The role of the arts in the sustainable development of rural territories: a case study in the Northern Portugal

1Helena Santos1, *Augusto Santos Silva1, Joana Ramalho2, Ricardo Moreira3
1Faculty of Economics, University of Porto, Portugal
2Universidade Europeia, Portugal
3Universidat de Barcelona, Portugal

The consideration of culture as the fourth pillar of sustainability implies an intellectual and political debate, grounded on both the theoretical and the empirical level. One must revisit the knowledge already gathered in the fields of economics and sociology of development, concerning the centrality of culture as a framework, a resource and a strategy for local and communitarian development.

Working within rural territories poses specific problems. On the one hand, demographic and socioeconomic imbalances represent hard restrictions in what concerns the resources and agents one can mobilize in development processes. On the other hand, the richness of material and immaterial heritage, the vividness of oral traditions, a strong sense of community and cultural identity, all are important local assets that can be transformed in quite useful means of development policies and programs.

This paper discusses these topics, sociologically and also considering the design and implementation of local cultural policies, drawing from the results of a case study: the long-term project of artistic and cultural intervention based in a professional theatre troupe and its performing, creative and educational activities. This project is itself a partnership between a group of professional artists and five municipalities of the Northern Portugal; and its aim is precisely to use the rich immaterial local heritage as a ground for collective involvement in a sustainable and culture-driven development strategy.

As the project has begun in 2004, it is possible to analyse its consolidation, the results and its social impact in a ten-year period. And this, in turn, provides some ground to an analytical and normative debate sensitive to empirical diversity and real achievements.

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