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LOCAL SSE POLICIES ENABLING THE SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL TRANSITION

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WORKING PAPER

Vitality in remote areas. Cultural social economy organisations
and public policies for culturally sustainable local development

Silvia SACCHETTI, Andrea SALUSTRI, Roger SUGDEN (Italy)

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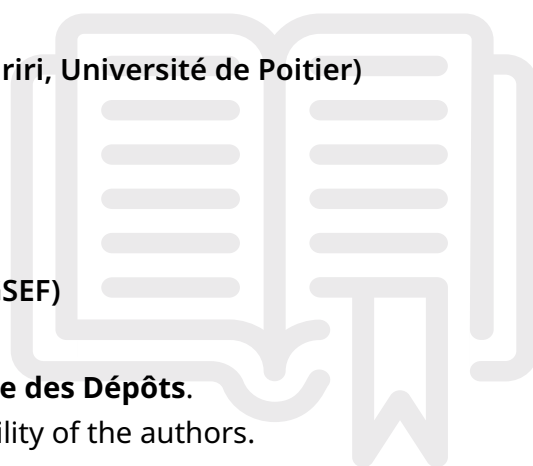
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Vitality in remote areas. Cultural social economy organizations and public policies for culturally sustainable local development

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Introducing the challenge and the approach

According to the Italian National Institute of Statistics, a territory is considered “fragile” when it is exposed to natural and anthropogenic risks and critical conditions in the main demographic and social characteristics of the population and the economic and productive system (Cicerchia, Caroleo, 2024). To measure the fragility of Italian municipal territories, ISTAT has developed a composite index from a set of 12 elementary indicators covering the above-mentioned four dimensions of fragility. Accessibility to essential services, which measures the degree of peripherality of a territory with respect to the poles of services, as defined in the National Strategy for Inner Areas (average travelling time to reach the nearest pole by car, identified on the basis of the simultaneous availability of the three essential services of education, health and mobility) is among the elementary indices included in the composite fragility index (ibidem). As a consequence, the notion of “fragile territory” includes and integrates that of “inner area”, which has received much attention in development and cohesion policies.

The “inner areas” of Italy are territories that lack immediate access to essential welfare services (education, health, and mobility) because of their noticeable distance from regional centres. For the public administration,

this classification includes areas that over time have gradually undergone a process of marginalization which has resulted in a demographic decline, a decline in employment and inadequate land use. Specifically, these are small centers, distant from the poles of attraction and supply of essential services such as education, health and mobility.¹

More than 60 % of Italy is made up of inner areas, and the latter are home to about 25 % of the population, organized into more than 4,000 municipalities (Barca, *et al.*, 2014). Defined in this way, inner areas (and, more in generally, fragile areas) are symptomatic of a broader set of areas at the global scale, so that an increased understanding of developmental experiences can provide useful suggestions on how to trigger culturally sustainable local development across peripheral territories and regions. Such experiences will be illustrated in the paper for the case of Cembra Valley, located in the North-East of Italy, in the Trentino Province, an area that at first glance cannot be included among the inner or fragile areas, but that, as most inner and fragile areas, is unable to meet residents' needs and fulfil the aspirations of its inhabitants.

As a result of secular processes of anthropisation, peripheral areas are often endowed with important environmental and cultural resources and, in some cases, the extreme variety and abundance of local tangible and intangible capital has fuelled a socio-economic dynamism that has inverted peripheralization processes. However, where territorial and social distances have prevailed, peripheral areas are suffering economic decline, which has been associated with the exclusion of local communities from the identification of development aims (Sugden and Wilson, 2002). Dominant approaches to development tend to provide predetermined developmental priorities, including actions that move communities towards increasing performance on a set of given indicators. Pre-defined priorities may go against the possibility to self-determine what is valuable for people, and hence distance communities from development aims which could have emerged otherwise. Decline has been related also with the dilapidation of the natural and cultural heritage that is the same source of monetary and nonmonetary prosperity, for example through extractive cultural or tourist activities (see also Choi and Sirakaya (2006), Inskeep (1991), and McCool (1995)). This can eventually lead to a "tragedy of the commons", as identified by Hardin (1968) and then reassessed by Ostrom (1990), who indicated that tragedy could be avoided if, besides market exchange for profit maximisation and state top-down approaches to resource coordination, production solutions also included cooperation and self-management by communities of users.

Exogenously defined development aims, related innovations or sectoral development that are driven either by market hierarchies or by development priorities decided by policy authorities, may not match what the people, given the opportunity, would think desirable (Beierle and Konisky 2000; Sacchetti and Sugden, 2009). Ioannides (1995), for example, illustrates this point with the decision of the Cyprus authorities to protect a commons by instituting a national park in Akamas without involving the local community in decisions around tourism

¹ Source: <http://www.psr.provincia.tn.it/Sviluppo-Rurale-2014-2020/Stato-PSR-Nazionale-PNRR-e-AREE-INTERNE/Aree-Interne>, consulted on October the 20th, 2023.

development (Byrd, 2007). Similarly, while digital transition (EU Commission, 2021) is indicated as a possible solution to the costs borne by remote area inhabitants, this must be weighed against the risk of fostering social isolation and loss of cultural specificities, and be complemented by solutions that foster participation, use of creativity, and relational goods (Uhlener, 1989), adopting a comprehensive view of human development.

An implication is that the organisations of the social economy (SE) that produce cultural services may represent, among others, a useful and effective piece in the development puzzle, when they are defined explicitly as inclusive of community constituencies aimed at “net value production” (Santos, 2012); that is, they produce both material and immaterial value in excess of what is appropriated by producers, e.g. through a price mechanism or by top-down decisions by the public authority. In addition, public policies oriented towards the direct production of culture could be effectively complemented by “shared administration” initiatives for co-programming with local community organisations (Arena, 2002; Becchetti, *et al.*, 2022). The utility is that community, or civil society organisations, can complement top-down policy mechanisms by specialising in the development of organizational resources and specific “inclusive or prosocial capabilities” (Sacchetti, 2023a) that support participation for the discovery of a community’s emergent aims.

The “identification” or “discovery” function of policy, at the top, combined with that of civil society organisations, at the bottom, can represent an alternative to policy designed on pre-defined priorities, and an opportunity to shorten social and territorial distances. Alongside Sacchetti (2023c, 2025) and Sacchetti and Sugden (2025), we assess the “vitality” of a community according to its capacity to identify or discover what they have reason to value, or the functionings to be pursued (functionings are defined in Sen, 1992) and to coordinate resources with consistent processes, so that a community and its people can move towards the identified aims. We suggest, in particular, features against which it is possible to appreciate the “vitality” potential of cultural social economy organisations (CSEOs), with the aim to contribute to the debate on the development of inner areas. We consider the interactions between the institutional framework, the governance of cultural events, and potential impacts. Specifically, we address the specificities of the institutional framework for culture, what values and preferences underpin and shape the activities of cultural organisations, what publics participate in the definition of the aims, in what terms participation occurs, what competences are required to implement activities, and where those competences reside among publics and localities. We observe the potential for collective benefits such as the diffusion of inclusive and participatory values (Borzaga and Sacchetti 2021), the production of relational goods (Uhlener, 1989; Gui and Stanca, 2010), the extension of ties (Granovetter, 1983), and the opportunities that arise from the activities.

We illustrate by presenting the features of the cultural policy of Trentino, a province in North-East Italy, and engage with “Puntodoc,” a cultural association operating in Cembra Valley, a rural area North-East of Trento, the main urban centre of Trentino. The association organizes the annual Festival “Contavalle - Piccola Rassegna del Ri-Esistere” (“Contavalle - Small Review of Re-existence”) and other activities. The festival involves publics across an entire mid-mountain valley, which share some features of fragile and inner areas. According to the

available policy documents, Cembra Valley is not formally included in the list of Italy's inner areas, despite having most of the characteristics, in terms of lack of services or demographics. It is possibly not includable since it is not far enough from the main urban center (Trento). Most Cembra Valley's Municipalities are not even included among the fragile territories. However, the area is subject to intense depopulation phenomena, further testifying to the lack of an adequate supply of services to satisfying the aspirations of its residents.

Against this background, our investigation begins with a preliminary analysis aimed at outlining the socio-economic context inside and outside the Cembra Valley, so as to detect elements of peripheralization and to match them with the cultural activities carried out within Contavalle's festival. Then, we build on primary data collection through six interviews conducted with Contavalle's festival stakeholders, including local public administrators, directors, volunteers, contracted collaborators, artists. Engagement with the festival organisation culminated in a roundtable discussion with academics and other cultural organisations from the community, in October 2024, funded by the Trento Municipality and the University of Trento. We contextualise interview findings using secondary sources such as information collected from webpages and reports.

Why consider cultural social economy organisations (CSEOs)

We suggest that the relevance of considering CSEOs in the light of the problems of peripherality and peripheralization (the first referring to territorial distances and the second to social distances, cf. Kühn, 2015) is that they can be an ideal vehicle for studying economic institutions that emphasise the inclusion of multiple publics in decision-making. First, CSEOs can be explicitly defined to pursue public interests through inclusive modalities as their main scope for action. Second, culture implies the manifestation of human achievements at the collective level, and hence it may represent a privileged context in which to observe the value of inclusion and the activation of human creativity in the identification of development aims.

Inclusive governance solutions

From a normative perspective, SE organisations should use governance and organisational solutions that legitimise the inclusion of multiple public interests at different levels of decision-making. Social economy organisations, for example, are recommended to assume a multistakeholder governance if they want to qualify as "social enterprises" (Defourny and Nyssens, 2010). Likewise, non-profit organisations such as charities and community associations are statutorily defined by explicit pro-social objectives, which can be implemented by including the interests of specific publics in the decision-making criteria of boards. Hansmann (1992), for example, emphasizes that the organisational features that make the non-profit model, act to inherently align with the interests of "weaker" stakeholders. He insisted on the relevance of constraints on the use of economic surplus (such as the profit distribution constraint), the social mission, as well as specific governance solutions which require a board of trustees (Hansmann, 1992). Sacchetti and Sugden (2009) and Sacchetti

(2015) introduce a complementary argument, suggesting that the bottleneck in the pursuit of the public interest by private organisations is the use of governance structures and decision processes that do not include the interests of the publics, but are exclusively defined by one single category of stakeholder (such as the owners, the managers, or a single patron). Building on these contributions, Sacchetti and Borzaga (2021) extended Hansmann's argument, suggesting that the social motive or the non-profit distribution constraint may not be enough to ensure that multiple interests emerge, and that, from a normative point of view, the production of positive social impacts and, conversely, the reduction of social costs, justify the inclusion of publics at different levels of decision making.

The implication, for our specific focus on CSEOs, is that arts festivals with participatory and inclusive structures and processes recognise that publics (for example, artists, volunteers, local community associations) can contribute to identifying the nature and aims of cultural events, according to what they value. This is perhaps especially the case for events with a "community theatre" approach. Community theatre has been understood as a creative process for producing a collective performance defined by and for the community, through a representation of their real experiences, where the author's written text is not the driving force of the performance, and where there is not a strict division of labour or a focus on the commercialisation of the theatrical representation (Dalla Palma, 2001; see Malini, 2020 for a comprehensive review of how community theatre has been applied in response to societal challenges).

Voice and listening

CSEOs may offer a context where people can voice and listen reciprocally to each other's ideas, experiences and needs. In previous reflections (Sacchetti and Sugden, 2021), we have pointed to what is essential about inclusion and participation, with reference to Hirschman's work on voice (Hirschman, 1970). We paired this perspective with listening, to round up the idea of a *participation process that is essentially about communication and contamination of ideas and views on desirable possibilities*. Voice and listening are a matter of reciprocity. For somebody to express their voice there must be somebody else listening, and vice versa. For example, a community festival director can listen to the voices of publics in the community, and vice versa publics can listen to the artistic director or leader. Likewise, a community brass band can include its musicians in the choice of the repertoire, community initiatives and events. Interactions of this sort can help the creation of social ties in the community, the exploration of what happens in other localities, increasing the capacity to identify what is valued. When the roles of both voice and listening are recognized, communication takes the shape of a multiform community of publics. It brings CSEOs to life by providing a meaning to participation. Voice and listening are also crucial for applications of community theatre. Supporting CSEOs could hence be an interesting policy direction for peripheral Italy, and indeed for remote and rural economies more generally, since with voice and listening practices, they can foster the identification of community aims.

From private to public benefits

Most studies have examined the dimension of individual outcomes produced by artistic education and cultural participation rather than those of common good creation. When considered, the collective dimension has been regarded as a positive externality. However, SE organisations, and cultural activities as meritorious good, aiming explicitly (and not as an externality) at generating societal value, while producing benefits also for specific individuals, categories or groups. Consider, for example, community brass bands. These are specific CSEOs which, in Italy, take the form of voluntaristic associations. In Trentino, they associate musicians, who volunteer their skills to play for the community. With these activities, Trentino brass bands produce at least three types of effects. First, they generate common benefits. They offer cultural opportunities to their own community as they enrich local events with music performances. In this way they support the public administration and policy makers in furthering cultural development goals. Brass band activities and related music events can also be seen as local contexts where the community stock of relational goods is reinforced. In this way, the quality of social capital in the community can improve (Donati, 2003). Second, they produce individual benefits: for the musicians by furthering their fulfilment, as well as for the people who learn or improve their music skills, while also satisfying some psychological needs, such as self-esteem, belonging, friendship (Sacchetti and Diani, 2022). Third, each one receiving a direct individual benefit from the activities can, in turn, generate positive utility for the community, according to a reciprocity principle (Zamagni and Zamagni, 2010; Becchetti and Bellucci, 2021), for instance when, as part of their activities, they also offer educational programmes, providing the community with access to basic music education. Cultural organisations of this sort have, as their primary aim, the generation of public benefits, complemented by individual benefits. The traditional perspective where the public benefit represents an externality of the individual pursuit of utility is, therefore, subverted. Here individual wellbeing is an external outcome of the main aim of producing public good.

Vitality and cultural services

Altogether, the above considerations are consistent with a production environment where multiple publics can communicate and elaborate on what is desirable, or where governance solutions enable the pursuit of the public interest. The “public,” here, is not a unique entity but is defined by a variety of groups that are typically affected by decisions taken elsewhere but who are not aware of the process, or included in the decision-making (Dewey, 1927). By removing the maximization of exclusively defined aims and emphasizing the inclusion of publics, organisations are better positioned to address power imbalances in the process of discovery, and ensure the inclusion and protection of publics, including those most marginalised. However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms depends on the organisation’s ability to remain “vital,” that is focused on the need for inclusive processes and the discovery of what has reason to be pursued through activities.

The idea of “vitality” was defined in Sacchetti (2023c) and then refined in Sacchetti (2024) as the capability of economic institutions and organizations to enable people *to identify and move towards* what they have reason to value, reflecting their own experience and motivation, deliberating and sharing with others to advance initiatives, highlight needs, offer mutual support, and undertake initiatives and activities that lead toward well-being and are generative of value for the community. This can be enabled through “contamination” processes that occur within deliberative and creative spaces where people can discover and identify what is valued.

When cultural production activities, such as popular festivals, cultural volunteering, arts education, are undertaken by community or civil society organizations they are likely to expand the possibility of people “to identify” valuable aims by means of creative and deliberative processes, voice and listening. It follows that vital cultural organizations are that can put in place actions that bring people and communities closer to processes of contamination of ideas and identification of shared, desirable aims. Possibly, this may help to mitigate the cumulative circular causation effects between centers and peripheries, and may improve the capability of peripheral areas (social and territorial) to meet people’s need and fulfil their aspirations.

Figure 1: The vitality of production organisation



Source: the authors, adapted from Sacchetti 2023c

To appreciate the potential of cultural life to activate vitality, as defined here, research applications can focus on detailing specific features of CSEOs, addressing three fundamental questions: “*who controls culture?*,” “*who is culture for?*,” and “*to what effects?*”. The first question – “who controls culture?” – addresses the identification challenge. It points in practice at who has the right to identify what ought to be valued and pursued. Fundamentally, taking a Deweyan perspective, preferences on aims and objectives are not considered exogenous but as the result of processes and economic structures (Sacchetti and Sugden,

2009). The second question – “who is culture for?” – points at who the direct beneficiaries of culture are, and the answer is assumed to follow from the institutional settings and processes identified with the first question. The third question – “to what effects” – considers the generative capacity of activities in terms of the public benefits created at a broader community level. The idea is that cultural activities are aimed at producing value for the entire community. Specific benefits for the person or the single public become generative when they overcome the personal dimension and create value for the entire community. Community benefits have the features of public goods, since they relate to benefits that are not excludable or subtracted in their use. This occurs, for example, when activities promote a diffused attitude towards shared decisions and communication rather than conflict, or a greater shared respect and promotion of values of solidarity and mutual help. We explain this point later in terms of “network effects” (Arthur, 1994).

“Who controls culture?”: Reconsidering inclusive governance and processes

The idea of “control” here is not used in terms of property rights necessarily but refers to who has the right to govern or identify the aims and direction of resource allocation, whether that coincides with a property right or not (Zeitlin, 1974; Cowling and Sugden, 1998). Grounding their analysis in the work of John Dewey (1927) and on the observation of uneven development effects in dominant ways of governing production (Hymer, 1972; Cowling and Sugden, 1998), Sacchetti and Sugden (2009) and Sacchetti, (2015), among others, have emphasised the ethical and cognitive limitations of the exclusion of publics from strategic choices. The involvement of publics at a strategic level, where the direction of resources and activities is decided, requires a change of governance at the pinnacle of the organizational hierarchy, and even when multiple publics share – by governance design – the right to take part in decision-making, there may also be diversified intermediate steps, where people can learn and build relational and deliberative competences. When inclusion is introduced, organizations may build a participatory culture and competences first, by creating a sense of ownership among participants. They can achieve this by empowering publics (cultural volunteers such as amateur actors from the community, for example) within the design of projects (a theatre play, for example) at operational levels first, and then progress towards inclusion strategies at more strategic levels. Communication spaces offer organization members and non-members alike the opportunity to contribute their experiential knowledge and creativity, actively taking part in choices, and moving them closer to the aims that emerge from the deliberative process (Sacchetti and Sugden, 2009; Sacchetti, 2023b).

“Who is culture for?”

The national cultural policy that supports the performing arts absorbs most of the resources made available through the “Fondo Unico per lo Spettacolo” (FUS) (Bertolini, Maggiora 2018), supporting production costs and demand levels that, without the Fund, would not allow the financial sustainability of activities. It is no coincidence that the first contributions to the

economic aspects of culture highlight the peculiarity of the cost structure of these organizations which, linked to high fixed costs of both production and labour and to the uniqueness of the artist, does not allow for increases in productivity on a par with other industrial sectors, through technological innovation (Baumol and Bowen, 1965). Through the national policy, public support, therefore, benefits a small number of entities on the supply side. With this approach, the risk is that the cultural offering is reserved to specific cultural organizations and groups of people and is not designed to be offered or accessible to all. This might be because of cultural tastes, or because of income and status, or because the traditional places where high culture is offered (theatres and opera houses) are concentrated in the main urban centers.

For example, the cultural policy of the Trentino province chooses, complementary to the national policy, a grassroots approach, which could reflect the initiative of communities and their publics, as well as guarantee cultural services production in multiple and remote locations rather than focusing on a few (urban) centres or social groups. The aim is to improve the direct contribution of communities in the making of culture, increase access to cultural services, create employment opportunities through cultural services, improve volunteering opportunities and social capital, and build diffused organizational and management practices for social and economic sustainability across the entire territory in the cultural sector.

“To what effects?”

The guiding principle of engagement and contaminating practices is to create, at the collective level, a better match between public interests and aims on the one hand and local development opportunities on the other. Findings support this view, for instance the work of Timothy (2006) on tourism destination communities, who emphasises the importance of community empowerment in local development choices. Moreover, inclusive economic institutions and practices can engender a cumulative causation cycle that reinforces people preferences and expectations towards participatory practices. Vital cultural organisations, or cultural organisations aspiring to be vital, can maintain or enhance their vitality by networking with each other in ways that align with the governance requirements for vitality. Elements of social capital such as trust among participants and legitimacy of choices also improve with participation (see empirical findings in Sacchetti, 2023a). Participation of publics is also expected to activate elements of personal fulfilment. These include the furthering of psychological needs, such as relational needs and moral needs. The use of creativity and relationality, more specifically, are associated with higher levels of fulfilment and wellbeing in people (Maslow, 1963; Sacchetti and Tortia, 2013; Sacchetti, 2023b).

Measuring the effects of specific activities for publics and the community remains a challenge, because of the unevenness of the relational space (Salustri et al. 2025) and of the coexistence of mechanisms of self-selection and compression (Salustri, 2023). We can expect that when participation is highly valued, organizations will assess the degree of inclusiveness, participation, voice and listening of multiple publics, and how this serves the vitality of publics and communities. Ultimately, the vitality contributed by the organization would

consist of some evaluation of the public's capability to put in place processes of identification of valued aims, so that the process itself represents a non-excludable and non-rival resource for the community.

Methodology

Operationally, we can formulate an answer to the three questions of vitality (who controls culture, who is culture for, and to what effects) by considering the cultural policy framework, the profile of cultural organizations, their location and main beneficiaries, the broader effects. The Contavalle festival is run in Cembra Valley by a CSEO called Puntodoc. It was identified, for the purposes of this research, following conversations with one of the functionaries of the local bank foundation, historically committed to the funding of cultural activities across the province. We then discussed the scope of research and the opportunity to study the festival with the artistic director, with whom a preliminary exploratory and nonrecorded interview was conducted. Data were initially collected from secondary documents and festival programmes available on the festival website. In parallel, primary data collection included 6 semi-structured interviews with the Contavalle Festival stakeholders, addressing the nature of this cultural social economy initiative, its governance, processes and effects in the context of a broader system of nested institutions and policies. Interviews involved the current president of the association Puntodoc, the association that coordinates the Contavalle festival, one donor with political experience, one local administrator from the municipality, one artist of the theatre company called "Omini" on the participatory theatre method used to involve the community in the discovery of relevant community issues, and two actresses. All interviews (in Italian) were transcribed and coded using Atlas.ti.²

We addressed:

- Local policy and socioeconomic challenges: we investigated the main contextual conditions and challenges faced by the community.
- Cultural offerings and services: The type of activities and services offered, also studying which actors generate organizational knowledge and skills; in addition, we studied the issue of involvement of recipients and collaborations in the territory; who are the main actors and networks from whom the organization gets the needed competences and skills, to enable activities.
- Who controls culture: The governance aspect of cultural organisations and their events can indicate which actors are involved in defining strategic directions and how much influence donors and founders, management figures, workers, volunteers and the local community have in defining the direction of activities and scope of the cultural organisation.
- Who is culture for: Activities can be of various kinds, some strictly related to educational, other to recreational and creative activities. The combination of activities provides an indication of the publics involved and reached. We also address some

² Code groups: context, elements of festival organisation, insights, motivation, cooperation and competition, benefits and problems, public administration, elements of vitality.

characteristics of the physical spaces where cultural activities take place. One of the functions of cultural organizations is to offer activities and services with some regularity or continuity to the community and its multiple publics.

- To what effects: We studied the consistency of activities and production coordination solutions with the creation of vitality, how service production has evolved, if this is the result of communication among publics with respect to values, aims, priorities and directions, critical issues, as well as areas of development.

From this analysis we can expect to be able to identify the degree of vitality of cultural organizations, depending on their ability to put in place those organizational resources which we associate with improved participation and embeddedness of cultural activities in the community.

The cultural policy framework of the Trentino Province

While public spending on the production of meritorious goods is enabled by virtue of the collective benefits they produce, it can also be justified by normative principles, often contained in constitutional laws – for example, where they speak of the development of culture and the protection of the artistic heritage, the universal right to education or health. In the Trentino case, the meritorious value of culture is recognised by the 1987 law on cultural promotion and subsequently by the provincial law on cultural activities 15/2007. As its guiding principle, the province “recognises culture as a strategic factor for the social and economic development of the community and for the improvement of individual and collective wellbeing, as well as a tool for supporting knowledge, awareness, creativity, innovation and sustainable development” (Provincial law 15/2007, translated by the authors).

Article 1 of the law identifies the aims of its cultural policies as follows:

- a) to improve the quality of individual and collective life, favouring the processes of social cohesion and knowledge as a strategic element for community growth;
- b) to guarantee conditions of equal access to and participation in cultural, social and leisure activities, without social, cultural and physical discrimination, and to develop a culture of gender equality;
- c) to promote creativity, innovation and sustainable development;
- d) to involve institutions, local authorities, cultural operators and economic actors in the development of cultural activities through participatory planning tools;
- e) to foster innovative planning and the quality of Trentino’s cultural system, promoting effectiveness and efficiency in the organisation of cultural activities, also through the enhancement of cultural networks in the territory; and (bis) promote the entrepreneurial management of cultural goods and activities also through public-private partnerships, favouring fundraising and crowdfunding activities
- f) to support and enhance associations in order to pursue the widespread and participatory development of culture, favouring the widest pluralism of expressions and initiatives (Provincial law 15/2007, translated by the authors).

As the last point emphasizes, civil society is given a special proactive role. It is in fact by empowering civil society organisations that the norm aims to implement a principle of participation in the development of culture. A key practical implication of this principle is the development of actions towards the “participatory planning, coordination and evaluation of cultural activities,” together with an emphasis on the economic sustainability of cultural organizations, stressing public support as well as the autonomous role of cultural organisations in developing cultural entrepreneurial capacity. There is, in other words, the promotion of a cultural industry attitude. This implies that cultural policy also supports the demand for cultural activities and – on the supply side – art workers, their training and occupational opportunities, as well as the incentivisation of inter-organizational networks as in the promotion of “the participation of enterprises and other economic actors in the design, organisation and support of cultural initiatives and events.”

This law has provided the normative context for festival organizations in the form of associations, but also a whole system of cultural institutions that include a widespread network of public and private libraries, 13 music schools and their branches in the form of associations and worker cooperatives, 130 provincial and local public and private museums mostly taking the form of foundations, 86 brass bands, 187 choirs, drama companies and cultural heritage circles in the form of community cultural associations.

The local cultural policy has supported community assets that in large part already existed and has encouraged collaboration between cultural organizations as well as cultural service production in multiple and remote locations, rather than focusing on few (urban) centres. Cultural activities of local relevance are given special attention. Article 8 addresses this point, emphasising the need to identify, within the community, “the local cultural and creative venues and networks” that can integrate “the different forms of cultural and artistic expression of the residents and for the participation of cultural operators in the enhancement of local creativity.”

The approach builds a clear bridge with one main feature of the vitality of a territory, which is designing economic institutions that allow for the identification of desirable aims and objectives. By promoting the joint public sector-community management of cultural activities in the territory, the broad effects have been not only related to access to services, creation of employment opportunities and diffused organizational and management practices, but also the creation of a vital context, that is one that reinforces participatory, relational and joint decision-making capacity among publics in the civil society.

The network perspective reinforces mutually supportive strategies, which are again incentivized by the public resources available for joint projects and by community organisations’ capabilities to design and implement joint projects. The interplay between the pillar organisations of this cultural policy has emerged through the events and activities that have been developed over time. Festival events for example are often produced not by one single organisation but through the partnership of multiple associations and with the

cooperation between two or more local authorities. On the other hand, music schools offer music education programmes for primary and secondary schools, brass band associations and choirs. Likewise, music schools, cultural volunteering associations and museums contribute to the organisation and content identification of festival events, while libraries go beyond their traditional role of “reading points” and have become multifunctional spaces and gathering spaces for multicultural and societal integration.

The local challenges and the social economy organisation behind the Contavalle Festival

The Contavalle Festival is one of the initiatives led by the Puntodoc association, which has been committed to promote community participation in Cembra Valley (a specific territory of Trentino) since its establishment in 2011. The association strives to identify community instances through cultural initiatives, utilizing participatory methods and tools that strengthen the emergence of genuine instances from the people, such as participatory theatre, collective storytelling, and social video documentation. Its activities engage a diverse range of stakeholders, including creative industries professionals, volunteers among local citizens, public institutions and funders. Puntodoc operates in a socio-economic and geomorphological context where diverse villages are present, each with its own history.

Figure 2. The Trentino province and the localization of the Cembra Valley

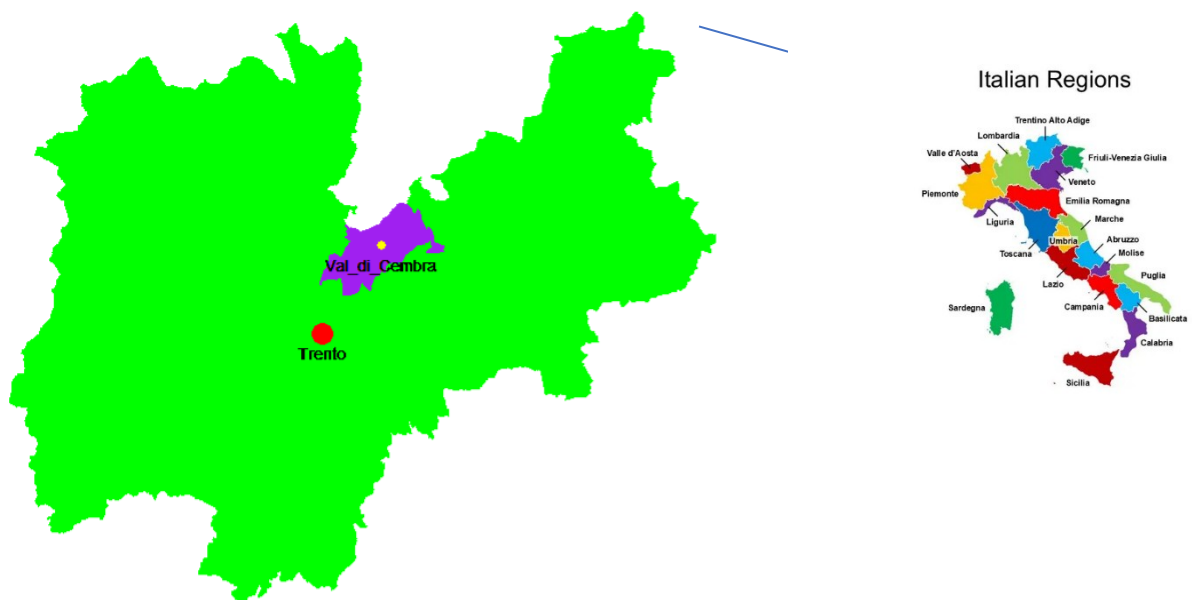
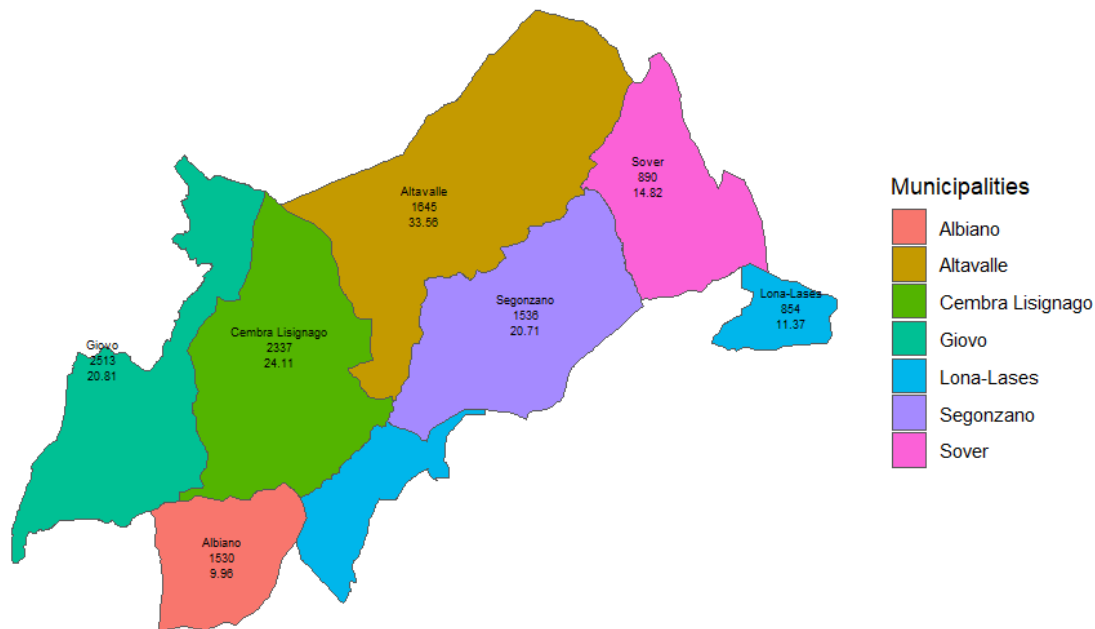


Figure 3. The geography of the municipalities in the Cembra Valley before the merger



Source: the authors. Figures refer to number of residents and territorial dimension (km²)

Currently, the Cembra Valley faces significant challenges of depopulation and aging, exacerbated by limited local services and job opportunities, mainly restricted to vineyards and porphyry quarries. A former administrator highlighted the cultural and economic stagnation caused by reliance on quarry work, which discouraged higher education and leadership development. A current administrator noted that the closure of services drives more residents to leave, creating a vicious cycle. Seasonal “return tourism” temporarily revitalizes the area in spring and summer. In 2016, a controversial administrative merger reduced the valley’s seven municipalities to four, sparking local debate and becoming a theme for participatory theatre in that year.

Figure 4. House agglomerations and terrace vineyards



Source: Wikipedia

Agriculture, particularly vineyards and small fruit cultivation, shapes the Cembra Valley's terraced landscape, while porphyry extraction, involving 86 quarries and 300 companies (as of 2016), is another key economic activity. However, a 2020 scandal exposed criminal control over porphyry operations in Lona Lases, the smallest municipality, leading to exploitation, violence, environmental harm, and administrative corruption. A former administrator expressed regret over the cultural impoverishment that accompanied the economic exploitation of porphyry. Reflecting on missed opportunities to connect material wealth with broader cultural development, his situation underscores a broader challenge for the region: the persistent narrative of Trentino as a “happy” and prosperous area may obscure awareness of social and economic disparities, including the relative poverty experienced by parts of its population. Specifically, even without questioning the non-inclusion of Cembra Valley among the inner areas or the fragile territories, the area obviously risks failing the needs and aspirations of its residents, thereby triggering a progressive depopulation that in fact activates a vicious circle.

Figure 5. Porphyry caves in Cembra Valley



Porphyry quarries in the Monte Gaggio (Albiano) area, left bank of the Cembra Valley in Trentino © Marco Galvagni. Source: Malesani (2021).

Cultural offerings and services

Contavalle: A Review of Cultural Resistance and Re-Existence

Launched in 2016, Contavalle represents both a cultural initiative and a tool provided to civil society to foster public debate and actively address the needs of small mountain communities. This dialogue takes shape through forms of participatory, civic, and community theatre. While not originally conceived as a grassroots initiative, the project was spearheaded by a director with roots in Tuscany, who, as a facilitator and professional in the field, collaborates closely with the Puntodoc Association. Despite its origins, Contavalle continues to be a festival crafted by the people and for the people, with the purpose of fostering connections and facilitating dialogue with those who employ theatre, storytelling, and art as instruments to counteract the fragmentation of their small-town communities.

The festival is deeply embedded in the local territory and community, emerging as a form of “resistance” that reflects and advocates for the interests of communities whose existence and communal identity are threatened by structural dynamics and top-down policies. Its inaugural event in 2016 followed the direction and vision of the Puntodoc association leadership. A central theme was addressed through the lens of the “theatre of the oppressed” (Boal and McBride, 2020) and the Montecchio model — a Tuscan town initiative with which the Contavalle director had previously been involved.

Initially conceived as a community festival, the project began as an informal, grassroots effort without the intention of creating a formalized festival or representing specific public interests. However, during the first public staging in the town square, the festival attracted a remarkable audience, with the number of attendees surpassing the town’s population. This overwhelming participation underscored the initiative’s public value and its resonance within and beyond the local community.

Who controls culture

The Contavalle Festival currently features both an official program of events and a participatory theatre initiative. Its organizational structure is grounded in an inclusive governance model, which includes weekly open town assemblies held between July and August as part of a year-long framework. Additionally, the phenomenon of return tourism plays a significant role: beginning in May and continuing throughout the summer, migrants who left the valley during the 1970s return to participate in these assemblies and contribute to the festival’s organization. Through their presence, they reaffirm their connection to the place and the community.

The festival builds upon and extends the inclusivity values and practices established by the Puntodoc Association since its inception in 2011. These initiatives, guided by the artistic director, have been particularly impactful in the upper Cembra Valley, with a focus on the municipality of Altavalle. Reflecting on this, a former local administrator notes:

I think that the kind of proposal that he [the artistic director] makes, that he tries to make, that the festival tries to make, in particular I always mention Tommaso, is to start right from the bottom, to include people, both by involving them directly in their own stories and then bringing them to this side, let's say the stage, I mean, right? *(Audience and former local administrator of Cembra, autumn 2023)*

The role of the artistic director, who brought his Tuscan experience to the valley, has been crucial and possibly the entire initiative may be dependent on his leadership: “[...] after that there is always Tommaso. He is the director, artistic director and so on. So without him we wouldn't have done anything, that's it, absolutely” [artist and Puntodoc associate, autumn 2023].

His attitude is compatible with the idea of enabling participants through guidance, letting topics emerge rather than commanding and controlling. One artist associated to Puntodoc notices:

Tommaso guides us and everyone tells us their experiences, then he also lets us suggest things [...]. Well, no, it's not that we have roles. At least for me, I don't have a particular role, I mean, we are all...afterwards there are those who take care of the technical things, [...] that's another matter, I mean, but inside we all talk, we all act, we all [...] whoever wants to, of course, I mean, because he doesn't force us. Tommaso certainly doesn't force us, but it's, how to say, there is this desire anyway, even though I'm a certain age, I still have the willingness, really it's nice for me. I mean, it's a diversion, something that [...] attracts me, I mean, I like it. *(Artist and Puntodoc associate, autumn 2023)*

Who is culture for

Culture within the Contavalle initiative is not intended for a restricted group of people but, rather, for a diverse audience, composed of the communities of the valley, which are fragmented into small townships. While Contavalle can be likened to a festival, it deliberately avoids this label, unfolding instead as a series of events primarily held during the summer. This distinct approach to the concept of a festival is tied to various community-driven projects in the Cembra Valley, all of which take the collective narrative of the community as their starting point and expand in multiple emerging directions. Through these initiatives, the history of the area, an intimate knowledge of its places, and imaginative visions of the future for these small towns are explored—fuelled by the creative energy of participatory processes. The overarching goal transcends mere entertainment, aiming instead to generate knowledge, engage audiences as active participants, and foster a process of critical dialogue and listening. This communication process draws on collective local memory to inspire reflections on the present, both for individuals and for the territory itself, generating relational local public

goods (Uhlaner, 1989; Gui and Stanca, 2010). Notably, these efforts also incorporate contributions from individuals outside the valley, broadening the scope of perspectives. As a local administrator notes:

The main objective, in my opinion, of Contavalle is precisely to tell about the valley. And to see, because sometimes, when you are in it, you don't see the needs, you don't see faults, you don't see things. If it's those on the outside, they notice them more, in short, they manage to make us see them. (*Local administrator of Segonzano, autumn 2023*)

Inclusion through diversification of activities

In alignment with its commitment to engaging a diverse audience, the association has undertaken a range of differentiated projects spanning various domains of artistic production. This trajectory began in 2012 with the creation of a documentary on the history of migration from Cembra Valley to France and Belgium, produced in collaboration with the “Museo Storico del Trentino”. Building on this initial endeavour, the association has since expanded its activities to include:

- a) the production of documentaries,
- b) an annual participatory and civic theatre series involving local residents,
- c) a participatory theatre initiative specifically designed for young people,
- d) a radio program launched during the COVID-19 pandemic,
- e) the establishment of artist residencies, and
- f) site-specific performances aimed at reopening and revitalizing spaces that would otherwise succumb to neglect and the passage of time.

These initiatives collectively underscore the association's commitment to fostering community engagement through a range of activities, multiplying access points to the shared process of aims identification.

Inclusion through geographically diffused activities and use of multiple spaces

Activities are not concentrated in one municipality, but involve a diversity of towns, thus being spatially accessible to all the people. The festival:

[...] is itinerant, then the shows are one per municipality, plus some municipalities have two. Well, Albiano has two because then this year there's “Val di Cembra delle arti” which is this new cycle linked to architectural heritage. [...] Grumes has more

than one, and the other municipalities all have either one or two. One Sover, two in Albiano and Lases, one in Segonzano. (*Puntodoc president, autumn 2023*)

This territorial expansion of the activities has increased over time. One artist associated to Puntodoc observes: “[It] was a cultural offer that really gave us a lot. Then, at first it was just participatory theatre, then the Festival was born, which Tommaso enlarged every year, and now it has expanded throughout the valley.” [artist and Puntodoc associate, autumn 2023]

The municipalities of the valley provide support to the association while maintaining a non-intrusive approach to its artistic decisions. They contribute by offering access to unused spaces, such as the assembly hall and the theatre located in Grumes (municipality of Altavalle). In addition, the association has introduced initiatives aimed at regenerating dilapidated areas, notably through artistic residencies along the historic industrial road of the Cembra Valley. These residencies are designed to facilitate the creation of site-specific performances, staged along a series of short routes.

The goal of these initiatives is to engage a diverse audience—local residents, valley communities, and tourists—by drawing attention to lesser-known and often inaccessible sites scattered across the area. These spaces are not only intended to be rediscovered but also reintegrated into the community’s fabric through inclusive and participatory processes. By reconnecting the public with these locations, the association seeks to foster a sense of collective ownership and appreciation for the valley’s cultural and historical heritage.

Inclusion through voice and listening

Listening happens as a specific strategy, which is both organizational – with the weekly meetings during the year – and with the theatre performance prepared by the “Omini” [literally “little people”] theatre company. This is the best description of their approach to doing theatre, in their own words:

We wondered what was the point of doing theatre and who to address, a question we still ask ourselves today, and what language to use. And the answer we gave ourselves at the time was to go and listen to the people where we would later do our work, and then listen to the thoughts of passers-by, in coffee shops, bars, of people we met around, more or less by chance. And we started from very small places, small villages. (*Omini theater company member, autumn 2023*)

One of the actors from the “Omini” theatre company, who spends weeks in the Cembra Valley to talk to the people before producing their performances, describes how they engage with the people and offer a “hear” to listen to their voices, without fixed questions:

[...] what we ask goes from [...] from how they live in the town, from what the town looks like, by having the people who live there tell us about it, and then with descriptions of the place, which we give back in a fairly imaginative way, a sort of Mel Brooks or Monty Python documentary, I don't know how to define it, but with that flavour. And so, yes, we hear from a historical-geographical description of the place, to stories of personal life or work, i.e. everyone there has obviously told us about the quarry, the porphyry, the "sgnappa," the illegality of the Grappa that was sold, the wine, but we also hear personal life stories, talking about sorrows, playing football, sport, a typical local dish or loneliness. That's why another thing that our work often brings together is this, that we often meet lonely people. And we are also interested in those with a certain amount of attention; we devote time to them. And so that loneliness is then also re-enacted. Or catch phrases of the place. Yes, it's a bit, it's really a-we don't have, in fact, fixed questions, because to fixed questions that we have sometimes tried to use in the past, we have seen that there is a fixed answer. (*Omini theater company member, autumn 2023*)

Once the themes are identified, the "Omini" creates the performance, which is an elaboration of the process of voice and listening. Through their work, the "Omini" have found a practical way to identify, with and for the community, what is of value for the people, who talk:

about their lives, about what was going through their minds, about memories, about the most everyday things and the most intimate things, because then what was happening at the time, and what is happening more and more, is that people then open up totally in front of a stranger. And so we become psychologists, priests, pharmacists and whatever else you want to put into the listening we do, because people want to talk, to vent. Even then we realised it. It was, in fact, the year of the first big crisis, in 2007, of the world economic crisis in short, which then also affected our society. And so going down into the villages and among the people was a way for us to really listen and also to give the theatre back a function that it had since its inception, in other words, to talk and deal with the people around and in front of them. And this is what is still happening today. (*Omini theater company member, autumn 2023*)

On the other hand, what has value for the community is identified also by the people through participatory theatre, through an event called "There will be, once upon a time":

On the official programme, there are the artists, and then there is participatory theatre, which is what we call "Ci sarà una volta," this group of citizens that is very diverse, sometimes there are many, sometimes there are few. And this performance, each year, works on a theme. This year they will work on the "botteghe" [ancient craft workshops] [...] this year the nursery school will do something within the show. And here, well, Tommaso [the art director of the festival] will have said it, it is not the artistic product that is the value, but the process of involvement, and this – in this sense – involves the citizens, because they see themselves again [in the performance]. Because it is not so much the number of people who participate in the performance, but

the return of a narrative of themselves. Understand? [over time] We worked on immigration, on the [municipality] merger, on the school closing [...]. (*Puntodoc president, autumn 2023*)

Inclusion through volunteering and economic opportunities

Puntodoc operates through collaborative linkages with private citizens and volunteers, as well as with local associations, who represent the “social capital” of the place:

[...] community citizens and volunteers represent the free participation – more or less active – in the activities. The local “Pro Loco” represent the co-planning partner [...] of events in collaboration with other organisations: [...] “Sviluppo Turistico Grumes,” “Associazione Grumestieri,” or other entities in the area with which you once lend a hand on communication or collaborated with, or with whom collaborations arise, or mutual needs are met. (*Puntodoc president, autumn 2023*)

The production of events is also for young professionals and artisans who can contribute with their work to the staging of events. Puntodoc president explains:

We have the opportunity to bring in the skills of local guys [...]. It's not that I want to be self-praising though, something we believe in so much, I can call the best graphic designer, I can call the best photographer [...] but I choose to call a local guy who has a passion for photography. But I pay him because I recognize his professionalism and he does the Festival's two photographic services for us [...]. The discourse of volunteering falls a bit, but in my opinion it's a strong point because in fact [by paying for the contribution] I recognise your competence. (*Puntodoc president, autumn 2023*)

It creates opportunities also for hospitality small businesses:

The exhibitors [...] the artists sleep in the hotels in the bed and breakfasts locally, of course they are already full in the summer. But we also contribute to the dinners, that is to say, the Festival brings a small economic benefit. (*Puntodoc president, autumn 2023*)

To what effects

Puntodoc's main objective is to harness culture and art-oriented activities as factors of participation and social regeneration, helping to bring different publics in the area into a dialogue and hence by acting as a vitality platform, where issues and initiatives are identified

by the community and its publics. One of the artists who is a member of Puntodoc and takes part in the organization emphasised the importance of critical thinking in this process: “So maybe one thinks. That’s what’s important to me. Getting people to think for themselves. That for me is the most important thing, because all of us in the group are thinking for ourselves. And we don’t discriminate.” (*Puntodoc associate and writer for the theater, autumn 2023*)

Although this approach could eventually lead to underplay external influences or contributions to the debate (on the risks of localism, see Mohan and Stokke, 2000), Contavalle seems to be quite successful in acknowledging the limitations. A local politician observes:

[The festival] can give that something extra, but it is definitely not the solution in my opinion to people who leave, but certainly for those who are here all the time, to make people see our territory alive, in short, this definitely helps. (*Local administrator of Segonzano, autumn 2023*)

The network of associations and municipalities that Contavalle seeks to cultivate not only serves as a platform for the exchange and comparison of experiences and methodologies related to grassroots, civic, participatory theatre, and self-dramaturgy but also provides participants—engaged in various roles—with valuable opportunities for critical reflection. This reflection extends to the unique challenges and characteristics of Italy’s small towns and rural areas, encouraging a deeper examination of the resilience strategies and best practices these communities have developed to sustain their cultural and socioeconomic landscapes (see, as an example, De Rossi, 2018). The festival serves as the primary tangible “outcome,” as defined in the impact measurement literature. This is realized through a variety of hallmark events traditionally associated with festivals, including artistic performances, theatrical representations, author-led aperitifs, and book presentations.

Equally important, still, is the emphasis on the processes underpinning the events and the values or priorities embedded within them. These activities are shaped through participation, dialogue, and active listening. So, the inclusiveness and dialogic process that leads to the production of the festival and other activities, considering the procedural preferences of the organisers, is also an outcome. Together, these elements constitute a dynamic and generative space that functions as both a discovery laboratory and a site for cultivating participatory values, as well as relational goods and social capital. Within this space, participants collaboratively identify and articulate what is deemed desirable, while engaging in the exchange of perspectives, recommendations, and best practices relevant to the life and sustainability of small communities.

With participants, who have a direct role in shaping activities, people share a high degree of value proximity. The way in which the Omini theatre company has initiated collaboration is illustrative of the point:

We came across, more or less by chance, the Contavalle Festival because we saw that it was doing things related to our work. And we contacted Tommaso Pasquini, the artistic director, we told him what we were doing, he told us what he and his association were doing in some territories. Then we met face to face and, a year or so after our meeting, we planned to go to Contavalle with our own project. (*Omini theater company member, autumn 2023*)

Activities include also a number of institutional partners, besides the Cembra Valley's municipalities, who are mostly involved as funders but also as actors with whom the community can share a discussion on development aims. They comprehend the "Comunità di valle," and the "Piano di zona giovani" project (for young people). With these constituencies, there is a proximity of intents and values, which is part of the process that shapes the events. In parallel, there are other partners with whom there is not necessarily proximity, but who are overall financially supportive of the main aims and values of the cultural project. These include the bank foundation (Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Trento e Rovereto), the province of Trento, the region Trentino Alto-Adige.

Considering the amount of events they [the bank foundation] finance, the number of organizations that they finance, there is a relationship, I think, of knowledge but not of relational proximity. And then there are the province and the region. Sometimes the BIM (consortium of municipalities, catchment basin), which are other entities which finance, participate in the project with a share, and there is no [relational proximity]. (*Puntodoc president, autumn 2023*)

While firmly anchored in the local context, the association extends its efforts to establish connections at the national level. Indeed, it has initiated collaborations with various partners across the country, activating cross-sectoral projects that engage territories with distinct socio-economic profiles, yet sharing certain similarities. These include municipalities such as Montecchio in Tuscany, Torre Pellice in Piedmont, and Armungia in Sardinia. Such collaborations are motivated by a sense of "mental proximity" and take shape in networks of communities grounded in reciprocity and mutual support (Boschma, 2005). These networks also incorporate experts specializing in participatory processes, along with a research group of anthropologists from the University of Siena.

The vision the Puntodoc Association seeks to cultivate centres on fostering and sustaining an active dialogue around a model of culture that is intrinsically tied to the vitality of small mountain communities. This approach prioritizes communication and the dissemination of participatory practices and tools, hence aligning with the broader objectives of vitality and community empowerment. These objectives underscore the importance of identifying collective preferences and goals, acknowledging the diversity of publics, embracing openness to external communities to avoid the risks associated to localism, and emphasizing participation, dialogue, and knowledge creation through shared experiences. Cultural and social isolation is the main and often unacknowledged latent cause of both inner areas and

fragile territories. In this perspective, Puntodoc Association provides a fundamental contribution to activate a pattern of culturally sustainable local development (Throsby, 1995; Dematteis, Governa, 2005).

Discussion and final remarks

The Contavalle festival's aims and direction are defined not only by the intentions of its artistic directors and organizers but mainly as a tool for the generation of societal value and a catalyst for local social and cultural vitality. One interesting result is that the inclusive nature of the festival did not emerge as a consciously constructed feature from the outset. Rather, as its founder and artistic director observed, it evolved organically over time (Pasquini, 2024), following emerging needs and publics which were engaged by the permanent community meetings throughout the year, the association's network and openness to external stimuli and artistic competences, and by the same nature of the cultural activities. Its development is a testament to the adaptive and emergent nature of initiatives that, in our view, align with the idea of vitality (Sacchetti, 2023c) and related ideas of relational goods and sustainable territories (Donati, 1993; Dematteis, Governa, 2005).

The approach requires an evolutionary perspective, and over the course of the nine years during which the festival has been offered, the aims and themes of the festival have evolved alongside its context and issues brought about by the publics. The perspective of "vitality" implies that cultural organizations enable activities along the lines progressively identified by communication dynamics of voice and listening. Moreover, it requires the institutional support of a network of actors with different and complementary functions. On this policy can offer support:

- a) to provide immaterial resources, focusing on competences and skills (such as commercial activities),
- b) to provide funding and spaces (institutional actors), with a view to favour initiatives that share procedural values of participation, intending to discover aims and priorities rather than assuming them as given (volunteers, directors, artists, the community overall),
- c) hence viewing cultural activities as constantly in a process that aligns with a generative perspective. This means to prioritise the cultural organisation's ability to respond to local challenges and opportunities over the achievement of a definitive identity or pre-defined outcomes.

By embracing this adaptive framework, Contavalle's festival becomes a "vital" process of voice and listening, rooted in the needs and aspirations of the communities it seeks to serve, while simultaneously fostering innovation and cultural renewal through external linkages and publics (e.g. communities of artists, local migrants).

Assessing vitality in terms of the ability of a community and its publics to identify desirable aims and activities, as well as being capable to contribute and cooperate towards their

actualization, we can suggest that cultural policy frameworks, such as the one introduced in Trentino in 2007, and festival organisations of this sort can be “vital” and generative of relational public goods (Uhlener, 1989) and social ties (Granovetter, 1983), as opposed to static or exclusive of community interests and aims (Sacchetti, 2015). The Contavalle festival, its processes, and the other activities of Puntodoc, in this context, are one of the paradigmatic cases of vitality, meaning that its values, aims and modes of identifying and implementing activities are the result of “contaminations” among publics, inclusive and dynamic, escaping homeostatic forces and exclusivity of access. In this sense, organised activities and their processes allow the identification of relevant instances, let ideas emerge, and transform individual contributions into benefits for the entire community.

Based on these considerations, we suggest how CSEOs as Puntodoc and cultural initiatives as the Contavalle’s festival are suitable to create opportunities of culturally sustainable local development in all those inner areas, fragile, and, more in general, peripheral territories that are unable to meet people’s need and to fulfil their aspirations. However, the outcomes of the initiatives undertaken mostly depend on the existence of an enabling legal framework as that one elaborated by the Trentino Province, as well as on at least a basic socioeconomic development, such as that observed in Cembra Valley. Consequently, rather than being considered as a “best practice”, Puntodoc and Contavalle’s festival should be conceptualized as “good practices”, that is, as initiatives that could be replicated in territories sharing similar socioeconomic and environmental characteristics as the Cembra Valley.

Further research might contribute to identify other territorial contexts where the initiative is replicable, as already made by Puntodoc itself. Also, research might be dedicated to replicate the initiative alongside other relevant dimensions where organizations are asked to meet people’s need and fulfil their aspirations (consider, as an example, the importance of organizational culture in entrepreneurial activities, as well as the relevance of the users’ uptake in the design of social protection services, as health and education services, etc.). In these cases, beside the intrinsic value of the initiative, consideration should also be given to its instrumental value, as the recognition of the cultural and relational dimension would result in substantial cost savings and increases in effectiveness of the services provided. While recognizing the risk of instrumentalizing activities and processes that were born to give voice and listening to cultural instances, what we are advocating is a more general recognition of the cultural and social aspects in domains of activity supposedly distant from daily life and people’s wellbeing, in support of a holistic development path coherent with the demands expressed by the relevant communities and their publics.

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ABOUT THE PUBLICATION

Founded in 2013 in Seoul, the GSEF – Global Forum for Social and Solidarity Economy – is a global organization of local governments and civil society actors committed to promoting and developing the social and solidarity economy. Its 90 members, present in 35 countries, represent the diversity of SSE stakeholders: local governments, networks of actors, associations, cooperatives, mutual societies, foundations, social enterprises, universities, etc. The GSEF supports the development of the SSE around the world by promoting dialogue between public authorities and SSE actors in order to jointly develop local public policies that contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the emergence of ecosystems conducive to the SSE.

The GSEF thematic working groups (WGs) were voted on at the General Assembly on May 5, 2023. The WG on “The Impact of SSE Public Policies on the Achievement of the SDGs” brings together some fifteen researchers from all continents. It is led by Marguerite Mendell (Karl Polanyi Institute) and Timothée Duverger (Chair Terr’ESS, Sciences Po Bordeaux) and supported by the GSEF General Secretariat employee working on his CIFRE thesis.

Following on from research already conducted by the GSEF in partnership with UNRISD, which led to the production of guidelines for local SSE policies, in January 2024 the Research WG launched a call for contributions to gather proposals for working papers focusing on three recurring processes in public action: development, implementation, and evaluation. Through the analysis of these processes of SSE public policy development, the authors of the papers (both researchers and SSE actors) were asked to examine two fundamental dimensions: the contribution of these local policies to the achievement of sustainable development goals, and the paradoxes associated with the institutionalization of the SSE.

A reading committee composed of GT members evaluated more than forty proposals, including the seventeen working papers now published under the title *Local SSE Policies enabling the Socio-Ecological Transition*. Each paper is available on the GSEF website, free of charge, in its original language (English, French, or Spanish) and in English. This publication and the English translations were made possible thanks to financial support from Caisse des Dépôts.

The concrete examples provided by these working papers will feed into programs to strengthen the capacities of local authorities and support the development of public policies favorable to the SSE.



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