complexity and this unilateralism are especially counter-productive in respect to the processes of sustainable development in low-density territories. A direct link of culture to marketable goods and services overlooks the richness and centrality of resources such as traditions, arts and crafts, the natural and cultural heritage, leisure and non-professional performances. These resources are not valued or valuable in strict economic terms but are crucial to the definition of local identities (Greffe 2010). And in regions that – for being peripheral, depopulated and/or out of the range of investments, public administration and political power – are so deprived of financial, physical and human capital, the cultural background and sense of community can indeed be the very basis for mobilisation and engagement of people in processes of social development (Greffe & Pflieger 2005; Azzopardi 2012).

Issues about non-urban and peripheral territories are indeed re-entering the development research and practice, and the hegemony of urban models is being questioned, even if from an economic perspective. Three quotations (among others) from the Western core account for the specificity of rural settings: Bell and Jayne (2010, drawing on an English case) show how the ‘creative rural agenda’ must fit into the rural culture and economy; Jørn Cruickshank (2016, based on two Norwegian experiences) clearly demonstrates the complexity of the cultural dimension in rural settings planning; and (in the Pacific), regarding the implementation of Australian local cultural policies in rural areas, Kim Dunphy (2009) criticises the ‘city-centric approach of funders and gatekeepers’.

Moreover, the consideration of low-density and rural territories is recently being addressed by the European Union (EU) cohesion policies (Dijkstra 2021), acknowledging the perils of a growing ‘geography of discontent’ generated by regional economic inequalities (Iammarino *et al.* 2018). Although culture remains marginal in these explicit concerns, that European agenda, if effectively essayed, might fuel a *positive mobilisation* of culture and arts as a pillar for sustainability (and development). This is the very opposite of blindly turning the rural assets into a ‘creative [industries] countryside’ (Bell & Jayne 2010); it is about ‘putting «weak» policies into strong agendas’ (Ferrão 2015: 84), relying on territorial embeddedness (‘place-based policies’, as Iammarino *et al.* put it), aiming at active social inclusion, and not just top-down problem-solving.

One has no excuse to plead ignorance, considering the availability, since the 1980s, of an important sociological and economic literature on the multiple and

reciprocal links between culture and development. UNESCO itself has paid a particularly acute attention to the political and methodological consequences of this literature (UNESCO 1984a, 1984b, 2015; Greffe 1986; Henry and Kossou 1986). We can summarise the main findings in the following items.

First, if the concept of development denotes the process of expansion of social capacities and the 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, 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, the successive reports of the United Nations Development Program). It could also include the cultural dimension, which, although stressed and gradually included in the United Nations (UN) programmes, still lacks proper awareness and implementation (Maraña 2010, De Beukelaer *et al.* 2015).

Second, 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 characterise 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.

Third, since these patterns are variable according to historical, geographical and social circumstances, and there are no universal criteria to justify a one-dimensional hierarchy between them, the basic assumptions of the so-called modernisation theory cannot be accepted (or, at least, must be substantially revised). The idea that it would exist only one effective road to development, the one covered by European modernity, has to be abandoned; and instead, the multiplicity of routes to human development must be fully recognised. This should be a clear consequence of assuming cultural diversity as the condition to open (plural) possibilities for exploring sustainable futures, globally and locally linked (Azzopardi 2012).

Fourth, as a pattern of individual or collective behaviour, culture is not only a framework for social action. It is also a *resource*, at all its levels: as mentality, way of life, art and heritage. This is a very important principle for development policies. One particular community may be incredibly poor in terms of natural resources, demographic vitality or economic assets; but every community, by the plain fact that it is constituted through history by men and women, is culturally rich. It can even happen that cultural goods, like material and immaterial heritage, working

traditions, religious beliefs and other symbolic ingredients, may be the *main* set of resources from which a development process can be launched.

Fifth, and finally, referring this process to such cultural resources – and globally to the community's sense of collective identity – can also be a productive means to encourage and structure social participation. The methodology of endogenous development implies the primary use of existing resources; the more or less intense participation of several segments of the concerned population; and the joining up and partnership of its most relevant institutions. But how can one achieve this purpose if one fails to articulate with the set of values and beliefs on which the community to be mobilised bases its identity? Working closely and daily with the existing people and the social institutions and networks that they constitute, in a local community, be it rural or urban, has all to do with understanding and accepting their cultural forms and capitalize them as valuable assets (Hickey & Mohan 2004; Greffe & Pflieger 2005; Duxbury & Jeanotte 2011; Lacour *et al.* 2014; Ledwith 2012).

In brief, 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. Therefore, it cannot be ignored neither by analysis nor by policies. It cannot be reduced to an instrument, as in functionalist approaches. It is simultaneously an end, a factor and a support of processes aiming at promoting global, 'human' development of people, territories and communities. In this sense, 'culture is the place for thinking on development' (Silva 2000: 144-145).

The concept of sustainability, as proposed by the Brundtland Commission (United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development 1987), strongly reinforces this perspective. On the one hand, it stresses the global, multidimensional nature of development: not only an economic, but an economic and also an ecological, social and, of course, cultural process. On the other hand, it establishes the orientation towards future, fully respecting the needs and interests of the next generations, the intergenerational availability of resources and, thus, the permanence of humankind.

Thinking in cultural terms adds a very important element to the idea of sustainability, referencing time not only to the future but also to the past. Cultural forms, building up communities, are generated, reproduced or transformed throughout generations and centuries. When we use them as development resources, we are linking the prospect to future with inherited ways of living and acting. This twofold temporal reference – future and past – favours a full comprehension of the double meaning of sustainability: harmony between the different dimensions and restrictions that are at issue; durability of the undertaken action and its effects.

Our research stands for the need of a holistic perspective. Benefiting from the comprehensive approach inherent to the methodology of case studies, we will

focus on a cultural policy experience in a peripheral European territory, aiming to contribute to the intrinsic link between culture and development. First, we will justify the pertinence of approaching low-density territories and the research design will be presented (section 2); then, data will be discussed, concerning the launching and implementation of the experience, its effects and its policy embeddedness (sections 3 to 6); finally, we will try to draw some conclusions that could be useful for sociological comparison and policy design.

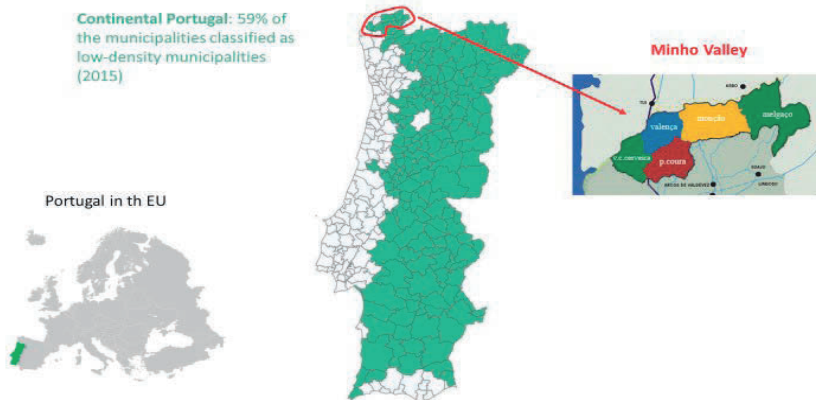
## 2. The relevance of a case study on a European low-density territory

The economics and sociology of the relationship between culture and development offer good food for thought. The focus may be on the added value of culture-driven strategies to the improvement and modernisation of economic areas, namely in the context of urban gentrification (see, e.g., Markusen & Gadwa 2010; Duxbury & Jeannotte 2011); to the revitalisation of local communities (see, for a Canadian program, Jeannotte & Duxbury 2015) and rural places (as in Australia, through a national program on local cultural development policies since the mid-2000s – see Smithies & Dunphy 2015 for an overall framework; Gibson & Connell 2011 on music festivals). Or the focus may be entirely different, one dealing with cases whose ultimate objective is the expansion of artistic practices – cultural development meaning, consequently, the development of arts and culture as an autonomous goal. Alternatively, we may somewhat combine the two orientations, taking culture, not as a means but as a development goal, and still considering carefully the externalities it can generate for economic growth, social integration, civic and political commitment and education. There is a quite large inventory of research possibilities.

Nevertheless, some precautions have to be kept in mind. We all know that the link between culture and sustainable development is far from being a specific issue of ‘developing’ countries or regions. Its relevance also touches ‘developed’ countries or regions. This is not a ‘South topic’, but South *and* North: a relevant and meaningful topic everywhere (e.g. Dessein *et al.* 2015). Development is really a *process*, an evolutionary, unfinished and non-predetermined process (Bruton 1985). And there are several ways for the topic to appear in a European agenda: rural and regional development, rehabilitation of former industrial quarters, urban development, partnerships linking public services and third sector economy, interculturalism, support for young and/or micro entrepreneurship, and so on (Cameron 2004, European Commission 2010, VVAA 2012, 2014, UNESCO 2015). Within this vast range of possibilities for research and policy, this chapter chooses to address the specific characteristics of low-density territories.

In 2003, five municipalities<sup>16</sup> of the Minho Valley and a professional theatre company co-founded a new company, called *Comédias do Minho* (*Minho Comedies*). Minho Valley corresponds to the top Northwest of Portugal, Minho River serving as the border between Portugal and the Spanish autonomous community of Galicia – Figure 6.1 shows the five municipalities' territory. All the five municipalities are small in population, ranging, in 2021, from 7,773 (Melgaço, the smallest one) to 17,816 inhabitants (Monção, the largest).<sup>17</sup> In 2003, all were ruled by the same party, the Socialist Party (PS). The professional theatre company, *Teatro do Noroeste* (*Northwest Theatre*) was established, in 1991, in Viana do Castelo, the main city and the administrative capital of the Minho-Lima region.

Figure 6.1.  
The territory of Comédias project:



This was a bottom-up initiative. It did not result from any national policy; nor was it funded by any national or European body. Two partners with different experiences – five local political leaders, looking for common projects, and an artistic entity seeking opportunities of anchorage and consolidation – converged in an attempt to maximise resources. Two years later, in 2005, when the *Teatro do Noroeste* abandoned the pro-

<sup>16</sup> The municipality is the local unit of the Portuguese public administration. There are currently 308 municipalities in the country. The political bodies of each municipality (the executive board, *Câmara Municipal*, and the assembly, *Assembleia Municipal*) are elected for four-year terms. See chapter 4 of this book.

<sup>17</sup> Statistics Portugal, 2021. Except when mentioned, the sources of the data are either the *Comédias'* documents or our own fieldwork.

ject, a new professional company was already at work, *Comédias do Minho*, employing a small group of actors who were thus initiating their professional career.

Having begun its activity in 2004, *Comédias* has been continuously working for two decades. No one, among associates, partners, sponsors and artists, questions its permanence. Therefore, it can be taken as a living laboratory to reflect on prospects for the interrelationship between arts and social development, in a European low-density territory.

The methodology that we used can be labelled as an 'in-action' strategy. This means an immersive protocol of observation, analysis and interpretation, based on a dialectic interaction between the research team and the empirical case, throughout an extended period of systematic research (from 2009 to 2014), with regular stays in the field. A real exchange has been tried, in a dual sense: our insights from the field (questions, decisions, in-progress considerations) were informally shared, and this was meant to contribute to the self-reflexivity of the project. In fact, the origin of this research (in 2009) relied on the opportunity of combining the reflexivity purposes of the project coordinators (as they were aware of the experimental and uncertain scope of the project) and our academic interests, both aiming to understand an on-going singular experience, which inevitably was affording a wider transformation process in the territory. Although collaborative (and this means not neutral), it is not action-research, as we did not take part in the decision processes, nor did the researchers aim to identify 'problematical issues' in order to change their course. Our presence was permanently negotiated, and it has been explicitly critical, that is, systematically discussed with the company and the association. Our research must also be distinguished from arts-based research, our purpose being to highlight the emergence, development, embeddedness and effects of a particular project in a particular territory, considering this project as a significant totality, pertinent for broader interpretations on culture, policy and development (see Passeron & Revel 2005, esp. 10-13).

This methodology involves a comprehensive observation protocol and several data sources. The fieldwork was regular and persistent, in order to seize the different activities of the company and its context, combining *in situ* observation, formal interviews, informal interaction, and systematic registration through written notes and photography. We also worked on many types of documents (ranging from official statistics, internal documents, technical and political papers, to a wide range of other documentation, from local studies and traditions to arts and literature and films and photos, where available). Having in mind the broad research goals and the methodological strategy, we could not be limited to the Minho Valley and the *Comédias* project, and thus selected complementary inquiries into the Portuguese

arts fields and cultural policies, for critical appraisal and comparison (e.g. Santos & Moreira 2013). After the conclusion of the fieldwork, in 2015, updating of the *Comédias* project has been maintained by indirect accompaniment of its activities.

### 3. The architecture of a theatre-based project

The five municipalities that constitute the inner geography of *Comédias* typically present the problematic situation of many European rural areas. Table 6.1 summarises the main demographic and social indicators.

Table 6.1.  
Selected socio-demographic indicators for Minho Valley:

Indicators	Year	Portugal	Minho Valley
Inhabitants	2011	10,562,178	61,021
	2021	10,343,066	56,765
Population growth (%)	2001-2011	1.80	-1.70
	2011-2021	-2.07	-6.11
Population density (persons/km <sup>2</sup> )	2013	113.1	72.9
	2018	111.4	69.8
% of inhabitants living in localities of less than 2,000	2013	38.0	78.3
	2021	38.9	80.1
Age dependency ratio, old (%)	2013	30.8	44.3
	2021	36.9	55.1
Inhabitants (aged 15 and more) with tertiary education (%)	2011	16.3	9.7
	2021	18.2	11.2
Professional and intermediate occupations (% of the employed population)	2011	25.9	28.8
	2021	17.0	19.0
People occupied in agriculture, fish and forest (% of the employed population)	2011	2.3	4.5
	2021	2.2	4.2
Low-skilled workers (% of the employed population)	2011	13.1	18.3
	2021	15.4	25.6

Source: Statistics Portugal – Census (2001; 2011; 2021); Statistical Yearbook of the North Region (2012, 2013, 2014; 2019).

Table 6.2.  
Political party and mayor by municipality, 2001-2025:

Terms	Melgaço	Monção	Paredes de Coura
2001-2005	PS: R. Solheiro (since 1982)	PS: J. Moreira (since 1993)	PS: A. Júnior (since 1993)
2005-2009			
2009-2013			
2013-2017	PS: M. Pombal	PS: A. Domingues	PS: V. Pereira
2017-2021		PSD: A. Barbosa	
2021-2025			

Terms	Valença	Vila Nova de Cerveira
2001-2005	PS: J. Serra	PS: J. Carpinteira (since 1989)
2005-2009		
2009-2013	PSD: J. Mendes	Independent: F. Nogueira
2013-2017		
2017-2021	PS: J. Carpinteira	
2021-2025		

Source: National Election Commission.

Some aspects are especially critical, such as the loss of population (in all the municipalities) and its isolation, the high old age dependency rate, the weak proportion of educated people, the percentage of employed people in low-skilled occupations. However, the region has benefited from the new role of the elected local officials, since 1976, the year of the first local election in Portugal; and also benefited from the gradual extension throughout the territory of some basic public capacities, such as education and health facilities, or communication and transport infrastructures. One remarkable fact – that the activists of the *Comédias* project usually point out – is the political stability at the municipal level, and the continuity of cultural policy despite several political changes (Table 6.2)<sup>18</sup>. When the project was launched, in 2003, the five mayors of the Minho Valley were already experienced political leaders, accustomed to

<sup>18</sup> After the revolution of the 25<sup>th</sup> of April 1974 (the 'Carnation revolution'), the first local democratic elections took place in 1976. The Social-Democratic Party (PSD) is a member of the European People Party (EPP, centre right-wing), and the Socialist Party (PS) is a member of the Socialists and Democrats (S&D, centre left-wing). See chapter 4.

mutual interaction; and they could say that now that the basic needs of the population were resolved, a cultural turn could be undertaken.

Considering the two decades from 2004 until 2023, the *Comédias* project can be described as follows. At the beginning, it soon became clear that its accomplishment would require a high degree of autonomy and resources that *Teatro do Noroeste* (the pre-existent professional theatre company that was originally co-founder) alone could not fulfil, and the company left the association (being replaced by a local bank oriented to agriculture). The first two years of activity were not so successful, including in terms of the adherence of the populations. In fact, some prejudices, although not explicit, surfaced in the conventional artistic model that was implemented: expecting that non-publics (in this case: rural, aged, non-educated people, many living in isolated areas) would not be very demanding in artistic terms; and taking (almost) for granted that any kind of art would be appreciated by people with no previous contact with professional theatre. According to one mayor (interviewed in 2012), such a distant, 'imported', proposal, even if artistically good, would never compete with television, and 'that would be fair'.

Then, in 2006, a quite different model, innovative and risky, was launched. Two decisive changes took place: a private firm operating in the region (a wind energy consortium) started sponsoring the company on 3-year contracts; and a new concept for the artistic direction was developed, anchored in its artistic autonomy.

The private support was pivotal for the implementation of the new artistic concept, much more expensive than the previous orientation based on small theatre productions for itinerancy in the five municipalities. Two notes about the private funding. First, it is a high sum (100,000 euros per year), still today, considering the Portuguese reality. Second, it is an exceptional situation in Portugal, where private support for arts is rare and almost limited to the public sector (e.g., national theatres and museums).

The five municipalities supported the project directly (via the association) and indirectly (for example providing public spaces such as parish halls for performances). *Comédias* was annually granted by the central government (through the Directorate-General for the Arts) between 2004 and 2012. Since 2013, the project was entitled to receive a 'sustainable support' from the central government (a quadrennial grant, representing, in 2018, an annual average amount of 250,000 euros), accounting for a major part of its budget. Even though, the private sponsorship remains essential for a project that goes far beyond the initial idea of 'just delivering plays to villages'.

Indeed, the artistic dimension has been the core transformation of the project, aiming at 'a reconciliation with the territory' after the failure of the first two years (municipal staff, 2012): designing a 'specific project for the territory where it operates, with effective symbolic value for local people, and involving them' (artistic

director, 2012). 'Taking theatre to the villages' assumed therefore a completely new meaning. Using the words of a former member of the artistic commission of the project (interviewed in 2008), it was all about 'looking at people in the eyes' when playing for them; and *refusing to duplicate the socioeconomic and cultural marginality of the territory into a marginal artistic project*. A 'serious' artistic project, 'consistent, evolving and durable, would create a new centrality, a new artistic and cultural pole' (artistic director, 2008).

As proposed, building a new centrality entails a process of 'creating opportunities for the people to express themselves, and to develop their own, autonomous, «emancipated» [an explicit mention of Jacques Rancière 2009], independent, relationship with the arts, thus with the world', while focusing on a cosmopolitan artistic project (artistic director, 2012). This is how the original objectives were reframed: having a theatre company *and* developing an educational project meant, from then on, *a dual commitment, towards the art and towards the territory*.

#### 4. The prospect of a new centrality

How to operationalise this approach, admitting that too much of territorial embeddedness would lead to a limited artistic proposal, without proper recognition in the art world, and that too much of a contemporary and cosmopolitan aesthetics would divorce the company from the territory? The balance between the two orientations is necessarily dynamic and uncertain: it will always be affected, not only by general changes (e.g., a political change in one municipality or an economic crisis), but also by transformations generated by the action of the theatre company itself (e.g., its status or recognition). 'Without cultural centralities, the risks [of localism] are very high', but so are the risks of making 'artistic proposals solely at the service of the artists themselves' (municipal staff, 2012).

The 'new centrality strategy' was launched in 2007 by Isabel Alves Costa, the first artistic director assigned to the project. Relying on her long experience and high reputation as curator and manager, responsible for an international puppet festival in Porto (the second Portuguese city), she proposed to split the artistic and managerial aspects. Thereafter, the advisory committee of the association (that existed since its foundation) was reframed as an '*artistic commission*', and well-known personalities were invited. Two became pivotal: Miguel Honrado (in the commission until 2024), with a long practice in cultural and artistic management, at the time in charge of EGEAC, the municipal cultural corporation of Lisbon; and Pierre Voltz, stage director, researcher, and responsible for *Les Théâtrales des Jeunes en Europe*, renowned in the field of theatre and intervention in rural territories.

That was a different, and rare, artistic governance of the cultural project, which has been implemented up to today. Three structuring aspects were assumed. First, director and advisors shared the need to '*depersonalise* the artistic production' (artistic director, 2012), conceived as the anchorage of an effective intervention. Second, the reputation and prestige of the director and advisors facilitated the acceptance of the new project by the municipalities, strengthening its autonomy. Third, the new model introduced a concept of artistic *programming*, envisioned as an interface between guest creators/ partners, the theatre company, and the territory, trying 'to respond to the needs of the territory' (artistic director, 2012), which were 'not just artistic but also cultural' (municipal staff, 2010).

This paradigm envisioned three 'pillars' of action: artistic production based on the *permanent circulation of artists* (inviting stage directors, choreographers, actors, musicians, dancers, etc.); *community involvement*, through the social and cultural 'inscription' (Paiva 2014) of the theatre company (working closely with local amateurs and lay people); and *pedagogic-educational intervention*, mobilising local and regional agents (individuals and institutions, such as schools, libraries, museums, but also old people nursing homes).

At the beginning, the three pillars were relatively autonomous, so 'there was a hierarchy (...): the theatre company was the centre, the pedagogical project followed (because it gained a lot of expression [and visibility]), and at the end came the community project. (...) At a certain point, we realised [that the hierarchy] had to be blurred' (artistic director, 2013). The activities of the pedagogic pillar were integrated into the artistic dimension, with specific productions for and with children, youngsters, adults and seniors, which were given the same statute of any other artistic production. This integration was a delicate mission for both the theatre company and the guest artists, because pedagogic activities are commonly perceived as art education, or training for participation in the arts, not as artistic expressions *per se*.

Under the new orientation, the pedagogic pillar achieved 'a huge effectiveness' in territorial inscription (artistic director, 2013). It eventually led to the formalisation of a Network of Local Collaborators, such as teachers in primary and secondary schools, technical staff of libraries, museums and other cultural institutions, and volunteers, from all the municipalities. Given the small scale of Minho Valley, the scope of the Network spread to families, neighbours, friends, and the pedagogic pillar became imbricated into the community activities.

Table 6.3 shows the array of regular activities currently covered by *Comédias do Minho*. One can notice the diversity and intensity, requiring a permanent mobility throughout the territory. One can also see the expansion and renewal of subjects and formats, as the project evolved and new possibilities emerged – for example,

more active participation of volunteers, or new demands from amateur artists and from local institutions. For instance, the *Invisible University*, launched in 2017, tests 'theoretical approaches' to philosophical and moral concepts (e.g., justice) through the arts. It is assumed as a new step (one decade after the implementation of *Comédias do Minho*) in the dialogue between conventional critical thinking and local and traditional values, feelings and knowledge, demonstrating the impact of *Comédias* on the territory and the impact of the territory on the project (Santos *et al.* 2014).

Some practical factors contributed to the integration of the three pillars of intervention. One was the participation of the elements of the theatre company (with around ten elements, five of which actors, the others technical staff) in all the activities, from theatre plays to training, education, and community involvement, *while their participation evolved towards artistic creation* (each actor became responsible for working with an amateur theatre company in the territory, one per municipality; and the actors were invited to propose artistic productions for the project).

The local team was also crucial for the artistic, technical, and social feasibility of external collaborations (by guest artists) and co-productions (with other companies). At the beginning, some of the external collaborators were asked to provide training for the then young members of the company, as they were starting their careers while adapting to the territory (none was native). Along with learning-by-doing, specific skills were needed for different programmes, such as movement, masks and puppets, or working in/with non-conventional spaces (e.g., heritage sites or private houses). As the project evolved, the situation was reversed: *Comédias* became requested to supply artistic proposals *and* to provide training, not just in Portugal but also abroad.

A de-hierarchisation of centre and periphery is indeed at stake in the project: outsider artists are pivotal for re-interpretations of the territory, but 'they must educate their own gaze and become fully aware of the implications of their work' in the territory (artistic director, 2013), as it could easily turn into a sacralisation or a caricature (Gandra 2014: 131).

Cooperation with the local amateur dramatics is also an example of the complexity of the implementation of *Comédias'* model. Working with the amateur theatre groups was not an easy task: what the amateurs valued the most was technical, not aesthetic, assistance. As an incentive to a more serious commitment of amateurs with aesthetics, an amateur theatre festival was launched in 2011: the FITAVALÉ (Itinerant Festival of Minho Valley's Amateur Dramatics). The event 'exposed' the amateurs' productions to non-local publics. Additionally, FITAVALÉ was meant to promote the intermunicipal circulation of the groups, going far beyond theatre productions.

Table 6.3.

Regular activities of *Comédias do Minho*:

Theatre company	Regular productions, including coproductions	Circa 10 professional actors and staff
Pedagogic pillar	Plays for children and students	Regular productions (2 per year on average)
	Pedagogic activities	Mostly targeted to secondary school students
	Workshops and other training activities	With children, youngsters, adults, including teachers and other education professionals
	Forums and encounters	School theatre, community arts, different arts – visual and performative arts, literature, cinema, music
	Local Network of Collaborators	Teachers, municipal staff, volunteers (since 2009)
Community pillar	Community documentary films	Regular production, and cultural diffusion
	Open-air performances with local people	Circa 5% of the population in the main performances
	Network of Amateur Dramatic Groups	Circa 100 actors and circa 10 groups
	FITAVALE – Itinerant Festival of Minho Valley's Amateur Dramatics	Since 2011
	Invisible University	Since 2017; 'knowledge production (poetic and scientific languages)': workshops, conferences and lectures on performances, concerts, films, books
	Digital content	Podcasts, videos, films, chats, radio drama (e.g., <i>Comédias Radio – Wireless imagination</i> , since 2019; <i>Comédias Take Away</i> , since the Covid-19 pandemic)

Actions towards the amateur arts and artists of Minho Valley soon expanded into traditional music and dance groups (brass, drums, *concertinas*, folk dance, choirs), enlarging the possibilities of involving them in *Comédias'* productions. Co-creation, train-

ing, multiple collaborations, but 'neither paternalistic nor exoticist. (...) The amateurs are now much more autonomous and more... artistic' (municipal staff, 2010). During our fieldwork, we observed artistic improvements due to the generational renewal, as newcomers to the groups had participated, while children and youngsters, in the pedagogic activities of *Comédias do Minho*.

Up to a certain point, the *Comédias* project put 'everything upside down' (artistic director, 2008): conceived as an intermunicipal policy for a deprived region, it attracted a private sponsor, it got pluriannual financial support from the government, it now exists for two decades. While being inscribed in a rural and deprived territory, the project has achieved artistic reputation in national and European terms. The institutional awarding of *Comédias*, in artistic and non-artistic instances, signals the recognition of the holistic nature of the project (Table 6.4).

Table 6.4.

*Comédias do Minho's* awards:

Year	Award/ recognition	Justification
2007	European Union (LEADER+*)	Good practices for rural development
2010	Creative North Award**	Innovation and creativity for regional development
2011	Portuguese Theatre Critics Association	'Training and artistic creation inside and outside the region, promoting training courses, workshops and meetings with creators, and co-producing with [very diverse cultural-artistic] entities'
2016	Access Culture (ex-aequo)	Social accessibility: 'This project is so far-reaching that it stands out for its good practices in promoting access to culture. It's a theatre company that takes theatre to the villages, in an unprecedented effort of cultural accessibility in the region, based on close proximity. It has created a broad cultural network that involves politicians, cultural technicians, local agents, amateur artists, educational agents, young people who collaborate or are trained in the project, at different levels of the relationship with artistic practice.'
2021	Presidency of the Republic celebration of the World Theatre Day	Cultural decentralisation

2023	Festival of the Creativity Club of Portugal	Silver award in the category of corporate publishing attributed to the design studio responsible for the 2023 Programme
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\* EU programme for rural development (see European Observatory of Rural Areas 2007: 57-59).

\*\* A partnership between a governmental organisation and a media corporation.

## 5. The 'impact' question

When applied to assess cultural outcomes, the concept of impact is rather ambiguous (see, for example, Belfiore & Bennet 2007). First of all, it is perhaps overused in the context of studies commissioned by institutions of various kinds, that wish to 'test' or to 'prove' the 'cost-benefit efficiency' of their cultural facilities, services or programmes, in order to legitimate them before funding agencies. In that framework, it is not rare that advocacy takes the place of analysis, and rhetoric substitutes for evidence (Belfiore & Bennett 2010: 136). Second, there is a strong, even if unconscious, connection between the 'impact' perspective and neoclassical economics; and experts tend to overfocus on easily recorded and quantified data, in a standard approach that can overlook some of the key features and outcomes of artistic and cultural processes. This is indeed a heavy trend among impact studies, despite the early criticism (see, e.g., Radich 1992). Third, the use of the concept is too often related to functionalist views, which deny the autonomy and self-sufficiency of arts and culture, 'demanding' that they justify their existence (and the allocated 'taxpayers' money') in non-cultural grounds – for instance, by demonstrating their effects in terms of economic growth, social cohesion, social integration, minority rights, reduction of poverty, and so on. And finally, many impact studies just ignore that, if the concept of 'impact' helps to define the direction of a causal relationship, evaluating the consequences of *X* over *Y*, the impact of territory on the arts can be much more important than the reverse (see Santos *et al.* 2014).

This does not mean denying any attempt of assessing and measuring the effects of cultural agency. It solely requires a more comprehensive approach. And the point of view of sustainability matters a lot.

On the one hand, assessment and evaluation are a matter of reflection, discourse, and debate. They call for a humanistic perspective, and not only economic (Belfiore & Bennett 2010). They are topics of thought and conversation. From 2009 to 2014, the field research on which this article is partially based was itself part of the project's own reflexive monitoring. As summarised in section 2, it was typically a 'research in action', trying to add the specific principles and means of sociological inquiry to the on-going planning of the *Comédias'* team. In that context, discourses are crucial: what people say about what they are doing, seeing and living, be they the

professional artists, the amateur performers, the municipal officials, the students and teachers, or the audiences, is a key component of the praxis inherent to the project.

So far, the general tone of the discourses produced about the *Comédias* project is very positive. The book published in 2014, celebrating and revisiting its first decade, included texts by different activists and observers (Domingues & Vaz, 2014). All expressed strong enthusiasm: the elected mayor currently chairing the association, the private sponsor, the artistic director, the actors interviewed by a critic and journalist (and the journalist himself), the external experts and creators that have been collaborating. Looking from a greater distance, the researchers' chapter was also cheerful. And, more importantly, the book offered local people's photos and quotations that undoubtedly showed adhesion and emotional engagement.

One should not underestimate the various testimonies on the high intensity and transformational energy that can arise from mass participation in open-air performances that recreate traditional legends and rituals, or the involvement of amateur actors in the reading and staging of plays, or the first attendance in one's own village or parish to a professional theatre or dance performance, or the request to inform and enrich, with one's experience and knowledge, the company's artworks. 'Thank you for having changed my life. Thank you for allowing me to join this family', said two women to the young actors, at the end of an activity in which they had participated (quoted in Costa 2014: 63). 'They [the actors] now belong here', an old man, once emigrant and now retired, told us (Santos *et al.*, 2014: 131). 'We have succeeded in building up an invisible university', one of the mayors repeated in several public occasions. Sense of belonging, sense of identity, sense of personal and collective change and development: the socio-psychological dimension of the experience in the context of such a project should not be forgotten.

There is, of course, a rhetorical element in this kind of discourses. They try to convince the listeners, to state an argument, to advocate a cause. People do see the events and their own participation from the point of view of their *habitus*, interests, and dreams. None of the various perspectives – including the one from the 'impact' expert – is global and neutral. All are parts of a dynamic and complex social reflexivity. But how could we reflect upon the project throwing away this reflexivity (see Belfiore & Bennett, 2010: 138-139)?

Meanwhile, an effort of systematisation can be made. Regarding sustainability, the first point to make is that the strategy put into practice is proving well, in a 20-year period, in terms of achieving the basic objective of any artist: to enter and survive in a rather difficult market, assuring jobs and enhancing the conditions and opportunities to work and perform. In fact, a new artistic 'centrality' arose in the Portuguese arts field; a new location was established in the Portuguese geography

of performing arts. Gradually, the signs of recognition within the field have arrived: the *Comédias do Minho* won several awards; from 2013 onwards, they qualified for a four-year subsidy; and they were already invited to such important venues as the two Portuguese national theatres. The collaboration with national and international directors and choreographers, their interpretation of this collaboration as landmarks in their own career, because of that inspiring interchange with local people and identities, and the increasing participation in national and European networks, are other facts and factors of artistic recognition.

Among the conditions that have rendered possible this professional and artistic endeavour, two seem crucial. One is the permanence of local institutional support, at the level of the political authorities and technical staff of the Minho Valley's municipalities, and at the level of local patrons and sponsors. The other is the territorial anchorage of the project, the praxis that the above quoted old man summarised in the sentence 'you now belong here'. The strategic ingredients of that praxis are the following three: (a) itinerancy, taking the regional scale and the whole territory as the framework for action; (b) multidimensionality, coupling the professional theatre activity with pedagogic intervention and support for the local amateur dramatics scene; (c) networking, building up a structure of cooperation, both with education and culture professionals (the 'local collaborators') and with local non-professional groups (the annual festival of amateur dramatics). The organisational structure based on a small permanent staff allows the attraction of trainees from art schools, either regional or national, as well as to engage local people in various logistic activities. The Local Network of Collaborators improves the pre-existing educational services of the municipalities (in schools, public libraries, local museums, cultural centres, etc.) and the cultural activities of the schools.

Thus, the *Comédias* project acquired a twofold singularity. As an artistic program, it created a new, recognizable pole within the national arts field. As a territorial intervention, it focused on regional development from a cultural point of view and anchored in a close relationship with local political bodies, configuring a bottom-up process of sustainable development. This singularity occurred in the Portuguese context, where no other analogue one could be found; but also in the European context, where, as far as we know, it is not common that this kind of comprehensive and territorialised approach is launched by the municipalities themselves. 'Community-based arts', in the broad sense of close links between the arts and their social contexts, are certainly a current issue in the cultural policies of developed countries, covering a wide range of features. Our standpoint regarding *Comedias'* singularity stresses the innovative action of *local* authorities, establishing the theatre company and directly setting up the basis for a regional artistic project. This is quite a unique

practice, in comparison to the more frequent initiatives launched by national policies and programmes.

## 6. Fitting into local cultural policies

The *Comédias* project certainly does not exhaust the goals and range of local cultural policies in the Minho Valley. Although small in population and weak in economic resources, the five municipalities are far from being confined to this initiative and partners. It is worthwhile to observe how this project fits into their cultural policies as a whole.

Table 6.5 presents the available information regarding the educational and cultural facilities of each municipality, state-owned or municipal. Table 6.6 gathers data on the main cultural events organised or supported by the municipalities. Both suggest that the *Comédias*, being unique in its inter-municipal nature and in its way of doing, is but one among various initiatives. Moreover, data suggest that the participation in this project is not substitutive for policies directed towards *other* audiences and objectives. Indeed, three local cultural events are significant at the national scale, and have some international reach: Paredes de Coura Rock Festival, since 1993, is a core indie festival of the Iberian Peninsula (see chapters 7 and 8 of this book); the Contemporary Arts Biennale at Vila Nova de Cerveira, founded in 1978 and hosting a museum since 2002, has important exchanges with the Galicia Autonomous Region of Spain; and the International Documentary Film Festival at Melgaço (since 2014), which is a partnership between a film society and the municipality's Cinema Museum, explicitly addressing identity, memory and border, has been getting international projection in Europe. Table 6.6 also shows some continuity in municipal policies, assessed by the longevity of many events, and the fact that some of them are cultural symbols of Minho Valley. At the same time, all the municipalities continue to pay a lot of attention to the conventional forms of celebrating folk culture, which are still very rewarding in terms of political legitimacy and electoral competition.

Table 6.5.

Number of educational and cultural facilities, 2013 and 2021-22:

	2013	2021-22
Cultural centres and auditoriums	11	12
Public libraries and archives	10	10
Local museums (museum-houses included)	10	10
Interpretative centres, heritage sites and circuits	14	16

Art galleries	16	17
Secondary schools	11	9
Tertiary education schools*	2	2

\* Belonging to the same Polytechnic Institute (of Viana do Castelo).

Table 6.6.

Selected regular events in Minho Valley, 2014-15 and 2021-22:

	2014-15	2021-22
Classic-contemporary orchestras and festivals	3 (itinerancy)	4 (itinerancy)
Pop-rock music festivals	2	3
Traditional music festivals (drums, brass, choirs, <i>concertinas</i> ...)	5	5
International dance festival	1	1
International folklore festival	3	2 (1 itinerant)
Theatre festival (FITAVALE, by <i>Comédias do Minho</i> , not included)	1	1
Fine arts biennale	1	1
International Documentary Film Festival	1	1
Book fairs and regular literature events	2	6 (1 itinerant)

Sources: Municipal cultural agendas; Statistics Portugal.

So, the option for an endogenous, bottom-up and participatory strategy, aiming at artistically exploring and expanding the traditional roots of folk culture, is absolutely compatible with a wider-ranging local cultural policy, addressing the needs and attitudes of the various groups (age-groups, social professional groups, educational groups, urban or rural groups, and so forth) that nowadays constitute the social mosaic of any given European region, despite its location and density. The *Comédias* case even suggests that diversity is, if not a requisite, a positive condition for the anchoring and sustainability of a ground-based approach to local culture, within a necessarily much broader policy.

Nevertheless, the question remains of how much the local powers want or can invest in such an approach. And this is, at least, a threefold problem. First, it is a question of political coherence. That approach is compatible with other quite different approaches (folk is not the opposite of rock, one could say!). But it cannot

be subordinated, and it is not functional to the kind of political use of conspicuous cultural commodities, attracting a lot of people, namely tourists, that is so often in practice at the local and at the national level – such as musical mega-events or bright new public venues. Second, it is a question of resources. In a conjuncture of strong financial constraints, the viability of long-term, time-consuming strategies crucially depends upon the capacity of funders and sponsors to maintain the indispensable amount of money. And third, it is a question of continuity, i.e., institutionalisation. It implies the transformation of a political circumstantial initiative (so capital, as we have seen, in the launching of this bottom-up project) into an institutional practice and routine, such as the supply of water, gas and electricity, the maintenance of primary and secondary schools, or the assistance to local sports teams or leisure associations.

All these questions have to do with time, time being the key parameter of sustainability. The most strategic assumption of projects like *Comédias* is to deal with a territory, and not with a conventionally defined ‘audience’. A territory is a spatially and historically rooted population and all the things built by men and women while interacting between them and with the natural environment: the economy, the society, the institutions, the traditions, the values, attitudes, beliefs and rituals, the embodied *habitus*. Any cultural initiative that departs from this territorial conscience, and wishes to inscribe itself in this territorial framework, needs time: investment, that is, present expenditure to obtain future gains, long-term commitment, gradual establishment of confidence, continuous work, patience to look for results that are neither immediate, nor easy, nor uncontroversial. But this, that is mostly evident in endogenous, participatory projects, is also the condition for multiple other policies directed to the increase and consolidation of human competences and social and cultural capital, such as education, training, and the empowerment of people both as art consumers and art practitioners. If cultural policy as a whole has something to learn from projects like *Comédias*, it can be expressed in few words: sense of territory, sense of time.

## 7. Conclusion: theatre, polity and development

There is always an imbalance between reality and the possibilities of its representation, through (always) selected analytic and interpretative schemes and processes (be it in science, art, economy, society, policy or culture). And this is of the utmost complexity when we try to relate general conceptualisation with empirical uniqueness. While aware of the hazards, we are also aware that we must contribute to broaden the horizon of social action, especially in intrinsic normative domains, like ‘development’.

The story of *Comédias do Minho* is not an unproblematic marriage of art and development, a union of artists, authorities, and population. But the fact is that, in these two decades of existence, the main trend has been improvement and consolidation. The next future is open, as always, to success and defeat. Time, the main exigency, is one of the scarcest resources in the political field and the art world.

On the other hand, the project is unique, which forbids simplistic generalisations. Each case is a singular case; and it is difficult to imagine that the set of conditions, circumstances, activists and participants can be replicated elsewhere in the exact configuration it acquired here. Still, comparisons are not just only possible, but necessary, taking into account the different contexts, and trying to confront the different strategies, resources and accomplished outcomes. The analytical description offered in this chapter is conceived as an empirical contribution to that comparative approach, which, of course, has to avoid overly formalist schemes and, instead, has to consider in-depth real and complex social processes.

Such comparative research programme could, at least, assess two main ideas that arise almost logically from the present case. One has a mid-range nature, the other is more general.

First, when one tries to identify the critical factors that explain the specificity and (so far) the success of *Comédias do Minho*, one tends to list the following ones: (i) *the bottom-up method*, combining the professional ideal of a theatre company and the political and institutional concerns of elected officials; (ii) *the regional scale*, for the critical mass it was able to grab; (iii) *the non-localist territorial approach*, territorial in the sense of deeply rooted in the local community and non-localist in the sense of opening the local community to the influence of a much wider social environment; and (iv) *the twin dimensions of an artistic activity*, situated in, and referred to, the national world of art, *and a community development project*, attentive to local identities and resources and focused on long-term and long-lasting networking. *These are keys for sustainability* in low-density territories – partnership without dependency, territorialisation without localism, social orientation without dropping the artistic intention and way of doing – and they may well be adequate, *mutatis mutandis*, to other forms of social and policy settings (see, e.g., Duxbury & Campbell 2009, for a Canadian experience; or Gibson 2012, esp. 74-77; and Dunphy 2009, concerning Australian rural cultural projects). But here, because of the lack of economic, political and demographic resources, they are absolutely critical. They propose new brands, new centralities, new horizons to deprived communities, and this is a crucial means for development. Simultaneously, they put in question long-established, already obsolete dichotomies such as creation *versus* reception, endogenous *versus* exogenous, local *versus* cosmopolitan or tradition *versus* modernity. Finally, they can also help

the researcher to 'overcome the false and sterile dichotomy between «intrinsic» and «instrumental» value of the arts in which cultural policies debates seem presently stuck' (Belfiore & Bennett 2007: 148).

The other concluding remark has to do with theatre. One should not ignore that *theatre is at the very core* of this multidimensional intervention. And this is not a hazardous or merely circumstantial fact. Here, the well-known and ritually repeated historical linkage between theatre and democracy acquires a renewed and totally pertinent meaning. As a performing art, theatre requires the interaction of characters and roles to give life to texts and to produce action. Theatre demands that many individuals voice their anguishes and dreams, sharing them publicly. Theatre obliges actors and audiences to stay side by side, and interact, it compels proximity. Theatre unveils conflict, and proposes a collective way to deal with it. Theatre presupposes a public space for encounters, an *agora*, and fosters the consolidation of a polity, where common goods and needs can be cooperatively addressed. Think about that: these elements – words, characters, roles, actors, audiences, interplay, controversy, public sphere, collective action, discourse, polity – are also key components of sustainable development.

As we have presented and discussed it, the *Comédias'* experience may well contribute to understanding culture as the very core of sustainable development. Our research allows us to stress that low-density territories could be further explored, namely, to underline the importance of bottom-up, specific, situated projects to enrich the density of policy frameworks and implementations – in Europe and outwards. This of course must entail perseverance towards complex research protocols and reflection, as well as the efforts to share and discuss concepts, contexts, experiences, and outcomes.

A long improvement is still at stake, to incorporate singularities (time being one of them) into the theory and practice of cultural sustainable development.

