

Building cultural bridges to foster a more democratic and inclusive society: the case of the Alentejo (BRIDGES)

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Executive summary: culture as an essential element of democracy

The Education at a Glance report placed Portugal in a critical position in terms of educational standards on the global stage, an issue directly linked to economic inequalities and access to education (OECD, 2026). The situation in Portugal's poorest region, the Alentejo (non-coastal), is exacerbated by other difficulties such as poor transport links and low population density, which make it difficult to overcome structural inequalities. It is necessary to counteract the historical and economic inequalities in the Alentejo, which manifest as social and educational inequality. The "Ponte Cultural-BRIDGES" project proposes to act through culture to overcome these differences and promote inclusion among the most vulnerable groups. To this end, the project: 1) Begins with a review of the literature on these inequalities in areas affecting the fundamental rights of the most vulnerable groups (BRIDGES, 2026). 2) Carries out work on cultural agents and culture: data collection, surveys, mapping, interviews. 3) Promotes knowledge dissemination, reviews the latest international trends and explores forms of inclusion through art (BRIDGES, 2026). These complementary approaches highlighted the urgent need to implement strategic and investment measures to support small cultural organisations and existing historical associations in the Alentejo; to carry out initiatives through culture to support groups most vulnerable to inequality (women, people of colour, the poor, the elderly, those with neurodivergence, disabilities, and mental health conditions); develop stable support networks; promote visibility in communication, so as to integrate the region's reality on an equal footing, taking into account its human, cultural and natural potential, highlighted by Évora's Capital of Culture 2027

Recommendations: Actions linked to art and culture to strengthen democracy

- Encourage structural and long-term investment in culture, the arts and education in the Alentejo.
- Integrate disadvantaged communities and groups through cultural and arts-education projects.
- Support forms of inclusion through education and artistic intervention in the Alentejo community.
- Highlight, recognise and support the role of cultural actors, both formal and informal, in the Alentejo.
- Reduce the inequalities affecting vulnerable groups (women, immigrants, neurodivergences, disabilities).
- Harness the transformative power of culture to promote democratic equality and break down social barriers.
- Transform the BRIDGES project into a permanent programme that continues to monitorize Alentejo region.

Target audience (policy brief): Regional: CCDR AL., Local Authorities, Municipal Councils, Parish Councils of the Alentejo. Foundations: INATEL, GDA, Manuel F. Santos. Government of Portugal: DgArtes, PNA, PNC, GEPAC. International: UNESCO, European Union.



Introduction and background to the issue: The focus on culture?

Culture is an essential element in the development of personal skills, self-esteem, identity and social relationships. As such, it is recognised in various ways in declarations of universal scope. The International Bill of Human Rights establishes the right to participate “freely in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits” (UN, 1948: Art. 27)

Currently, supranational frameworks, together with the charters they have produced, are in agreement in identifying culture as one of the key elements for achieving long-term social development (Mundiacult, 2025; Compass 2025; UNESCO, 2025). Similarly, the Porto Santo Charter (2021) highlights the fundamental role of culture in development, by promoting a democracy underpinned by the arts, local heritage, and culture in general.

The Portuguese Constitution recognises, in various ways, the right to the fundamental principle of culture, and to the personal and social benefits derived from it (Pires, 2026). Portuguese society is one of the most committed to these principles, demonstrating a high level of interest in culture in international reports. In fact, 92% of the Portuguese population believes that “culture and the arts are important for the well-being and economic development of their region”, that they allow for the free and personal expression of democratic ideas (without censorship), and that they promote understanding (EuCom, 2025: 9, 36). Unfortunately, the lack of support for cultural actors leads figures such as Carlos Wallenstein to question whether this constitutional right will exist in Portugal in the future (Galhós, 2020: 138).

The situation is even more acute in the most disadvantaged regions. Data from 2023 on the Alentejo reveal profound inequalities compared with other wealthier regions, which have higher population densities and better transport links and infrastructure (INE, 2025).

In this context, since 2020, a gap in the actual knowledge of cultural actors across the country has begun to be identified. To address this data gap, a DgArtes Cultural Atlas was published, GEPAC data was released, and specific reports were produced, such as that of the Cultural Observatory, which highlight the need for a regional approach; some of these initiatives aim

to understand the Alentejo, such as the CCDR's collaboration with OPAC, the Portuguese Observatory of Cultural Activities.

In recognition of their contributions, these approaches lead to the following conclusions: we are faced with a complex cultural reality that requires specialist analysis; a lack of a comprehensive view of the local reality; and an overly institutional approach that renders both formal and informal cultural actors invisible. There are several gaps in the knowledge and mapping of informal practices, everyday habits, and the reality of community life and social interaction. These are aspects that need to be explored in greater depth in order to gain a more precise, concrete and direct understanding of the reality of cultural actors in Portugal, particularly in the Alentejo. Only then will it be possible to develop public policies that meet their needs and boost their activities, fostering synergies and collaborative work.

Within this context the BRIDGES project was born, addressing this need to generate micro-social knowledge in order to visualise and understand the cultural reality of the country's largest, most sparsely populated and poorest region, the Alentejo. To this end, it drew upon an understanding of the reality and historical background of local cultural actors.

Firstly, it notes that the Alentejo region has been characterised by a high level of community activity since the advent of the constitutional system in the 19th century, driven as a means of social cohesion in times of crisis (Zozaya, 2020). This has led to significant reliance on informal education and practices of political resistance within the community network (Zozaya, 2022).

Secondly, to study the possibilities of inclusion through culture, the BRIDGES project adopts the concept of culture as that which – in society – encompasses education, the ‘arts, creative activity and cultural heritage’ (EuCom, 2025: 6). BRIDGES considers that the following play a fundamental role in the development of culture: i) cultural institutions (national, regional and local); ii) cultural actors; iii) the participating population. The combination of these elements, together with the values of equality and diversity, promotes inclusion and, with it, democracy.



Thirdly, in order to guide public policies in the field of culture and promote democracy, it was essential to address the following points:

1) Update information on the Alentejo by: i) Collecting data on cultural actors and cultural institutions operating in the region. ii) Conducting surveys to: understand the cultural practices of students, adults and older people, and gain an insight into the situation of cultural actors and cultural institutions. iii) Cross-checking the results obtained with interviews. iv) Plotting the data on maps to visualise this overview of the Alentejo.

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2) A review was conducted of current national and international strategies for social intervention through culture and the arts, to define public policies that meet current needs. Following the BRIDGES (2026) initiatives, we observed that there is a new paradigm of participatory and collaborative democracy that promotes diversity and inclusion through culture, within which the current reality of the Alentejo must be situated. Even when incorporating innovations from the digital realm, the human element remains essential. The Alentejo retains the im-

portance traditionally accorded to personal networks of trust, friendship and personal collaboration—so-called social capital—which is typically the result of social networks (Zozaya, 2007: 14–30).

3) Based on the information gathered from the conferences and interviews organised, BRIDGES (2026) highlight the following guidelines for public policy action. These aim to support the most vulnerable groups and promote greater equality through art and culture. The aim is to support: inclusion and equality (for women, stigmatised groups and the elderly) through a shift in discourse (linguistic, museological, heritage-related and digital); diversity and neurodiversity through art; mental health through cultural prescription; and segregation, domestic violence or the neglect of populations at risk of exclusion through community-based cultural and social practices, legislative theatre, theatre of the oppressed, and proposals that embrace difference.

All these measures aim to normalise difference and formally recognise equality among people, through the use of gender-neutral language for men and women, as well as for traditionally marginalised groups. In the Alentejo, more vulnerable groups have been identified, making it necessary to act in accordance with the aforementioned guidelines to promote gender equality and the inclusion of foreign nationals, racialised people, members of the Roma community, people with disabilities, and those with neurodivergence (ADHD, TEA, autism). Embracing the richness of diversity is fundamental to advancing the democratic process.

Analysis / Key Findings

The findings of the BRIDGES project in the Alentejo region, obtained through surveys, the creation of databases, and a review of the literature and current state of the art, point to the need to support cultural actors who already live, work and operate in the region. Support, which can take various forms, is scarce and insufficient for most, including cultural associations and institutions based in Portugal's largest region.

With regard to forms of global inclusion, on the one hand, the global, national and regional charters, initiatives and statistics analysed reveal that culture is being used to strengthen social cohesion, a sense of belonging, and the integration of women at risk of exclusion, minorities, and people with neurodivergence, disabilities, or at risk of exclusion. These themes were addressed and documented in the BRIDGES International Seminars: I-Women in Focus, II-I Have A Dream, III-Invisible Limitations? (BRIDGES, 2026). The results revealed a global approach to these situations through art,

culture and science. They involved the participation of experts from the fields of psychology, medicine, the arts (visual, musical, theatrical...), education, museology, the digital world, amongst others. This approach is being applied in international and national initiatives, as well as in local projects in the Alentejo region, including theatre groups, medical cultural prescription, community policing by the PSP, and cultural mediation. Cultural agents from all over the world, from Europe and from Portugal, are demonstrating the need to strengthen these cultural areas to promote long-term social transformation.

To create a panorama of the cultural landscape of the Alentejo and to identify opportunities and weaknesses, we launched three surveys.

1) The survey on cultural habits in the Alentejo received 254 responses. It revealed a sample of a **highly educated audience** with strong ties to the interior of the country (**Central Alentejo**). Most have a high level of education, as the sample was mainly distributed within the university context and on academic social media platforms. Although **they appreciate the arts and music, participants assume an essentially passive role** as spectators, consuming a great deal of online audiovisual content at the expense of creative output. **Active pursuits are dominated by** contact with nature, built heritage, and a well-established reading habit. **The main barriers to cultural enjoyment are** geographical distance and the lack of centralised promotion, which far outweigh the financial factor, as expenditure is seasonal. This group asserts itself as an important agent of cultural transmission and demonstrates markedly **cosmopolitan values**; it values **multiculturalism and the role of culture** (music, literature) as factors in social and educational inclusion and enrichment.

2) The survey of cultural actors and institutions in the Alentejo received 207 responses (107 complete). The sections left blank are also indicative, as they reveal the absence of the requested information (funding, amongst other things).

The results of the sample indicate a **cultural ecosystem dominated by non-profit associations (42.9%) and individual artists (28.0%)**.

Although there are examples of **historic associations** still in existence, founded in the city of Évora in 1836, 1839, 1849, or 1900, the majority were established from 1986 onwards, in the context of democracy. The sector is concentrated in **Central Alentejo (70.1%)**, operating in a decentralised manner across cities, towns and villages, reaching a scale ranging from the local to the international level.

Music leads the artistic fields (54.7%), followed by interdisciplinary initiatives. Activities focus on family audiences and heavily involve schools and senior groups. Among those in charge (management, etc.), predominantly **aged between 35 and 50, 46.3% are women.** As regards logistics, most do not have their own venues; few are owned by the organisations themselves and many are provided by other institutions (local councils, parish councils, etc.). **A lack of equipment affects 29.4% of practitioners**, and many of them borrow it. Social media is the primary means of promotion. Funding, which depends on local authorities and has recently seen an increase from the DG for the Arts, is scarce: **35.4% receive up to €15,000 annually, with limited funding** being the main obstacle to growth, but **there are other constraints** that reflect the general and systematic lack of support.

3) A nível de género, predominam as participantes do sexo feminino (**57%**). Geograficamente, o estudo foca-se na região do Alentejo, com grande destaque para o **Alentejo Central (71,8%)** e o Alto Alentejo (25,9%). Os inquiridos frequentam maioritariamente o **3.º ciclo do Ensino Básico (64,7%)** e vivem em agregados familiares compostos por 3 a 4 pessoas, cujos setores económicos de emprego familiar são diversos, com liderança do **setor terciário/serviços (35,4%)**.

The student survey received 111 responses (85 complete), mostly from **young people with an average age of 15** (with a significant concentration of 14-year-olds, although it also included three adult students studying part-time). In terms of gender, **female participants predominate (57%)**. Geographically, the study focuses on the Alentejo region, with a strong emphasis on **Central Alentejo (71.8%) and Upper Alentejo (25.9%)**. The respondents are mainly in the **third cycle of basic education (64.7%)** and

live in households of 3 to 4 people, with family employment spanning various economic sectors, led by the tertiary/services sector (35.4%).

The survey reveals a generation of young people who value friendships and personal relationships, who maintain a strong connection to the digital world (particularly social media), with leisure habits centred on sport and music, and who show a marked lack of interest in formal education and the news. Although their close personal circles are still largely homogeneous and regional, young people demonstrate a broadly tolerant, empathetic and receptive mindset towards cultural diversity, and are receptive to multiculturalism, diversity and social inclusion through the arts and sport.

To gain an insight into these realities in relation to cultural actors and cultural institutions, two databases were compiled: one on cultural actors and the other on cultural institutions. These data corroborate the survey results (covering the non-profit sector and individual artists, with a focus on music and interdisciplinary collaborations, etc.). **These are being plotted on two interactive QHis map** (Schiavottiello, 2026), which illustrates cultural density, existing networks and the historical depth of the cultural fabric. **The maps reveal the rich cultural fabric that must be supported and promoted.** They offer a glimpse of the possible approaches these cultural agents adopt to sustain their activities related to the performing arts and informal education initiatives.

Para contrastar os resultados com informações qualitativas, realizamos entrevistas semi estruturadas a agentes culturais nacionais e internacionais, com o objetivo de identificar os desafios, os apoios, as estratégias de integração, e as práticas educativas e inclusivas através da arte.

To contrast the results with qualitative information, we promoted semi-structured interviews with national and international cultural agents, with the aim of identifying the challenges, support mechanisms, integration strategies, and educational and inclusive practices through art.

Alongside all these spheres that reveal forms of inclusion through culture, narratives of exclusion are emerging. These are constant threats to the system championed by

democracy: micro-attacks and hate speech organised on social media and in the media against groups that may be more vulnerable, in Portugal and in the Alentejo region: women (the 'manosphere'), xenophobia, racism against the immigrant population and the Roma community (Lusa, 2025), the exclusion of diverse people and the invisibilisation of neurodiversity (undiagnosed conditions on the ADHD and autism spectrums).

It is essential to embrace the richness of diversity and multiculturalism present in the Alentejo and in Europe/Portugal in order to unite the potential of all people and communities – particularly vulnerable groups – as is already the case with numerous initiatives and theories promoted through culture in national and international contexts (BRIDGES I, II, III, 2026). The need to make space for otherness, or for the 'other', was already included in the Bid Book for the Évora 2027 Capital of Culture bid (Executive Committee, 2022: 5–7, 56, 77).

In this context, it is important to highlight a group that is structurally disadvantaged. The female population – due to historical factors – continues to face inequalities that are deeply rooted in the system. The most significant issue is the failure to acknowledge the presence of women in official public documents, which are always written in the masculine form, whether singular or plural, contrary to the European standards accepted by Portugal (CES, 2021; Zozaya-Montes, 2026). This situation affects not only the Alentejo, but also other regions of Portugal.

With this aim in mind, we have launched the BRIDGES Manifesto (2026b). It proposes the practical implementation of inclusive language that recognises women's roles within the administrative and official systems of the University of Évora. Specifically, it calls for the use of terms such as "student, lecturer, researcher, scholarship holder" to refer to women in official documents (employment contracts, public notices, the Moodle platform, communications, amongst others). In this way, Portugal will fulfil the commitments it has made to the European Union.

NEED: To reduce gender inequalities starting with language: to promote linguistic equality for the integration of women into collective discourse, following UÉ standards accepted by the Government of Portugal (CES, 2021)

Figura 1 – Interactive Map BRIDGES of Cultural Agents in the Alentejo region (QGis).



Source: Nicola Schiavottello, database by Filipa Coelho, for the BRIDGES project (IP. Zozaya-Montes).

Policy Options and Recommendations

1-Investing in cultural actors in the Alentejo, stable funding redistributed:

The results of the data collection (BRIDGES 1-2, 2026), the surveys (BRIDGES a, b, c, 2026) and the interviews (Zozaya, 2026) reveal that the majority of cultural actors (especially those working individually or in pairs, and associations over 50 years old) receive minimal support and have limited skills or a low level of competitiveness when applying for national and international funding.

Providing structured, long-term support for the implementation of their own projects would promote stability and capacity for action. This investment can make a significant difference, even with small amounts relative to the resources involved in cultural events or major projects promoted by the State and local authorities.

🔑 Strategy: micro-grants, redistribution, transparency, equal opportunities.

2- Hold public tenders twice a year: Municipal Councils, Parish Councils and Regional Development Centres (CCDRs) award an-

nual grants to individuals who submit an application or who are selected by them. There is a “glass ceiling” for cultural agents who are less entrepreneurial or who believe their needs are not met because they are not relevant to political power (reason: unanswered emails from local councils, negative responses, failure to schedule meetings, etc.). To promote transparency and increase fair competition, 50% of the grants already awarded by the CCDRs, municipal councils and parish councils could be allocated through a biannual open competition, so as to ensure that each beneficiary can only receive one grant per year. Allowing two applications ensures that cultural agents do not miss out on opportunities when they are unable to meet deadlines due to the excessive workload to which they are normally subjected.

🔑 Strategy: distribute to strengthen what already exists.

3-Support cultural actors in various ways: by creating formal networks and spaces for interdisciplinary collaboration.

Numerous cultural actors and associations highlight the need for support beyond financial

assistance: spaces, networks, communication, launch events, etc. Existing initiatives do not form a genuine network of action. A coordinated network should be established, with spaces (which could be the historic associations) for rehearsing and working, preferably on a co-working basis, as it is necessary to create synergies. It is equally important to have support for acquiring or obtaining equipment.

4-Moving beyond the rhetoric of discourses on inclusion and turning it into reality.

The contemporary debate surrounding social inclusion through artistic and cultural practices has shown a growing saturation of discourse in the media sphere, often characterised by the repetition of stereotypical narratives lacking empirical basis.

With the aim of bridging this gap between institutional rhetoric and real-world applicability, there is an urgent need to ground inclusion policies in concrete data and replicable methodologies. It is proposed to adopt practical models validated by the BRIDGES I, II and III International Seminars (2026), which operationalise inclusion through transdisciplinary interventions in the fields of theatre, opera, visual arts, cinema, or health.

📌 Strategy: to make culture a driver of change, moving away from the peripheral role assigned to it by some political agendas.

5-Invest more in interdisciplinary education that integrates the arts and culture:

Promote a comprehensive education policy using resources and initiatives already tested in

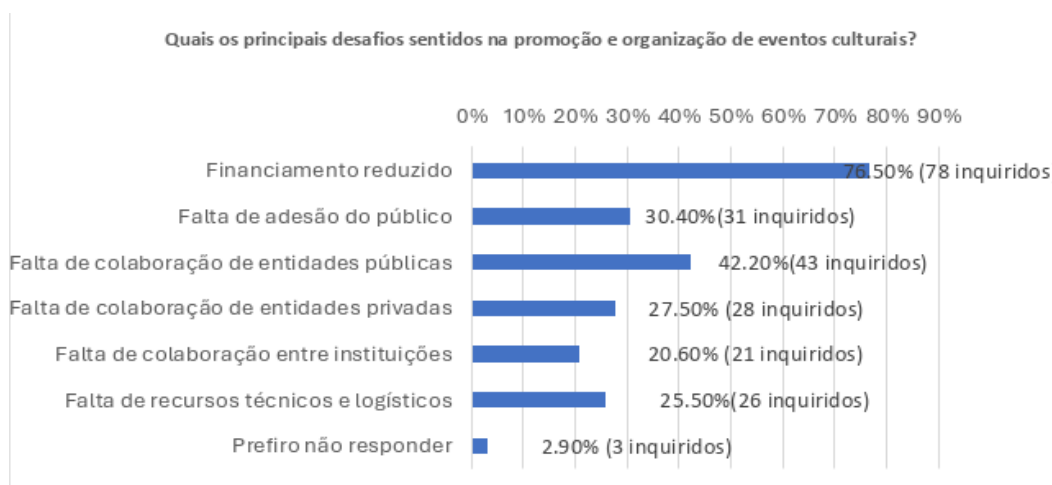
Europe and other parts of the country, particularly targeting the most disadvantaged groups. Develop a comprehensive education system to foster an inclusive democracy. The convergence between the formal education system and artistic practices should not be viewed as a secondary extracurricular activity, but rather as a fundamental tool for cognitive development, active citizenship and school retention in the Alentejo region.

6- Empower the cultural sector in matters of scientific and artistic inclusion:

Design initiatives that transform the lives of populations who are excluded from information, have low literacy rates (functional or absolute), or who are stigmatised and marginalised due to their diversity. Through this training, cultural agents will be able to complement the community's educational frameworks, addressing the structural gaps historically associated with low educational attainment in the region and illiteracy. Mitigating educational and cultural vulnerability is an essential step towards safeguarding democratic health. Low literacy acts as fertile ground and a catalyst for the rise of populism, hate speech and narratives of social exclusion. Investment in training artists translates into a direct reinforcement of civic values.

📌 Strategy: Democratise through debate, training and the fight against disinformation, whilst strengthening digital and scientific literacy.

Figura 1 – Perception of limitations cultural actors and cultural institutions (questionary BRIDGES).



Fonte: questionnaire to Cultural Agents, Graphic: Ana Pinto (BRIDGES, IP Zozaya-Montes)

Conclusion: We Have A Dream

The utopian vision of reducing social inequalities based on differences in background and personal circumstances was magnificently realised by Martin Luther King. In this spirit, revived by BRIDGES II (April 2026, “I Have A Dream”), culture can be an ally in the quest for inclusion. All recent calls for equality and democracy within the EU are linked to culture.

The Portuguese Government has already promoted this idea at a transnational level.

The Porto Santo Charter (2021), adopted by Portugal during its Presidency of the Council of the European Union, was based on the following premise: the strengthening of democracy is powerfully linked to art and cultural expressions, as well as to bringing the State closer to the community through the recognition of its cultural heritage, understood in a global sense.

The consolidation of regional democratic development requires the strengthening of cultural actors and community organisations based in the Alentejo.

From a historical perspective, many of these organisations have played a crucial role in the cultural and educational development of the region since the 19th century. These institutions served as important centres for literacy and popular education during a period marked by high rates of illiteracy in the Alentejo, and today constitute an intangible heritage and an institutional memory recognised and preserved by the academic community. It is therefore imperative to ensure structural and ongoing support for this associative ecosystem.

The assistance and support we propose for cultural actors, associations or institutions goes beyond the strictly financial dimension. It should encompass structural elements, such as support with premises (many do not always have their own or leased premises), technical capacity-building through support for applications with

resources to compete for international funding, and support for skills development or know-how to compete in national or international tenders. Institutional capacity-building is essential to enhance the competitiveness and sustainability of a cultural ecosystem with great potential but many vulnerabilities.

Among vulnerable groups, the situation of women is of particular concern,

as they have historically been affected by structural inequalities stemming from their traditional confinement to the private sphere, the care economy and the family environment. In the Alentejo region, women — both as individuals and as cultural agents — face additional barriers that hinder their full integration. In this regard, the current regulatory framework reiterates the urgent need for inclusive and equitable practices that mitigate gender inequalities (CIG, Commission for Citizenship, 2013). Furthermore, it is suggested that the adoption of gender-inclusive language (CES, 2021) be implemented in the Alentejo context through the formal recognition of professions, positions and academic degrees held by women in the public sector (BRIDGES, 2026b). This need is justified by the multidimensional nature of inequality, whose manifestations and risks of replication tend to intensify in the digital ecosystem (Benítez, 2026).

To conclude, art and culture exert a decisive influence on transnational public policies, with a direct impact on the areas of education, health and science. It is therefore imperative to strengthen these sectors and consolidate measures that are already being piloted in the Alentejo. However, there is still a long way to go. Structural support for associations and actors operating in the region is essential to drive this change from the ground up, through a bottom-up approach, ensuring its full sustainability.

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