

Invisible Lines: an analysis of inequalities in access to culture in Portugal

Pedro Borrego, Ana Lúcia Romão, Flora Maravalhas, Bernardo Valente, Luís Baptista, Sandra Firmino & José Soares Neves

Centre for Administration and Public Policy, Institute of Social and Political Sciences, Universidade de Lisboa

Executive summary

In Portugal, cultural diversity varies significantly across territories, reflecting geographical, demographic, socio-economic, and institutional factors. This analysis provides empirical evidence on inequalities in access to culture across different regions, namely Terras de Trás-os-Montes, Alentejo Central, Algarve, and Grande Lisboa, combining quantitative and qualitative methods, including statistical and geospatial analysis, as well as interviews with key stakeholders. The findings show that access to culture is embedded within broader territorial development dynamics and cannot be dissociated from local socio-economic and institutional conditions. However, these conditions are not determinative in themselves. The analysis highlights the mediating role of institutional strategies, partnership networks, and place-based cultural governance practices. It also shows that public policy instruments, such as national cultural networks, tend to reflect the existing capacity of territories and may contribute to the reproduction of territorial asymmetries. Similarly, accessibility to cultural facilities, particularly museums, depends not only on their existence but also on their territorial distribution, proximity to populations, and mobility conditions.

Qualitative evidence further reinforces that access to culture goes beyond the mere availability of infrastructure, involving processes of mediation, audience engagement, and institutional coordination. In this context, museums emerge as multifunctional territorial infrastructures with the potential to promote social cohesion and cultural participation, although often constrained by limitations in resources and institutional capacity.

From a public policy perspective, the findings point to the need to move beyond standardised, infrastructure-led approaches. Reducing inequalities in access to culture requires place-sensitive policies that strengthen institutional capacity, foster cooperation networks, and enhance conditions for effective participation. The results are particularly relevant in the context of the National Arts Plan (2024) and the Strategic Agenda PT 2030, which link cultural policy to territorial cohesion, social inclusion, and demographic balance. Part of the findings has been consolidated into an [open-access, interactive digital platform](#), based on geographic information systems, which can support data analysis and evidence-informed decision-making.

Recommendations

- Integrate culture into cross-sectoral public policies
- Develop an explicitly inclusive cultural policy
- Ensure autonomy within a strategic framework
- Strengthen cooperation networks and multilevel coordination
- Invest in institutional capacity and human resources
- Reinforce mediation and audience engagement strategies

Target audience of the policy brief

Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport; DGARTES – Directorate-General for the Arts; GEPAC - *Gabinete de Estratégia, Planeamento e Avaliações Culturais*; *Museus e Monumentos de Portugal*; regional authorities (CCDRs) and local authorities (Municipalities, Intermunicipal Communities, Lisbon Metropolitan Area, Porto Metropolitan Area); Portuguese Network of Museums and other museum networks; national museums; companies and associations within the cultural and creative sector.

Introduction and Problem Statement

Access to culture is widely recognised as a fundamental right and a key dimension of social inclusion, territorial cohesion, and sustainable development. Beyond its intrinsic value, cultural participation contributes to community wellbeing, the strengthening of local identities, and trust in institutions (Council of the European Union, 2018). However, access to cultural opportunities remains uneven across territories, reflecting socio-economic, demographic, and spatial differences (Widdop & Cutts, 2012).

In Portugal, these inequalities persist despite sustained public investment and decentralisation efforts. Since the late 1980s, cultural policies have promoted the expansion of provision through national cultural networks, including public libraries, museums, archives, theatres, and contemporary art facilities (Neves et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the distribution of these infrastructures remains uneven, contributing to differing levels of access to and participation in cultural activities across territories (Gama & Costa, 2021; Garcia et al., 2018).

It is important to emphasise that the problem is not simply a matter of equipment availability. In many territories, cultural activity is organised through local networks, community-based practices, and place-based initiatives. In such contexts, museums often take on expanded roles, acting as spaces for culture, education, social inclusion, and local development (Ballatore & Candlin, 2022; Hooper-Greenhill et al., 2009). Access to culture therefore depends not only on available provision, but also on factors such as mobility, institutional capacity, human resources, and partnership networks.

The “Invisible Lines” project examines these inequalities in Portugal, focusing on the role of museums. The analysis covers territories with distinct characteristics:

- Terras de Trás-os-Montes: a high proportion of municipalities with low levels of professional artistic activity reflects the limited presence of formal cultural structures, constraining sustained access to cultural activities for the resident population. This context is compounded by structural factors such as low population density, demographic ageing, and a shortage of

technical and human resources in the cultural sector, which hinder sustainable cultural development in northern inland regions (Neves et al., 2024);

- Alentejo: low population density and territorial depopulation constitute structural challenges to cultural access. Despite the presence of cultural facilities, institutional capacity to activate them remains limited, with shortages of qualified human resources and cultural management tools. This results in a gap between potential and effective provision. These constraints are further reinforced by population ageing and youth outmigration, which undermine audience sustainability and the continuity of local cultural initiatives (Neves et al., 2022);
- Algarve: the seasonal nature of economic activities and the resulting job insecurity are structural features of the region (OECD, 2025). Demographic fluctuations throughout the year, linked to tourism and the presence of temporary residents, make it difficult to foster consistent and sustained cultural dynamics, thereby affecting the stability of audiences and the continuity of cultural initiatives;
- Grande Lisboa: challenges take a different form. Despite the high concentration of cultural facilities, internal inequalities persist due to rapid urbanisation and heterogeneous socio-economic and infrastructural conditions. The diversity of cultural provision does not necessarily translate into equitable access, with accessibility constrained, among other factors, by the cost of participation, which is higher than the national average (Brandão, 2024; Dias & Lopes, 2014; Fonseca et al., 2011).

These differences show that challenges in access to culture vary significantly across territories and cannot be addressed through uniform policy solutions.

The project adopts a mixed-methods approach combining: (i) statistical analysis of socio-demographic and cultural sector data at municipal and regional levels; (ii) geospatial analysis of museum accessibility, using service area modelling and origin–destination cost

matrices based on travel distances; and (iii) 22 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including museum directors, municipal cultural representatives, and officials from Museums and Monuments of Portugal. This approach made it possible to map

inequalities, identify the main territorial and institutional drivers behind them, and understand how these dynamics are experienced and operationalised in practice.

Analysis / Key Findings

Territorial profiles

The territories under analysis were operationalised into four NUTS 3 regions with distinct territorial profiles, with direct implications for access to culture:

- Terras de Trás-os-Montes
 - Low population density and pronounced demographic ageing;
 - Low levels of educational attainment and labour market participation;
 - Significant municipal expenditure on culture, but limited effective provision (facilities, heritage assets, live performances, art exhibitions);
 - Lower levels of public financial support for organisations running cultural projects in the region, and a lower presence of cultural enterprises and artistic activity, compared with other regions;
 - Dispersed cultural provision with weak integration into national cultural networks.
- Alentejo Central
 - Low population density and significant ageing;
 - Higher levels of educational attainment and economic participation compared to Terras de Trás-os-Montes;
 - Strong presence of heritage assets, museums, and arts education;
 - Relevant levels of public funding;
 - Cultural provision and coverage of national networks remain uneven.
- Algarve
 - Higher demographic and economic dynamism;
 - More balanced age structure;
 - Strong presence of cultural and creative enterprises;
 - High levels of cultural production and integration into national networks;
 - Challenges in the territorial distribution of provision and accessibility.

- Grande Lisboa
 - High concentration of population, economic activity, and cultural infrastructure;
 - Higher levels of educational attainment and cultural participation;
 - Strong presence of public funding, institutions, and national cultural networks
 - Persistent internal inequalities in access.

Determinants of integration into national cultural networks

There are currently five national cultural networks (libraries, museums, archives, theatres and cinema-theatres, and contemporary art facilities). The intensity of integration across mainland Portugal - measured by the number of networks in which each municipality participates - is illustrated in Figure 1. The figure distinguishes low-density municipalities (partial or total) from others, based on the criteria established by Deliberation No. 31/2023/PL.

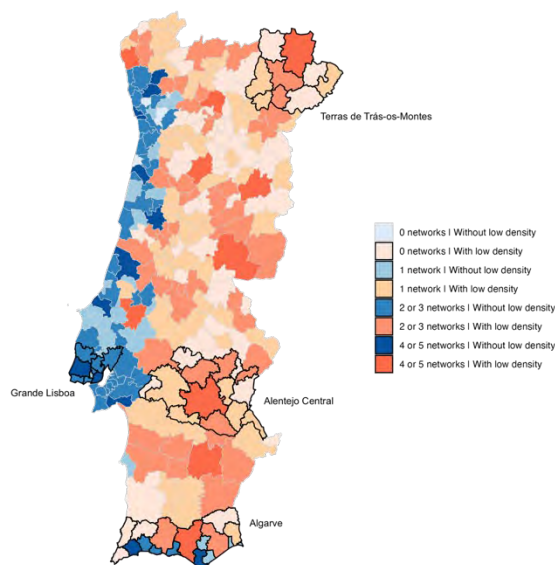
Although integration into cultural networks depends on the voluntary participation of facilities, it is strongly conditioned by structural factors related to territorial capacity. These mechanisms were identified using decision tree machine learning algorithms and robustness analysis:

- The most decisive factor is the local cultural and creative base: municipalities with fewer cultural enterprises tend to have very low levels of integration (0 or 1 network);
- Low integration is associated with socio-economic fragility: lower employment levels and lower educational attainment reinforce exclusion from networks;
- Higher integration requires territorial critical mass: territories with stronger economic dynamism, higher employment, and higher

education levels tend to integrate into two or more networks;

- Artistic higher education is a key differentiating factor: its presence is strongly associated with the highest levels of integration (4 or 5 networks);
- Investment and heritage play a complementary role: they contribute to intermediate levels of integration but do not compensate for a lack of structural capacity.

Figure 1 – Intensity of national cultural networks in municipalities with and without low density, in mainland Portugal.



Overall, integration into cultural networks appears to follow a cumulative pattern, whereby stronger territories reinforce their position, while structurally weaker territories face greater barriers to entry. These results suggest that public policies must go beyond infrastructure provision: strengthening human capital, economic structures, and institutional capacity is essential to reduce inequalities.

Museum accessibility and territorial coverage

The results show that the distribution of cultural provision is closely associated with territorial structural conditions. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate how this distribution translates into effective access to museums, combining population coverage and territorial proximity, with museums as key infrastructures:

- Museum accessibility shows strong territorial asymmetries: Terras de Trás-os-Montes has the lowest levels (52% of the population within 15 minutes; 81% within 30 minutes), reflecting a dispersed network;
- Alentejo Central and Algarve present intermediate profiles, with significant gains up to 30 minutes: both exceed 90% coverage within 30 minutes, although with differences in short-distance accessibility;
- Grande Lisboa concentrates the highest accessibility: 94% of the population within 15 minutes and near-total coverage within 30 minutes (>99%), reflecting high urban density;
- Short-distance accessibility is the main differentiating factor: the greatest inequalities are observed within the first 15 minutes of travel;
- Intermediate proximity and population coverage are strongly associated: municipalities with shorter average distances to museums tend to show higher population coverage, resulting in greater effective accessibility;
- Inland territories face greater access barriers: they tend to have lower concentrations of facilities, even where provision is relatively close, or require longer travel times to reach available museums;
- Accessibility depends on territorial distribution, not only on supply: factors such as density, connectivity, and spatial organisation shape access.



Figure 2 – Service area representation within a 30-minute drive to museums in the Portuguese Network of Museums, museums managed by *Museus e Monumentos de Portugal*, and municipal museums across the four NUTS 3 regions under analysis.

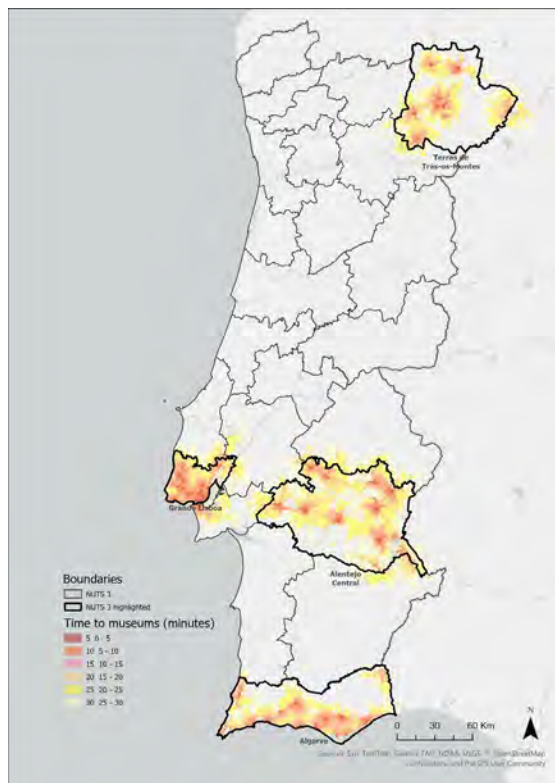
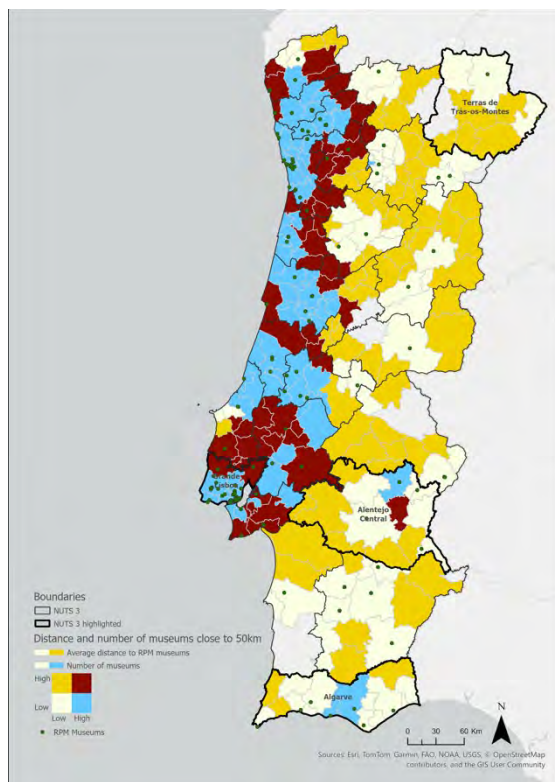


Figure 3 – Municipal museum accessibility matrix: average distance and number of museums, in mainland Portugal.



Insights from key stakeholders

The qualitative analysis of interviews conducted across the different territories under study identified a set of characteristics that shape inequalities in access to culture in distinct ways.

In Terras de Trás-os-Montes, museums go beyond their traditional role as exhibition spaces, positioning themselves as strategic infrastructures for territorial development. In this context, museums and other cultural facilities play a significant role as drivers of economic, social, and cultural dynamism, while also fulfilling a central function in safeguarding specific territorial identities, particularly those associated with language, collective memory, and intangible heritage.

However, these territories face significant structural limitations, particularly in terms of institutional capacity, with a clear shortage of qualified human resources and a widespread concern regarding low levels of participation in cultural activities. The main constraints identified include population ageing, insufficient transport provision, and difficulties in communicating and promoting cultural initiatives.

In this context, there is a clear need to strengthen community engagement and participation, as these do not occur spontaneously and require active mediation strategies, proximity, and sustained relationships with audiences.

In Alentejo Central, museums serve diverse audiences, with a strong presence of schools and older populations, alongside increasing participation from families and weekend tourists. In this context, cultural institutions have sought to structure their activities around educational and intergenerational audiences, with strong local anchoring. They have developed strategies such as workshops and other regular activities aimed at fostering visiting habits. At the same time, they have invested in enhancing interactive experiences, seeking to attract new audiences in search of more comprehensive and immersive cultural offerings.

However, this territory faces constraints in terms of human resources and institutional capacity, particularly regarding language training, communication and outreach skills,

and digital capabilities. These limitations affect the ability of institutions to respond effectively, reflecting technical constraints and gaps in workforce qualifications.

In Algarve, museums emphasise their relationship with the community and the promotion of cultural diversity in their activities. Tourism emerges as a structuring dimension of museum practice, influencing programming, communication, and engagement with audiences. While it creates opportunities for visibility, it also poses challenges in balancing the needs of local audiences, migrant communities, tourism workers, and external visitors. Museums maintain ongoing work with schools and place strong emphasis on community engagement through activities aligned with local interests. In this context, proximity-based practices are particularly evident, with museums “stepping beyond their walls” to reach communities directly.

This territory is characterised by a high level of cultural diversity, which is reflected in growing attention to the inclusion of minorities and migrant communities. Despite a clear commitment to network participation, innovation, and strengthening institutional capacity, museums face both ambition and constraints. Persistent challenges include the availability of qualified human resources and the need for training in key areas.

In this context, museums position themselves as spaces of active and inclusive cultural mediation, rooted in diverse communities. They display a dynamic of innovation and cooperation, albeit under conditions constrained by structural limitations in resources and institutional capacity.

In Grande Lisboa, access to museums located in more peripheral areas continues to be constrained by structural territorial and social barriers, particularly in terms of mobility, communication, and socio-economic inequalities. Key limitations include transport constraints for school visits and older populations, as well as difficulties in communicating with diverse audiences. Accessibility is understood in a broad sense, encompassing the recognition of persistent inequalities, with lower participation among more disadvantaged groups and an ongoing

need to democratise access. In some cases, social perceptions tend to undervalue the cultural provision of peripheral municipalities, which are more heterogeneous and socially vulnerable, often relegated to a secondary position and portrayed as having limited cultural relevance.

In this context, the social and democratic role of museums becomes particularly salient, emphasising the public value of culture and its importance as a space for memory preservation, knowledge production, and the promotion of critical thinking. Museums are thus understood as instruments for social inclusion, the reduction of inequalities, and the strengthening of democratic values and human rights.

Museums have sought to adapt to new audiences and contexts, investing in experiential approaches, digital innovation, and new forms of communication. These efforts also extend to improving physical and sensory accessibility for people with disabilities. Nevertheless, significant challenges remain, particularly in fostering cultural habits from an early age and strengthening the sense of belonging among local communities.

Policy Options and Recommendations

The analysis reveals a cultural sector that is active, innovative, and socially oriented, yet still constrained by territorial inequalities, institutional fragilities, and challenges in audience engagement. From a public policy perspective, there is a need to strengthen the focus on creating effective conditions for participation, interest, and social appropriation of culture, going beyond formal access.

From a cross-territorial perspective, the following recommendations stand out:

1. Integrate culture into cross-sectoral public policies

Promote stronger links between culture and education (audience development from an early age), tourism (territorial valorisation), economic development, and social and territorial cohesion.

2. Develop an explicitly inclusive cultural policy

Integrate dimensions of accessibility (physical, social, linguistic, and economic), cultural diversity, and participation. It is essential to ensure not only access, but also to foster interest and sustained engagement with audiences, responding to evidence that the main challenge lies in engagement rather than cost or physical accessibility alone.

3. Ensure autonomy within a strategic framework

Guarantee institutional autonomy in the management and programming of cultural facilities, framed by clear strategic guidance and supported by incentives for cooperation and innovation, promoting a balance between local flexibility and broader public policy objectives.

4. Strengthen cooperation networks and multilevel coordination

Expand the Portuguese Network of Museums and promote the development of local and regional networks, as well as intermunicipal and cross-border cooperation. Encourage shared solutions - such as joint educational services, integrated ticketing systems, and coordinated programming - to address fragmentation and achieve scale.

5. Invest in institutional capacity and human resources

Prioritise training in key competencies (languages, digital skills, communication, and conservation) and support the development of multidisciplinary professional profiles. Create conditions to attract and retain qualified professionals, particularly in more remote territories, ensuring job stability, professional recognition, and adequate working conditions. Strengthen digitalisation and museum innovation as essential drivers for consolidating existing practices.

6. Reinforce mediation and audience engagement strategies

Support co-creation with communities, decentralised programming, and outreach activities beyond institutional spaces. Develop targeted communication strategies and promote engagement with diverse audiences, including those with lower levels of participation, in order to transform potential access into effective participation.

More specifically, for each of the territories under study, the following tailored recommendations are proposed:

Terras de Trás-os-Montes

1. Strengthen territorial and participatory cultural mediation initiatives

It is recommended to reinforce itinerant programmes and community co-creation practices, as well as to invest in professional cultural mediation, moving beyond a programming-centred approach. These measures aim to address low levels of participation and the territorial barriers identified.

2. Invest in institutional capacity and participation in cooperation networks

In response to the identified limitations, it is recommended to strengthen technical qualifications in key areas such as digitalisation, communication, and cultural management, as well as to consolidate partnerships with higher education institutions

and other local organisations. Further participation in intermunicipal and cross-border cooperation networks should be encouraged, promoting stronger linkages between the cultural and tourism sectors.

Alentejo Central

1. Consolidate mediation strategies targeting educational and intergenerational audiences

It is recommended to strengthen continuous programmes aimed at schools and older populations, linking activities to practical experiences (such as workshops) and local events (such as cultural or gastronomic festivals). It is also suggested to promote collaboration with other institutions, particularly through the development of artist-in-residence programmes.

2. Invest in human resource development and key competencies

In response to the identified gaps, it is recommended to strengthen training in areas such as languages, communication, cultural mediation, and digital skills, as well as to create conditions that support the retention of qualified professionals.

Algarve

1. Promote participatory and inclusive cultural governance mechanisms

It is recommended to institutionalise co-programming mechanisms with local communities and to develop strategies targeting diverse and migrant audiences. It is also important to strengthen the integration of culture within educational pathways, enhance

coordination between museums and local associations, and develop network-based solutions that reinforce links with tourism and the local economy.

2. Strengthen institutional capacity and foster network-based collaboration

It is recommended to reinforce the availability of qualified human resources and training in key competencies, as well as to support digitalisation and innovation initiatives, without replacing face-to-face cultural mediation.

Grande Lisboa

1. Develop integrated cultural access policies

It is recommended to strengthen cultural transport solutions, particularly for schools and older populations, as well as to promote the coordination of routes and programmes across cultural facilities. It is also important to reinforce targeted communication strategies for diverse audiences and to invest in active mediation for groups with lower levels of participation.

2. Strengthen the role of museums as spaces of inclusion and citizenship

To promote the democratisation of access to culture, it is recommended to support inclusive and participatory programming, as well as the development of immersive and accessible experiences. It is also important to invest in specialised technical training, digital capacity-building, and communication, while strengthening links with national and international networks.

Conclusion

The analysis shows that inequalities in access to culture in Portugal are closely associated with the structural conditions of territories. Factors such as population density, demographic ageing, levels of educational attainment, economic dynamism, and institutional capacity shape the distribution of cultural provision and opportunities for participation.

National cultural networks, despite their central role as a public policy instrument, do not operate independently of these conditions.

Their presence and intensity tend to reflect the existing capacity of territories and may, in some cases, contribute to reinforcing existing asymmetries. Similarly, access to museums depends not only on the number of facilities, but also on their territorial distribution, proximity to populations, and the conditions of mobility and connectivity.

The interview analysis further highlights that access to culture is not determined solely by the existence of infrastructure. It is a process that involves mediation capacity, active audience

engagement, and coordination between institutions. In this context, museums emerge as multifunctional territorial infrastructures, playing an important role in social cohesion, local development, and the promotion of cultural participation, although often constrained by limitations in resources and institutional capacity.

The findings also show that cultural performance is not explained solely by structural factors. In some territories, institutional strategies, cooperation networks, and place-based practices help mitigate

constraints and generate positive participation dynamics.

From a public policy perspective, these findings point to the need to move beyond approaches primarily focused on expanding infrastructure. Reducing inequalities in access to culture requires territorially differentiated policies that strengthen institutional capacity, human capital, cooperation networks, and the conditions for effective participation. More than ensuring potential access, the key challenge lies in creating the conditions for this access to translate into meaningful engagement and social appropriation of culture.

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CONTACT

science4policy@planapp.gov.pt

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