

SUMMARY

This document sets out the main conclusions of the *Culture and Ruralities Forum. Processes for social, economic, and demographic transformation*, organized by the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sport at the Cerezales Antonino y Cinia Foundation (Cerezales del Condado, Leon, Spain) on 14 and 15 June 2017, with the participation of over thirty specialists from numerous sectors: culture and the arts, heritage, anthropology, sociology, economics, education, journalism, agriculture, rural development, cultural management, as well as representatives from the Public Authorities, the Spanish Towns and Provinces Federation (FEMP), and organizations and collectives operating in rural areas. It contains a range of observations on the meaning and the role of culture in our villages, and puts forward a series of proposals regarding how to approach cultural policies and practices in rural areas in the current climate. A culture and a set of cultural processes that ought to be regarded as key elements for social and economic transformation, personal and collective development, and the improvement of the quality of life in rural population centres, as well as a central aspect of strategies for demographic development and territorial balance.

DEBATING PANELS

KEYS FOR APPROACHING THE COUNTRYSIDE FROM A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

1. The reality of country life is not homogeneous, but extraordinarily diverse, subject to widely-varying demographic, social, economic, and cultural conditions.
2. Rural and urban life are two sides of the same coin and should be approached on the basis of interdependency and hybridization. Nowadays the countryside is neither at the centre nor on the periphery, but both.
3. Likewise, both categories form part of wider processes that are in permanent flux. Sectors such as agro-industry, cultural heritage, or tourism, which are dependent on global influences, in turn generate identity, new relations, and social cohesion. They also generate new elements and new business and employment models.
4. From a socio-demographic perspective, the diversity and mobility that nowadays characterize rural ways of life (second homes, emigration-immigration, seasonal populations, labour mobility) define a canon that is very different from that of previous eras, which were determined by development models that were basically agriculture and livestock. Diversity and mobility also extend to current perceptions and cultural practices.
5. The main problem generated by depopulation of the countryside is serious generational imbalance: an ageing population and the resulting breakdown of the relationship between the generations and the chain of care, which also has a negative effect on how cultural heritage is passed down. Generational imbalance, in turn, has a determining effect on demographic dynamics.
6. From an urban perspective, we tend to idealize the countryside, often resorting to stereotypes or to a certain degree of aesthetic imposition – vintage rural or fake rustic – which relegates all things rural to the merely symbolic or representative, with the resulting loss of meaning and function.
7. The recovery of rural life also seeks to ‘take the countryside to the city’ (functional decentralization, green cities, urban agriculture, relations and economies based on proximity, communal structures, etc.), solutions to the crisis of the second modern age. We mean values, attitudes, and know-how – cultural elements – that belong to and are characteristic of the countryside and that reveal their full effectiveness and value in current societies, and that we would be wise to fully appreciate within their original context.
8. The young generation, immersed in more globalized mobility and employment surroundings, can play a key role in taking apart the paternalist picture-postcard overview that characterizes the narratives regarding the countryside compiled from an urban perspective, and contribute to the updating of traditional perceptions.
9. The role of women in particular is decisive. We need policies that contribute to boosting equal opportunities, to improving quality of life, and to encouraging women to stay in the countryside. There are various international declarations that demand policies in this regard.

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10. Approaching the countryside from a cultural perspective should be done on the basis of an acknowledgement of rural life as a cultural category in itself. A culture that needs to be understood from the standpoint of collective memory and social cohesion, identity, the territorial perspective, and the social impact of heritage. A culture that is ultimately capable of appreciating and updating specific local heritage and that contributes to reinforcing the individual and social bond – confidence – with the place and the territory.

CULTURAL PROCESSES AS TOOLS FOR TRANSFORMATION

1. Sustainable development requires the ability to integrate various forms of reasoning: those linked to the territory (ecosystems), to local communities, and to economic processes. This cross-sectional capacity for integration is precisely what culture provides: it crosses over, weaves, pollinates, coheres, energizes, feeds back, and generates added value.

2. Currently great importance is given, at an economic and social level, to relational capital. And culture is precisely a relational tool. Nowadays we hear a lot about productivity (GDP), more about skills than knowledge, and culture is the cross-sectional element that contributes the most to this because it activates creativity and critical thought. It serves to develop agile minds that relate, that allow for resilience and reinvention, in both personal and community aspects. A cultured community – or one with culture – is better-prepared and better-equipped to face a crisis in economic terms, but also to activate mechanisms of solidarity, fraternity, and co-operation.

3. Culture also provides the possibility of constructing a system of specific thought capable of integrating and relating different ambits, e.g. with regard to the notion of 'common' or 'commons', which is now back in vogue and which is linked to certain cultural categories or forms of a communal nature that is characteristic of the countryside.

4. Culture as a tool for effective development and transformation should arise out of and be understood within the territory, connected to its social and economic needs: culture that is in direct and close relation to the place, bonded to its inhabitants.

5. Rural life – the 'micro' dimension – is often a privileged space for experimentation and for the performance of innovative cultural practices, capable of inducing broader currents of change at a social level. Rural life can be positioned – in certain contexts and circumstances – as being in the vanguard.

6. Cultural projects in the countryside have frequently shown themselves to be spaces for people to come together, interact, and learn, with potential to transform the surroundings, strengthen the community, generate self-confidence, develop skills and attitudes, and boost the economy. The processes tend to be quite slow and the effects are only visible long-term.

7. Culture can also contribute to building citizen structures with greater autonomy and participation: new governance models. For Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen, the concept of development is fundamentally a matter of being master of your own destiny.

8. Culture furthermore constitutes a fundamental tool to facilitate coexistence and to improve people's quality of life, both at the individual level and collectively, with the consequences that this has in terms of attachment and identity.

9. Culture and education are two sides of the same coin. Teaching innovation and cultural practices connected to the territory at rural schools should be a priority objective of public policy aimed at rural communities.

10. For this purpose it is necessary to improve the frameworks and conditions under which culture can be accessed. One of the main outstanding revolutions in this regard is to ensure the development of communications technologies and optimal access to the internet throughout the territory.

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11. Cultural policy, therefore, ought to occupy a central role in territorial-development strategies; otherwise, there is often a deterioration of what is communal. The presence of culture as a fundamental pillar of sustainable local-development strategies is reflected, not without reason, in various international declarations.

POLITICAL AND CULTURAL PRACTICES IN THE COUNTRYSIDE: WHERE TO?

1. The countryside is varied and diverse. This is why we should approach culture – the policies, practices, and processes that surround it – in direct relation to the place, on the basis of the singular nature of the territory and its population, where territory is taken to mean cultural space and population is taken to mean a social layer that determines the forms of relationship and the ways in which culture can be approached.

2. It is necessary to ascertain from the analysis of the cultural situation of the territory what processes and what changes are occurring, and to think about why we want to engage in culture and what for. Culture is not just about filling up leisure facilities, but it is above all about reformulating inherited narratives and practices in critical manner, in order to (re)contextualize and appreciate traditional knowledge, know-how, and practices; to understand reality, deconstruct it, and criticise the present in order to bring about change. Also to keep the channels of interpersonal relationships alive.

3. Even though the economic dimension is indisputable and irrefutable, culture cannot be conceived or approached exclusively as a resource: cultural industry, heritage, tourism. It should be seen as a right, a space for coexistence and a force for change; this requires thinking less about infrastructure and more about people.

4. The management of cultural heritage may be a good example, without this entailing questioning its value as an economic resource of the first order. Heritage, both material and immaterial, can be a source of identity and cohesion. This would require a certain re-appropriation by local communities of their heritage to ensure that the socialization of heritage is real and gives rise to processes of emotional identification.

5. It is essential, from a cultural point of view, to re-establish the generational bond and encourage the transfer of knowledge and know-how. But it is also necessary to expand the concept of culture beyond tradition or heritage and the policies based on conservation and dissemination.

6. Rural life is also a setting for cultural innovation – symbolic, material, and social – and development. Culture helps us to question ourselves and to look to the future, to think about what we want to be. Contemporary culture allows perceptions to be updated or repurposed, and may be a factor in development and in attracting population. Therefore cultural policies aimed at supporting contemporary creation should be rolled out, policies that take into account local reality and traditions.

7. It is essential to reduce the imbalance in access to culture between villages and cities, as well as to develop plans and strategies spread out over time. A system for allowing access to culture that is universal, cross-sectional, permanent, and focussed on the medium to long term is called for, as opposed to policies on access that are piecemeal and disjointed.

8. Institutions should not have a monopoly on cultural policies and programmes. Management models and decision-making structures that are less hierarchical and more democratic are needed. Communities should participate in and take control of these processes in order to generate identity and social fabric. Culture with a social basis and that is participatory allows for the construction of collective, identity-affirming spaces around it.

9. It is necessary to find ways that allow the public and private sectors to work together and generate synergies, as well as to create dynamics that will allow effective co-operation across all public authorities (European/national/local) and make an effort to integrate programmes.

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10. The management of cultural projects in the countryside should strive for greater professionalization. In this regard, the role of cultural agents, as persons capable of bringing together different strands (cultural production, social ecosystem, and economic production) in order to optimize processes and results, is highlighted. In parallel, the Public Authorities need to progress towards a higher qualification of dialogue.

THE ROLE OF CULTURE AND CULTURAL PROCESSES IN DEMOGRAPHIC POLICIES

1. The problem of depopulation of the countryside, which has now reached extremely serious levels, should also be tackled in terms of a cultural crisis or collapse: the progressive abandonment of a culture that could have given birth to a new social and cultural model.

2. Therefore it is imperative to construct a new narrative. A narrative that, while reversing the negative image that has taken root in people's social conscience in recent decades – with the resulting disaffection – is based on concepts such as collective identity, opportunities, or quality of life. This is precisely what culture can do.

3. When tackling the role of culture in the revitalization of the countryside, we must not incur in the typical idealization of past forms (which also contain lots of retrograde elements), nor should we incur in over-identification or artificial emphasis on what is rural that then degenerates into folklore or gentrification processes.

4. Movements towards the countryside (returns, neo-rural life, second homes) also determine new ways of feeling, thinking, and creating culture. For its part, culture may be a decisive factor when it comes to incentivising these movements.

5. Culture contributes to building a personality, a unique identity, to boosting what we are, and to articulating spaces for coexistence, community fabrics and structures that favour a higher quality of life, and ultimately, greater attachment to the place. The true value of culture is its cross-sectional nature, its capacity to create or release endogenous energies that are able to transcend social and economic factors.

6. Culture cannot always serve as a factor in economic growth, but it is the map that shows us the paths we must take in order to project into the future. Culture is what is common, what allows the reproduction of society. It encourages the development of new subjectivities (individual and collective) that favour processes of identity, motivation, participation, self-confidence, resilience, and social cohesion. Processes that serve to thread social life and whose transformative effects can be of enormous magnitude.

7. The role of rural schools – this should be underlined – has been and remains fundamental, critical, both to retain population and to generate collective identity, to transmit a sense of place and a feeling of belonging to a community, to encourage inter-generational transmission of the culture itself and stimulate new cultural production capable of acknowledging other times and feelings and for its potential for the development of innovative projects.

8. Access to and the enjoyment of culture, and the release of its transformative potential, also involves ensuring access to communications networks and reducing the technological divide.

9. A change is needed in the system of values, in the paradigm, and in vital objectives. A change of culture, which manifests itself in new ways of producing and sharing cultural manifestations (participation, duration, projection), new forms of economy (shared, sustainable, equitable), and political organization based on a higher profile for smaller local bodies and the direct involvement of the citizens.

10. In effect, the legacy of rural culture requires an expansion of the decision-making capacity of those who live in the territory. In so far as citizen participation has been shown to constitute a factor for reconnecting with the place, which can help to retain population, autonomy and empowering rural communities is essential.

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11. Therefore new models of government are called for. It is necessary to articulate the different levels of action in cultural policy, balancing the support and initiative of the various authorities with local and citizen-led administration. We have the example, close at hand, of certain communal ways of organizing social relations and the management of the territory (communal assets, open council, community tasks, festivities), cultural models that are once again proving their relevance.

12. It is necessary to view the crisis as an opportunity, as a stimulus for considering new ways of tackling the problem, also from a cultural perspective. In this regard it would be advisable to carry out studies to empirically analyse the relationship between cultural richness and demographics.

ROUND-TABLE DISCUSSIONS

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL DIMENSION. ACCESS TO CULTURE, PARTICIPATION, AND COMMUNITIES

Two cultural practices have been considered that put into practice citizen-participation models within the framework of two local councils with different numbers of inhabitants: the FAVA365 festival in Vilanova d'Alcolea (Castellon, 600 inhabitants), and the reading plan in La Puebla de Alfindén (a town on the outskirts of Zaragoza with some 6,000 inhabitants). These are projects of a participatory and/or co-operative nature involving different agents, which have been approached on the basis of the relational dynamics they generate, as well as on the basis of the conflicts and tensions that may arise during the course of the process. Culture in the countryside can be a way of testing cultural paradigms that differ from the mainstream, often linked to the reasoning of the cultural industry based on supply-and-demand processes or on the production of events.

Key aspects to be underlined:

1. **Community.** Culture as a tool to generate community. The importance of the existence of a cultural structure in which people can see themselves represented, and the involvement of communities in cultural projects, where decision-making occurs across the different village agents (associations, schools, residents, artists, local-development agents, political representatives).
2. **Proximity.** Projects based on proximity policies where close relationships are generated, bonds are reinforced, and a sense of belonging is created.
3. **Timing.** Slow, long-term processes are required. This timeframe clashes with the timeframes employed at the institutions where the practices are developed. It is advisable for local councils to promote an environment that allows longer timeframes for cultural projects.
4. **Autonomy.** The continuity and stability of projects is generated on the basis of a process of citizen involvement. These processes give rise to greater autonomy and agents that can self-organize, that demand that the institution/council that has created them should move aside and gradually take on a different role.
5. **Transversality.** The involvement of different areas and the overcoming of barriers between different disciplines.
6. **Resources and sustainability.** Working within tight budgets and with a high level of self-funding.
7. **Culture and popular know-how.** The importance of recovering and acknowledging the memory and the culture of our forefathers. Dialogue between different forms of popular expression. Relativizing programming models based solely on experts.

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THE SYMBOLIC DIMENSION. PERCEPTIONS, IDENTITIES, KNOWLEDGE: LOCAL-GLOBAL DIALOGUE

This round-table has been approached on the basis of the experience gained from two projects that also operate in different fields: audio production and experimentation in the Portuguese countryside (Binaural / Nodar), and a Galician network of cultural thought and production which operates at both a local and global level (Galiza Imaxinaria). The proliferation of highly-diverse cultural projects in the countryside provides proof that the city and urban environment is no longer the setting for the development of the most significant artistic and creative manifestations. The ubiquitous nature of artistic activity leads to the emergence of specific cultural realities and local experiences of exceptional interest. The way technology is used and the dynamics of digital culture are furthermore determining new forms of perception and new identities.

Key aspects to be underlined:

- 1. Co-operation.** Symbiosis between social movements, artistic movements, and institutions. An attitude or active listening and dialogue between different agents.
- 2. Coexistence.** New coexistence framework for those born there, visitors, and new residents. Attention to the different ways of perceiving rural life, nature, and urban life.
- 3. Autonomy and sovereignty.** The intention and the desire to generate 'citizen-involvement' tools, where these are deemed to mean processes for deep bonding with the territory.
- 4. Communication.** Development of communication, documentation, and archiving strategies to highlight realities, generate subjectivities, and aesthetic experiences.
- 5. Interculturalism.** Inter-cultural translation and the use of local and global languages. To rethink the concept of a rural teacher.
- 6. Heritage.** As opposed to conserving heritage, the notion of taking a long and critical look at it and getting involved in its future development is put forward.
- 7. Commons.** To understand the commons as a form of distributing wealth and generating new production models and consumption and exchange networks.
- 8. Technologies.** To cultivate the appropriate technological skills, combining what is local with what is transnational, without in any way idealizing traditional knowledge.

THE ECONOMIC DIMENSION. DEVELOPMENT, INNOVATION, AND SUSTAINABILITY

We approach this aspect on the basis of a project for the recovery of traditional trades and crafts, duly updated (Obrador Xisqueta) and an NGO that carries out projects concerning food sovereignty (CERAI). The economic dimension of development cannot be understood in isolation with regard to the social and territorial dynamics. It is necessary to integrate and balance these questions, both to ensure the sustainability of the development model and to take advantage of the emerging opportunities (social and environmental trends, new sources of employment, innovation dynamics of a heterogeneous nature). Six key dimensions are extracted to be considered when drawing up projects and designing initiatives with regard to development, innovation, and sustainability.

Key aspects to be underlined:

- 1. Values.** Proposed measures arising from rural territory based on shared values (environmental sustainability, diversity, inter-generational solidarity, gender perspective, ways of life, crafts and product quality, etc.).
- 2. Resources.** Proposed measures with a cultural basis, where the added value of the initiatives is based on logic: cultural and heritage resources / creative processes and skills / innovation dynamics / smart development (inclusive, sustainable, and knowledge-led).

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3. Innovation. The territory and the endogenous assets as an innovation platform. Sometimes this requires reassessing traditional methods or processes on the basis of current resources, tools, and knowledge.

4. New economic models. Based on a flexible organizational design, combining initiative and personal leadership (entrepreneurship) and open networks (internet, co-operation platforms). Oriented towards the production of goods and services characterized by the added value of the symbolic and experiential dimension.

5. Proximity. Endogenous development processes where the various local resources are fully appreciated, acting on the basis of proximity (responding to the needs of the local population) and with projects at a human scale.

6. Expansion. Participation in territorial networks and the importance of internationalization: combining local action and global outlook. This aspect is also of interest for designing multi-level funding strategies (e.g. through European funds).