

Culture, Territory and Impact: The POCTEP and PIS Programmes in the District of Castelo Branco

Márcia Silva, Sandra Lima Coelho & João Moreira de Campos
Universidade da Beira Interior (UBI) & Católica Porto Business School (CPBS)

Executive Summary

In sparsely populated areas, culture has been gaining prominence in local intervention strategies, particularly in the way it has been harnessed in conjunction with objectives of inclusion, participation and regional development. An analysis of nine projects supported by the POCTEP and Portugal Social Innovation programmes in the district of Castelo Branco reveals that their contribution goes beyond cultural programming and provision. In the projects analysed, culture was mobilised to bring institutions closer together, broaden forms of participation and foster greater engagement with local communities. In several cases, it enabled the involvement of audiences who are normally distant from existing offerings and helped to consolidate cooperation networks between organisations. The main weakness lies in continuity: when funding ends, many initiatives lose the ability to retain teams, maintain partnerships and continue the work that has been carried out.

Recommendations

- Involve local communities in the design and implementation of projects
- Encourage cross-sectoral cooperation: public, private and third sector
- Reformulate the assessment of cultural impact
- Develop cultural monitoring platforms

Target Audience(s) of the Policy Brief

National and regional policy-makers with responsibility for culture and territorial development; managing authorities of the POCTEP programmes in Portugal and Spain, and Portugal Social Innovation; local authorities, cultural organisations and third sector entities operating in low-density and cross-border territories; Regional Coordination and Development Commission of the Centre (CCDRC), Directorate-General for the Arts (DGArtes), Turismo de Portugal, European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC).

Introduction and Problem Framing

A territory is not merely an administrative boundary: it is a social construction, shaped by practices, relationships and dynamics of participation (Lefebvre, 1974; Haesbaert, 2004). The district of Castelo Branco is a territory characterised by low population

density, demographic ageing and persistent inequalities in access to services, infrastructure and opportunities for participation. Like other inland territories, these conditions pose concrete challenges to social cohesion,



population retention and the capacity for local mobilisation.

In this context, culture has increasingly taken on a key role in local intervention strategies, not merely as artistic or symbolic expression, but also as a resource mobilised to bring actors closer together, strengthen institutional ties and create broader conditions for participation. In territories marked by dispersion, isolation and fragile local networks, this role acquires particular relevance.

It is within this context that the analysis of the POCTEP and Portugal Social Innovation programmes in the district of Castelo Branco is situated. Between 2014 and 2023, these programmes supported culturally-oriented projects with distinct but related objectives in the way they articulate culture, social intervention and territorial dynamics.

To support this analysis, nine culturally-oriented projects supported between 2014 and

2023 were identified: four under Portugal Social Innovation and five under POCTEP. The research combined documentary analysis, nine semi-structured interviews with project promoters and partners, and two participatory Living Labs with territorial actors.

This policy brief analyses nine of these projects, seeking to understand how culture was mobilised, what effects it produced on local dynamics, and what conditions shape the continuity of the work undertaken after funding ends. This study has enabled the development of an analytical framework designed to assess cultural and territorial impact in low-density contexts, providing an overview of how these initiatives were implemented, the effects they had on local dynamics, and the factors that determine the sustainability of the work carried out once funding has ended.

Principais Resultados

The findings are organised around three key aspects:

- the way in which culture was mobilised in response to specific local challenges;
- the dynamics of cooperation and learning that these projects helped to foster;
- the vulnerabilities that continue to affect their sustainability.

This analysis allows us to examine the impact of these projects beyond the activities carried out, also considering the relationships, practices and ways of working that they helped to consolidate.

In the projects analysed, culture was mobilised in connection with concrete territorial challenges, particularly in contexts marked by isolation, limited cultural provision and fragile local networks. In several cases, it was used to foster proximity, engage populations and strengthen relationships between institutions

with different trajectories, scales and resources.

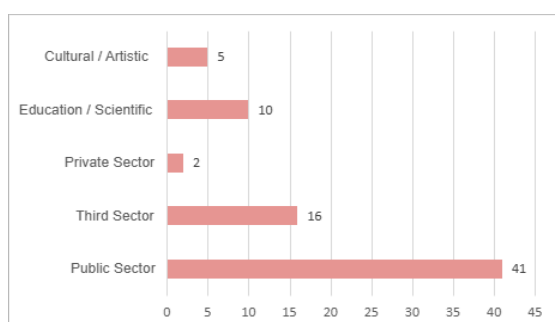
Beyond expanding programming, the projects analysed created conditions for access and participation in contexts where these tend to be more limited. In several cases, they engaged audiences usually excluded from cultural provision, built more sustained relationships with territories and broadened the presence of culture in contexts where it tends to appear in a more fragmented way.

The findings also show that a significant part of the impact of these projects lies not only in the activities carried out, but in the relationships they helped to consolidate. Partnerships between local authorities, schools, associations and cultural organisations strengthened cooperation networks, facilitated inter-institutional learning and, in several cases, created ways of working that persisted beyond the formal project implementation period.

In the case of POCTEP, cross-border cooperation was particularly significant. In several projects, it brought together organisations facing similar challenges, enabled the development of shared methodologies and consolidated forms of collaboration that went beyond the administrative logic of partnership.

The data collected also indicates that these projects are not distributed evenly across the country. Their concentration in municipalities with greater institutional capacity suggests that access to funding tends to favour contexts with more established organisational structures. At the same time, project governance relies primarily on public sector and third sector bodies, whilst private sector participation remains negligible (Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Types of Stakeholders Involved in the Projects



The main weakness identified relates to continuity. When funding ends, many initiatives lose the capacity to maintain teams, sustain partnerships and follow through on the work undertaken. It is at this point that the mismatch between the timeframe of funding and the time required for consolidating these processes becomes most apparent.

Furthermore, throughout the analysis, it became evident that conventional impact assessment models are insufficient to capture a significant proportion of the effects produced by these projects. Dimensions such as fostering closeness, strengthening institutional relationships, consolidating networks or ensuring the continuity of practices tend to remain largely invisible when the assessment focuses primarily on activity and implementation metrics. It was in response to this limitation that a participatory model for assessing cultural and territorial impact was developed (Figure 2), constructed with the actors involved and focused on the less visible but central dimensions of these processes.

Figure 2: Model for the Assessment of Cultural and Territorial Impact



Policy Options and Recommendations

The findings of this research support four recommendations addressed to policy-makers, funding bodies and cultural actors operating in low-density and cross-border territories.

1. Involve local communities in the design and implementation of projects

- Adopt co-creation as an institutional evaluation procedure.
- Establish monitoring committees composed of representatives of the various actors affected by the projects.
- Form advisory councils encompassing institutions and actors from both sides of the border.
- Identify cultural practices rooted in the dynamics and realities of the territories.

2. Encourage cross-sectoral cooperation: public, private and third sector

- Create funding mechanisms that incentivise collaborative governance models, inter-institutional consortia or forms of shared responsibility.
- Establish shared-value agreements in which strategic interests are aligned.
- Establish shared governance platforms in which all sectors are represented and decisions are taken collectively.

- Encourage mobility across the three sectors through programmes that foster empathy and the adoption of common languages.

3. Reformulate the assessment of cultural impact

- Recognise dimensions such as social capital, trust, belonging and the transformation of cultural practices.
- Incorporate deferred evaluation mechanisms, with follow-up after project closure.
- Include comprehensive accessibility metrics that take into account barriers of a physical, geographical, financial and attitudinal nature.
- Value identity and heritage dimensions as a means of preserving technical know-how and recovering collective memory.

4. Develop cultural monitoring platforms

- Produce, systematise and disseminate knowledge on cultural practices, actors and dynamics.
- Strengthen local capacity for action and autonomy through shared information.
- Give visibility to networks, cooperation, participation, accessibility and inclusion.
- Link the design and management of platforms to higher education institutions and across multiple territorial scales.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that the POCTEP and PIS programmes have had significant cultural, social and territorial impacts in the district of Castelo Branco. Viewed as spaces for collective action, these projects reveal culture not as an autonomous sector, but as a resource for territorial coordination and the forging of social bonds: they generated inter-institutional collaboration networks, strengthened territorial identities and created opportunities for participation in contexts marked by inequality of access, depopulation and isolation. However, the sustainability of these initiatives remains structurally dependent on external funding. The absence of continuity mechanisms after project

closure represents the main obstacle to consolidating the gains achieved. The main lesson for public policy is to recognise that the impact of programmes depends not only on financial instruments, but also on local capacities, trust relationships and institutional learning that enable funding to be transformed into lasting territorial development.

The participatory model of cultural evaluation developed in the project represents an original methodological contribution. By shifting the focus of evaluation from outputs to processes, relationships and continuities, this model responds to the need to develop evaluation



tools that are temporally sensitive, territorially situated and capable of capturing social capital, identity, inclusion and local autonomy. Its applicability to other low-density territories and European cross-border contexts defines a

relevant research agenda, one that may articulate the evaluation of cultural policies with perspectives from the sociology of territory, multilevel governance and social innovation.

References

Haesbaert, R. (2004). *O mito da desterritorialização: do "fim dos territórios" à multiterritorialidade*. Bertrand Brasil

Lefebvre, H. (1974). *La production de l'espace*. Anthropos.



COMO CITAR ESTE DOCUMENTO

Silva, M., Coelho, S. L., & Campos, J. M. (2026). *Culture, Territory and Impact: The POCTEP and PIS Programmes in the District of Castelo Branco*. S4P-25 Policy Brief 8050/2025. PLANAPP – Centre for Planning and Evaluation of Public Policies.

CONTACTO

science4policy@planapp.gov.pt

COPYRIGHT

© PLANAPP, 2026



[Science for Public Policy](#)



[PLANAPP](#)



[Newsletter](#)



[PLANAPP](#)



[@planapp](#)



[PLANAPP podcasts](#)



This policy brief was developed under the Science4Policy 2025 (S4P-25): Public Policy Science Studies Call, an initiative by the Centre for Planning and Evaluation of Public Policies (PLANAPP) in collaboration with the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT), financed by Portugal's Recovery and Resilience Plan. Thematic line S4P-25/03: Analysis of the cultural and economic impact of the POCTEP and PIS programmes in cross-border and sparsely populated areas.

The content is the sole responsibility of its authors and does not bind or commit PLANAPP nor FCT.