



# Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

## Rural Schools and Local Development in Portugal: Rehabilitation, Participation and Socio-educational Innovation

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### Abstract

“À Descoberta do Mundo Rural” [Discovering the Rural World] was a 15-month-long project, based on a partnership between the Institute of Educational Communities (ICE) and the Portuguese Association for Local Development (ANIMAR), both Portuguese NGOs, and financed by national and European funds. Its purpose was to identify and give visibility to formal and informal local development initiatives taking place in rural contexts across Portugal. The research team contacted and visited several places and talked directly with the initiatives’ representatives, as well as with other locally relevant social actors, such as representatives of local governments, schools, associations and charity organisations. Based on a participatory community-based research, local development was conceptualised as an educational process from a broader perspective than that of schooling. Through eight selected case studies, this paper focuses on how rural schools promote, participate in or otherwise contribute to the socio-educational development of the communities in which they are located.

**Keywords:** rural schools, local development, socio-educational practices, good practices, participatory research, community participation

### Introduction

The project *Discovering the rural world* [À Descoberta do mundo rural] was thought and developed in the context of a partnership between the Institute of Educational Communities (ICE) and the Portuguese Association for Local Development (ANIMAR), both Portuguese non-governmental organisations formally founded in the early 1990s. This 15-month-long project was funded by the Portuguese Ministry of Agriculture and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, through its Program for the National Rural Network. The University of Minho was also a partner in this project, responsible for organising and analysing data and developing the theoretical-epistemological framework that supported the initiative. The project emerged from the need felt by both organisations, as well as their local partners, to identify, acknowledge and give visibility to processes and initiatives which were already in place—in terms of local development in the rural context—throughout different regions, municipalities and places in Portugal. Although the authors acknowledge their specificity, in this paper (except when otherwise stated), concepts such as *local development*, *community development* and/or *participatory development* will be used interchangeably.

By studying on-the-ground community development practices in rural Portugal, the project’s main goal was to identify and analyse formal and informal local development initiatives in rural contexts, with the purpose of selecting what were seen as *good practices* in diverse areas, including the arts, culture, citizenship, heritage, sports, intergenerational activities, education, health care, social and solidary economy and community animation. Aside from this general goal, the project was designed and executed according to other more specific purposes, such as

creating value for these initiatives by promoting their visibility and the recognition of their importance for local development processes, promoting interaction and synergies between relevant actors, identifying new kinds of initiatives and acknowledging the diversity and strength of what was already in place.

Considering its participatory and community-based orientation, local development was conceptualised as an educational process from a broader perspective than that of schooling. The tendency to confuse the broader concept of education with the more restrictive one of schooling is largely a result of the extraordinary expansion of the formal system of education, especially during the 20th century. Historically, that expansion and generalisation had important effects, namely mass access to institutional education, but the expansion had other consequences. It generated an internal crisis within schools, due to the dilution of their specific mission in a wider conception of their educational and social functions. It induced a greater focus on the confined space of the classroom and academic contents to the detriment of a broader perspective of social and cultural promotion. It also led to the suppression and/or disqualification of non-institutional forms of learning, which occur in the contexts of work, neighbourhood relationships, community and associative life and social movements. In contrast, this project wanted to enhance and requalify different rural educational contexts and initiatives, involving learning about, and enhancing, endogenous skills, resources and experiences which stem essentially from within the communities themselves.

Multiple meanings of education and schooling emerge not only from academic literature but also from political, professional and media fields, which complexify the relationship between rural schools and the community development that we intend to discuss in this paper. We start by elaborating a theoretical and conceptual framework to identify and problematise the notion of good practices of local development initiatives in rural contexts. This is followed by an explanation of the project's methodological pathway, then eight case studies focused on local development initiatives related to rural schools are presented, considering rehabilitation, participation and socio-educational innovation as key elements for the empirical data analysis and interpretation.

### **A conceptual framework for the emergence of “good practices” of local development**

In order to understand the project *Discovering the rural world* and its outcomes, it is important to discuss the concept of local development and what we mean when we associate the concepts of education and development by reference to a given territory. Often these concepts emerge in association, but from an instrumental perspective that considers education as subordinated to the imperatives of development, thus being strictly understood as economic growth and, as such, forging a conception of education for capitalist development. As Talavera (2014) states, economicism—emphasising the economic aspects of a certain phenomena to the detriment of others—became “the supreme interpretation of human and social reality” (p. 340); hence everything that does not have market value is either devaluated or rejected. In consequence, the human being has been devaluated and has turned into a simple object of the market.

Therefore, to outline a conceptual framework for the emergence of good practices as they were defined in this project, we intend to shift the focus of reflection to other approaches, which emerged at least since the mid 1970s and that literature has designated as local development, community development, social, human, sustainable and participatory. Although these different but complementary dimensions emerge from the perspective of integrated development, according to Amaro (2003), they often express three different foci—namely, a focus on the environment, a focus on people and communities and a focus on human rights and dignity. Contrary to the instrumental perspective mentioned above, the relationship between education and local development sees empowerment and social change as crucial goals.

These approaches emerged as theoretical and practical alternatives to the dominant view of development historically linked with the process of industrialisation and urbanisation, during which the belief in economic growth settled to the same extent that the human being was devalued. By seeking to reintroduce the human aspect in development processes, the local development approach is based on three core principles (Vachon, 1993):

- i. development is not exclusively a result of the function or the economic value of the individuals' social organisation activities;
- ii. development does not pertain exclusively to large macroeconomic systems and centralised institutions, as it is strongly connected as well to micro-initiatives, which are not limited to the economic field;
- iii. the individual (and the community of which he/she is part) is a lever for development, through his/her ability to act as a citizen, counteracting the overvalued view of technological possibilities.

In light of these principles, the rural world can no longer be perceived as a stagnant space, but rather as a context for conviviality and practical experimentation and therefore as a bearer of the future (Canário, 2000). As Canário explains, while what is left of the old rural world does not constitute an alternative to the logic of the market, it corresponds to the survival of social islands with features previous to modernity that function as keepers of the values and ways of life that can serve as counterpoints to the predominant and standardising logic. An aspect of the said counterpoint is the defence and promotion of biodiversity in rural territories, which make them not only attractive to tourists, but also (and more importantly) liveable by those who wish to inhabit them (Ferreira, 2008).

Instead of the traditional rural/urban dichotomy, it seems more pertinent to analyse the rural world through the lens of two opposing logics: firstly, that of declining territories where relational and brainstorming networks are significantly narrow, where negativity and passiveness are fostered and where the future is seen as predetermined by outside forces; and secondly, that of territories where a different conception of individuals exists, where there is intellectual and material investment in the future, where relationship networks that are wider than the local territory are put into practice and where there is exchange and openness towards the outside (Jean, 1998).

In the context of project *Discovering the rural world*, the definition of *local development initiatives* was that of formal and/or informal projects or activities, organised by groups, communities, associations, schools, cooperatives, partnerships, civil parishes or other local organisations. To describe the dynamics generated by these initiatives, five analytical dimensions were considered:

- a. *The participation* of people, referring to individuals' and groups' engagement in planning and putting into action their own projects and initiatives, not only as spectators or consumers, but as subjects and authors;
- b. *The appreciation* of the territory's memories and stories, in an effort to requalify traditional ways of life, and understanding their rehabilitation as a catalyst for something new;
- c. *The ability to think collectively* about difficulties and seek new ways of improving the territory, or the search for collective and participatory solutions for the problems that the different territories are facing, by calling to action relevant local agents in an effort to mobilise and act;
- d. *The promotion* of (natural, cultural, human, physical and immaterial) resources available in the territory, with the purpose of overcoming

deficiency-focused points of view, based on the exploitation of resources, contrariwise promoting (self-)recognition of the territories' and people's potential;

- e. *The democratic quality* of decision-making processes, referring to the right to participate, equity in decision-making and the existence of markedly collective resolutions.

These dimensions were the basis for one of the project's outcomes, a *Good practices' guide* (ICE & ANIMAR, 2013), which featured 20 initiatives. These were described and discussed in terms of how they responded to the listed analytical dimensions. Their correspondence to those dimensions (or at least to the majority of them) was the main criteria for their inclusion in the publication.

The guide was made available online and distributed amongst local development organisations. An online dynamic database was also built, containing information about the initiatives that were identified within the covered territories, and it was thought to be a useful tool for dissemination and promotion of valuable (and eventually replicable) projects/initiatives, both for those already involved in such initiatives and for initiatives not yet contemplated.

### **Methodology**

Several studies have contributed to the discussion about the relevance of the participatory approach in place-based (or community-based) research, namely in terms of democratic legitimacy (Johnson, 2015), the often opposing views of decision-makers and local communities (Kiisel, 2013), empowerment effects (Ozer & Douglas, 2013), community assessment (Ahari, Habibzadeh, Yousefi, Amani, & Abdi, 2012), youth participation (Jacquez, Vaughn & Wagner, 2013; Nygreen, Kwon, & Sánchez, 2006) and family engagement (Yull, Blitz, Thompson, & Murray, 2014). While this paper does not focus on discussion about the participatory approach, the research project was eminently participatory, as the community was viewed as the most relevant informant regarding its own dynamics. As Ahari et al. (2012) state, a participatory research approach implies respect for public ideas, a robust belief in community empowerment, actions being carried out by and with people, not on or to people. Essentially, researchers become facilitators or catalysts and participants become co-learners. Nobody is considered the expert; insiders and outsiders work together as equals to solve problems. Listening, dialogue and negotiating consensus are strategies to achieve mutuality and empowerment.

Although the duration of the researchers' presence in each context was less than ideal for characterising the fieldwork as a participatory action research, the project was essentially qualitative and participatory, based on face-to-face interactions. The project's fieldwork resulted mostly from the direct contact with representatives of local territories, organisations and/or initiatives. The team associated with this project included collaborators from both ICE and ANIMAR, as well as research consultants from the University of Minho (Braga, Portugal).

In the initial exploratory phase, 26 municipalities were identified for the development of the project, but only 20 were selected for further work on the basis of the available resources and the previously defined criteria for the selection: 1) territories/initiatives previously known by ICE or their collaborators; 2) territories/initiatives previously known by ANIMAR or their associates; 3) territories about which neither organisation had great knowledge, particularly due to great social-economic changes that had taken place in previous years. In all three situations, an exploratory approach was adopted, also with the purpose of identifying initiatives that were not known by the project's partners.

Fieldwork was undertaken by a team of senior technicians working with either ICE or ANIMAR, who contacted representatives of local development associations, schools, social solidarity private institutions, local councils for social action, cooperatives, mutualistic associations, local governments (civil parish governments and city councils), as well as other relevant actors engaging in local development processes in their territories. All representatives were informed about the project's goals and engaged at least in informal conversations. Later on, the selected initiatives' representatives were formally invited to collaborate in the wider research process. All of them demonstrated interest in participating and gave permission for data collection as well as for the dissemination of the results, namely the *Good practices' guide* (ICE & ANIMAR, 2013).

Throughout the duration of the project (15 months), the research team carried out several visits, talked with the initiatives' representatives, as well as other locally relevant social actors, and gathered field records. Several instruments were used, such as observations, field journals, semi-structured interviews and informal exchanges. Documental evidence was also collected, in the form of activity reports, statistics and brochures produced by the local organisations.

Aside from data collection, the team also promoted social encounters/gatherings (*tertúlias*) between the representatives of the several organisations and initiatives, as well as debates and synergy-building meetings. For instance, in January 2013, a national meeting took place where both the project's team and representatives from the initiatives were present. This seminar, titled *Novas ruralidades, novos futuros* [New ruralities, new futures], was organised with a double purpose. On one hand, it was to provide a space where the people and organisations involved in these initiatives could meet and share experiences and ideas. On the other hand, it was to introduce them to the idea of a *Good practices' guide* and an online database. There was also room for debating important topics, such as which dimensions or kinds of initiatives produce changes in the rural context, how to move from an initiative towards an integrated development process, what forms of participation exist or should be promoted in rural areas, how to ensure the self-sustainability of the processes of change, what are possible futures for rural contexts, and what economies support rural contexts.

The study of each local development initiative corresponds to a case study. As previously mentioned, eight case studies were selected for presentation and discussion in this paper, considering their relevance for the discussion about the role of rural schools in local development processes. Pseudonyms are used for the eight projects that are described.

### **Rural schools and local development**

Like many countries in the European periphery, Portugal has suffered the consequences of an aging population and the abandonment of the countryside in favour of the larger, more cosmopolitan and more resourceful coastal (and mostly urban) areas. As birth rates drop and young families leave rural areas in search of better opportunities, many smaller schools close in favour of larger school centres in urban or semi-urban areas.

Questioning and seeking to counteract a fatalistic ideology that disseminates the idea that the disappearance of rural space and rural schools is inevitable, in some rural communities—the specific spaces and places where the research was carried out—some schools persist as platforms for local socio-educational development, as

*true microcosms – not in the sense that they replicate, to scale, the structures [that can be found at the macro level], but because they present themselves as contexts that are*

*fraught with specific complexities and diversity, governed by their own organizations and relational logics.* (Lúcio, 2011, p. 87)

Studying formal and informal local development initiatives in the rural context involves some consideration about the limits of mainstream education and characterising rural schools and local development through the lens of “democratic community participation” (Woods, 2014, p. 18). Citizenship is crucial in this perspective, as Bernstein (2010) states: “We must find new ways to revitalize local communities and foster the development of multiple publics where citizens can engage in debate and deliberation together” (p. 86).

Taking into account the 20 initiatives featured in the *Good practices’ guide*, it is possible to perceive a certain fluctuation between action rationales that are more or less commercial, more or less formal, more or less aimed towards the sustainability of the places and the initiatives themselves. However, generally speaking, these are initiatives that are based on community and citizen participation and supportive and proximal economies.

As mentioned, there are diverse approaches to promoting and/or studying the relationship between education and development, to which different notions are frequently given: sustainable development, human development, social development and participatory development. According to Amaro (2003), local development and participatory development are key concepts to define community-based development. The first essentially seeks to express “the process of satisfying people’s needs and improving the living conditions of a local community, based essentially on their abilities, undertaking a protagonist role in this process and in light of an integrated perspective of problems and responses” (p. 57). The second one emphasises the “adoption of a participative methodology in the processes of change and improvement of the living conditions of the population, from conception and decision to evaluation, passing through implementation, direction and monitoring, implying the full affirmation of citizenship, in its rights and duties” (p. 57).

Community participation is widely accepted to have many important benefits, including “increasing democracy, mobilizing resources and energy, developing more holistic and integrated approaches, achieving better decisions and more effective services, ensuring the ownership and sustainability of programs, and empowering communities” (Ahari et al., 2012, p. 2). From our perspective, the relationship between education and development is eminently defined by community participation and citizenship and this implies that people and rural communities must be conceived not as museum figurines, but rather as active participants and protagonists aware and fighting for their rights. The emphasis in this people and community-centred perspective helps to distinguish local development from the growth-centred development perspective.

#### **Case studies 1–4: Rehabilitating and repurposing abandoned school buildings**

By their own initiative and with the civil parish government’s support, the River Crafts Group made a home out of a previously abandoned primary school building. Their activities are strongly anchored in the region’s traditional way of life and main economic lever, the wool and linen production cycle. Aside from promoting gatherings where old artisans have the opportunity to, once again, put their craft to use, while also fostering communication (which takes place mostly during the evenings), the group also promotes craft training courses (which takes place mostly during the day) with a strong intergenerational aspect.

The first in their community to attain college degrees, the founding members of the Chapel Valley Youth Association decided to formalise their organisation following years of volunteer work, when they felt a need to give back to the community. Their home is a previously unoccupied kindergarten building, where they promote ICT and musical training for children, young people and adults, while also housing the only local library.

The Calendula Cooperative emerged from the initiative of a group of previously unemployed women who met while receiving formal training in professional sewing. They later got approval from the civil parish government to occupy an abandoned primary school building, where they apply their newly found expertise to locally sourced traditional materials to produce clothing.

Finally, the closing of the local primary school boosted the Learning by Doing Project. The civil parish government invited the locals to a discussion about what to do with the abandoned building. As the school had a history of developing adult literacy programs, the elderly population was very familiar with the space and proposed to claim it for their use as a makeshift day care centre. The space is also frequently used for the preparation of local festivities.

### **Case studies 5–8: Participating in local initiatives**

The Farm was a project that started circa 1990, when the promoting school was part of an initiative that fostered interaction between small isolated rural schools. This then led to the creation of a platform engaging schools, civil parishes and citizens' associations, which developed several projects and established some nuclear sites, such as a natural reserve surrounding a lagoon. It currently hosts a petting zoo and a geological interpretation centre, which complement regular schoolwork.

While it is not promoted by a school, schools have a main role in the The Sound and the Village project's everyday work. Fostered by a cultural association, the project promotes sound art, by taping, editing and mapping the acoustic heritage of nearby rural villages (e.g., voices, stories, songs, nature sounds). They collaborate with local schools to stimulate the students' interest in the issue of sound in different rural environments and provide them with the technical knowledge to do so.

The Fort initiative is a partnership between the local school group and its Parent Teacher Association. Among other activities (directed at the broader community), this initiative promotes yearly mock Olympic games, including sports, culture and recreation, for the local children and young people who represent their civil parish.

Finally, the Mountain Artisans' Association—parallel to their everyday work promoting the traditional linen and wool cycle, bread-making, basketry, pottery, archaic farming machinery and local cuisine—has a formal partnership with local schools which regularly visit their museum and attend their craft school. The artisans also collaborate in some of the school's vocational training activities while also promoting music classes using traditional instruments.

### **Discussion**

The cases discussed are but a few examples of how rural schools in Portugal are promoting:

- the appreciation and nurturing of local memories and histories;
- the ability to find collective solutions for difficulties;
- the use and potentiation of local resources;
- democratic participation in decision-making processes at the local level.

It is also interesting to consider the rebirth that repurposed rural school buildings are experiencing as they are reclaimed by a community. Although this was not one of the project's initial goals, our findings are also useful for a discussion of how rural schools promote and/or contribute to the social-educational innovation of the communities in which they are located. Considering the 20 initiatives featured in the *Good practices' guide*, it is possible to perceive a certain fluctuation between action rationales that are more or less commercial, more or less formal and more or less aimed towards the sustainability of the places and the initiatives themselves. However, generally speaking, these are initiatives that are based on community and citizen participation and supportive and proximal economies.

The eight case studies give us a picture concerning the relationship between rural schools and communities, as well as the ways local actors faced the closure of preschools and primary schools in their communities. Four case studies focus on the ways the abandoned school buildings were reclaimed by the community and eventually evolved into hubs for innovative socio-educational development. The other four show different kinds of local initiatives involving schools' and communities' participatory relationship, even after the closure of their schools which led to the concentration of all children in larger school buildings located in urban or sub-urban areas. The discussion of our findings is structured around four main topics:

- rural education in the context of global and standardised educational policies;
- supportive and emancipatory partnerships for the defence and promotion of rural school;
- creative and innovative initiatives of rebirthing and repurposing the abandoned school buildings;
- the valuing of the interrelated tradition and innovation in local development processes.

### ***Rural education in the context of global and standardised educational policies***

In Portugal, rural preschools and primary schools were virtually made extinct by the Ministry of Education throughout the past two decades. As early as the 1980s, legislation was approved that determined the closing of schools with fewer than 10 students enrolled, but this did not take effect immediately because of several factors, including economic, technical and logistic difficulties, as well as political issues (Ferreira, 2005). These had to do with a strong opposition from local actors – local governments and associations, students' families, teachers' unions, and schools and teachers generally speaking. However, this did not prevent the Government from shutting down rural schools, namely after 1998, following the publication of a decree determining a new management and autonomy model for schools (Portugal/Ministério da Educação, 1998).

The main argument used by the political power for closing schools, and subsequently concentrating students in larger school centres, was that this would prove beneficial for students, namely in terms of academic outcomes. This argument is doubly fallacious. On one hand, the issue with rural schools is not one of isolated schools, but rather one of isolated communities (d'Espiney, 1994). On the other hand, the concentration of students, inspired by the "myth of homogeneity" (Ferreira, 2003, p. 84), does nothing but to place them in a logic of educational policies increasingly influenced by international organisations and standards, according to which educational governance has transformed into governing by numbers through measurement, comparison and standardisation (Biesta, 2009; Grek, 2009; Lewis, 2017; Rubin & Kazanjian, 2011).

The fast extinction of rural schools is a revealing example of hierarchical and authoritarian ways of implementing educational policies. Based on merely technical, bureaucratic and economist



(Talavera, 2014) criteria, this type of policy is contrary to education and rural development's social and political dimension. Aside from restraining the participation rights of people and local communities (who are the most directly affected), the imposition of those and other similar measures in the rural world inhibits a culture of citizenship, as they are proclaimed as inevitable and undelayable, in the name of modernisation and national development (Ferreira, 2005).

The 'space' and 'place' axes are key for researching rural education, insofar as they can help question and overcome policy's blindness to rural education as well as to the social and cultural capital existing in rural spaces and places (Usher, 2002). Indeed, our case studies clearly show rural territories not as deserted of ideas, projects and accomplishments (Canário, 2000), but rather as living territories. For example, there are the cases of the old artisans' traditional knowledge that allow them to recuperate and renovate the wool and linen production cycle; the young people who were the first in their community to attain college degrees and felt a need to give back to the community; the group of previously unemployed women who received formal training in professional sewing and later applied their capabilities to produce clothing; the creation of a makeshift daycare centre by an elderly population; the artisans' association that promotes several traditional activities (gastronomy, music and instruments) in connection with schools, while also providing visits to their museum and collaborating in some of the school's vocational training activities.

Despite the vitality and diversity of these educational initiatives, showcasing a broader perspective than that of schooling (namely, intergenerational education), there is a global tendency to standardise the educational process, which becomes increasingly blind to the particularities of rural spaces and places. Concerning research, it is essential to pursue and deepen on-the-ground projects such as *Discovering the rural world*. This is important to consider its scientific, social and political relevance and impact, to continue to value the participatory action research approach, to emphasise the opportunity to consider the rural as a productive site for understanding the impact of globalisation and neoliberal economic policies, and to consider the general acceptance of the neoliberal discourse's universalisation (Corbett, 2016). Reid et al. (2010) also argue that an approach which puts the rural at the centre would require a decoupling of schools from central, urban-based bureaucracies and a greater scope for the local interpretation and implementation of wider policy objectives. This would challenge policy makers to rethink the measures on which the rural is determined to be disadvantaged, as well as rethinking the standard policy responses.

### ***Supportive and emancipatory partnerships for the defence and promotion of rural schools***

All of the case studies represent diverse local communities' initiatives in which people do not resign in the face of top-down school closing policies. Even when this became the reality, several local people, groups and entities self-organised to think and act collectively, both upon the consequences and the alternatives to closing. In these processes, the existing and/or established partnerships for the defence and promotion of rural schools assumed a crucial supportive and emancipatory role. In Portugal, and since the end of the 1980s, ICE's role emerges as particularly relevant in this sense. ICE is a national NGO/association, funded by activists and scholars committed to the promotion of community-based local development, in close connection with the promotion of citizenship and participative democracy.

Out of the 20 local development initiatives covered by the project, several people, groups, associations, organisations and local governments were connected to the movement generated by ICE – that of Rural Schools – both before and after the closing of schools, having participated actively in this movement. Case study #5 is particularly explicit in this sense. Also, some of the promoters of the initiatives described and discussed in other case studies maintained and/or maintain contact with ICE, namely by participating in local self-organised *tertúlias* in which ICE

members are invited to participate to stimulate discussion and provide scientific and political support. ICE members play the role of critical friends, with the common goal of boosting processes of social-educational innovation based on the rural actors' meanings, proposals and actions. This kind of supportive and emancipatory partnerships between local communities' actors and other entities who do not belong to those communities is instructive, as to how limiting the conventional internal-external, endogenous-exogenous, local-national, local-global, researcher-practitioner dichotomies can be.

In the several case studies, partnerships took on a fundamental role: partnerships between the civil parish government and the River Crafts Group, the Calendula Cooperative and the Learning by Doing Project, to occupy and repurpose the abandoned school buildings; the partnerships between schools and other entities (local or otherwise), as is the case with project The Sound and the Village, with the participation of schools and children; partnerships between schools and the Parent Teacher Association in the Mountain Artisans' Association; and the previous existing platform engaging schools, civil parishes and citizens' associations in which the role of ICE was and still is crucial. To this day, some of the promoters behind these initiatives participate, as associates, activists, leaders and trainers, in this NGO's activities and projects. This shows the importance of the local actors' previous emancipatory experiences as community volunteers, association members and/or leaders, participants in adult education and vocational training. Generally speaking, it also shows the importance of capacity-building initiatives based on formal and informal partnerships involving researchers, teachers, association leaders and NGO activists, among others, who help promote local community projects that, for instance, allow for the rebirth and repurposing of the abandoned school buildings.

#### ***Creative and innovative initiatives of rebirthing and repurposing the abandoned school buildings***

First of all, one must highlight the fact that the restoration of abandoned school buildings was the fruit of the communities' people and groups' self-organisation that involved negotiating with the local authorities the access to, or use of, the premises, obtaining the support of the political power and other local organisations, participating in collective decision-making processes and designing projects for the creative and innovative use of buildings. Inherent to all these processes and actions is a perspective of participation and experiential learning, inducing several types of local projects for the requalification, revitalisation and repurpose of abandoned schools buildings.

All the initiatives have their own peculiarities, but they share a focus on education in a broad sense. They are not based on the scholar model's traditional segmentation and age homogenisation, but rather on intergenerational education and local development processes, involving children, young people and adults with different levels of formal education and different ideas and aspirations. They are moved by common values and goals that pertain not only to the material requalification of abandoned school buildings, but also to restoring a sense of individual and community dignity that may have been questioned by development policies 'blind' towards the rural space, leading to the progressive extinction of the few existing public services and culminating in the closing of the local school.

The rehabilitation and repurposing of abandoned school buildings emerged from local initiatives, generating different dimensions of local development, from culture, education, environment and leisure, to the productive dimensions of proximal economy. The participative and integrated approach to rural development is, in itself, a process of socio-educational development. The case studies showcase these dynamics well, as the initiatives are more than a set of one-off activities; rather they are processes of establishing social organisations (e.g., a cooperative stemming from

the enterprise of a group of unemployed women and an association created by a group of young people).

The benefits of these local development projects are of two kinds: benefits for the community as a whole (which now has a new entity working on the field, a new space and a set of activities, subverting, in a way, the tendency generated in the previous two decades) and benefits for the organisations (who now have a legal status and institutional recognition, allowing them to raise funds, establish partnerships, participate in association networks, organise activities in their own space and/or those of other organisations). Generally speaking, these initiatives include an experiential dimension that is paramount for their own sustainability and that of future projects.

The benefits are individual and collective, as well as material and symbolic. The abandoned school buildings have a local and community symbolism that transcends both the infrastructural and the academic dimensions. The different initiatives show the communities' creative and innovative abilities. Aside from their materiality, they contain historical and contextual experiences, meanings and subjectivities, the ability to find collective solutions for difficulties and the appreciation and nurturing of local memories and histories, which are important sources for the rural territories and their populations' renewed self-esteem of their populations.

### ***The valuing of the interrelated tradition and innovation in local development processes***

Development is not limited to economic growth and this capitalist meaning is contrary to the emergence and sustainability of rural initiatives. Projects and actions carried out by rural communities, as the case studies reveal, are similar in terms of the developmental perspective they embrace. They are strongly anchored in the territories' traditional ways of life and main economic levers, thus they are not merely governed by an economicist (Talavera, 2014) and utilitarian rationale.

As the case studies show, the groups promoting these traditional activities can just as easily develop them in functioning schools, as they can recreate them in abandoned school buildings. Their work is multidimensional, including productive, recreational, educational and convivial aspects. These are the cases of:

- the revitalisation of the wool and linen production cycle in which old artisans put their craft to use while also fostering communication, mostly during the evenings;
- the creative use that the Chapel Valley Youth Association gave to the previously unoccupied kindergarten building (ICT and musical training for children, young people and adults, as well as the housing of the only local library);
- the locally sourced traditional materials to produce clothing in an creative and innovative way, by a group of previously unemployed women;
- the use of the abandoned school building to organise local festivities;
- the valuing of the history of the closed local school (previously undertaking adult literacy programs) which led the elderly population, who was very familiar with the space, to claim it for their use as a makeshift daycare centre;
- the project that promotes sound art, by taping, editing and mapping the acoustic heritage of nearby rural villages (e.g., voices, stories, songs, nature sounds);
- the promotion of intergenerational education through various initiatives, which could be alternatives not only to rural education but to education in general.

These initiatives show a lively and productive relationship between tradition and innovation, as well as the important role of local partnerships, both structurally and symbolically. Not resigning to the closure of school buildings, local actors faced the circumstances by initiating or recreating local development projects and activities in an integrative way—including social, cultural,

economic, artistic and environmental dimensions—thus unsubordinated to the unidimensional economic growth perspective. Using the concept of de-growth, Latouche (2010) argues that our societies are based on an economy whose only goal is growth for growth's sake. Thus, we need to rethink, from its very foundations, the notion that our societies should be based on growth. These are inspiring challenges for questioning the domination of economy over life and they demand an increased concern with our relationship as a species with the biosphere, as well as with the quest for greater social justice.

### **Closing remarks**

The work that these organisations undertake shows that there is more to rural development than service provision or funding program management. Lack of financial autonomy, more often than not, places rural initiatives at the bottom of the economic food chain in which they are forced to beg to stay afloat. This logic feeds a culture of domestication and dependency, contrary to the idea of emancipatory citizen association practices which privilege the people's link to their social context (Lúcio, 2011).

The processes and initiatives considered to be good practices in the context of this project—and when discussing schools as hubs for community development—fuel the debate about the relationship between education and development, and association practices and democratic citizenship. As with other similar initiatives, social participation generates collective learning spaces of a non-formal nature (Caride, Freitas, & Vargas, 2007). As they enable active participation and stimulate the construction of alternative future histories (favouring shared utopias), these initiatives innovate in how they continue to inspire people and their actions, and promote the requalification of the rural context “from the inside out”.

Recognising the potentialities but also the limitations of this project, it is necessary to reflect upon the methodology, the findings and other aspects potentially useful for further research. Reflexivity is one important component of social research and one relevant condition for considering research findings and practices useful for the project's participants (individuals and groups, local actors and researchers), as well as to make them relevant to other contexts. On the one hand, the analytic framework we have built for examining the ways in which schools are embedded in rural spaces, providing both physical and socio-educational space for the affirmation of local identities and life-ways (as well as hope for these communities' futures), has enabled the identification of several innovative and creative aspects, as well as others that do not differ significantly from what is quite common, regardless of context. On the other hand, looking at our findings more critically, both at the micro and macro levels (which we could designate “from the outside in”), could allow us to see other aspects contributing to a deeper understanding of the challenges facing rural communities worldwide. Perhaps the aforementioned question of the importance of valuing rural meanings in research has not been sufficiently deepened in our project. Perhaps, aside from inquiring what these initiatives were doing, we should also have asked why.

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