

Arts and Culture as Tools for Active Social Inclusion in Low-Density Territories

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Executive summary

Public policies that mobilise Arts and Culture (A&C) as instruments for active social inclusion are increasingly relevant in low-density territories, where socio-economic vulnerability, geographical isolation and institutional constraints limit opportunities for sustained participation. In these contexts, effective intervention requires approaches that are sensitive to local realities, territorial dynamics and the specific profiles of the communities involved. The analysis shows that investment in A&C can generate meaningful impacts on active social inclusion, but that these impacts are neither automatic nor self-sustaining. Rather than functioning as linear interventions, A&C projects operate as open intervention ecosystems, in which outcomes depend on implementation conditions, human and organisational mediation, and the structural constraints of the territories in which they are embedded. Impact emerges in a distributed and multidimensional way, through individual activation, stronger interpersonal relationships, community dynamics, and institutional and symbolic conditions that support participation. However, where self-reinforcing mechanisms are weak, these effects may remain fragile, uneven and reversible, particularly when team stability, close monitoring, trust-based relationships and continuity of engagement are not sustained. This policy brief therefore argues for a systemic approach to the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of A&C-based social inclusion policies. It identifies the conditions under which social impact is generated, stabilised or eroded in low-density territories, and sets out operational recommendations to support more realistic, evidence-informed and context-sensitive public decision-making.

Recommendations

- Reposition the policy to place the critical conditions for impact generation at the centre of intervention design.
- Recognise human mediation as a core infrastructure of the intervention, ensuring adequate teams, continuous monitoring and stable relational conditions.
- Adapt planning, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to different territorial contexts and target groups.
- Explicitly acknowledge the structural limits of the policy and strengthen coordination with other public policy areas.
- Strengthen longitudinal and distributional evaluation approaches, with a focus on trajectories, impact stability and inequalities in outcomes.

Target audience for the policy brief

Agency for Development and Cohesion (AD&C), Portugal Social Innovation 2030 Mission Structure (EMPIS 2030), Directorate-General for the Arts (DGARTES), Interreg Spain–Portugal (POCTEP) Cross-Border Cooperation Programme, Regional Coordination and Development Commissions (CCDR), Norte 2030 Regional Programme, Centro 2030 Regional Programme, Alentejo 2030 Regional Programme, Algarve 2030 Regional Programme, Demography, Qualifications and Inclusion Thematic Programme (PESSOAS 2030), Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, EDP Foundation, “la Caixa” Foundation, Culturgest – Caixa Geral de Depósitos Foundation, Creative Europe Programme 2021-2027, Equality, Rights and Values Programme 2021-2027.



Introduction and Problem Framing

Low-density territories are characterised by persistent structural challenges, including geographical dispersion, population ageing, fragile institutional networks, and limited access to social and cultural services. These conditions constrain structured social participation and reinforce dynamics of isolation and exclusion.

In this context, public policies in the fields of Arts and Culture (A&C) have increasingly been mobilised as instruments of social intervention, with the expectation of promoting participation, inclusion and community cohesion. This approach is grounded in the recognition of the potential of artistic and cultural practices to activate individual and collective capacities, create spaces for interaction, and generate symbolic recognition, particularly among vulnerable groups.

However, the articulation between social intervention and the fields of A&C is a complex process, which tends to produce highly uneven results across formally similar projects. In many cases, policies designed and evaluated

primarily on the basis of quantifiable outputs, such as the number of activities delivered or participants reached, provide an incomplete understanding of the social impact generated. This can foster excessive expectations and lead to evaluations that do not adequately distinguish between operational shortcomings, contextual limitations and structural constraints.

Addressing this challenge requires the adoption of a systemic approach to intervention, focused on understanding the critical conditions through which impact is generated, stabilised and eroded in low-density territories.

The practical application of this approach to projects incorporating A&C domains under the Portugal Inovação Social (Portugal Social Innovation) programme and PT2030 makes it possible to address this challenge by providing a systemic reading of interventions and identifying the critical conditions that enable social impact to be generated, sustained or lost over time.

Analysis / Key Findings

What is the target impact?

The overall impact identified is Active Social Inclusion, understood as the capacity of individuals and groups to participate meaningfully, with recognition and continuity, in social, cultural and community life. Artistic and cultural practices act as enabling instruments in this process, rather than as ends in themselves.

Where is impact generated?

Impact emerges in a distributed and interdependent manner across four levels: individual activation, including self-esteem, motivation and autonomy; interpersonal relationships, including trust and cooperation; community dynamics, including belonging and continuity; and institutional and symbolic conditions, including coordination and legitimation. The fragility of any one of these levels undermines the sustainability of the overall impact.

What is the causal nature of the system?

The study shows that there are no internal self-reinforcing mechanisms capable of ensuring the autonomous reproduction of impact. The system operates as an open causal ecosystem, dependent on the continuity of intervention, organisational stability and the quality of human mediation in order to generate and sustain processes of Active Social Inclusion.

What are the main enabling conditions and structural barriers?

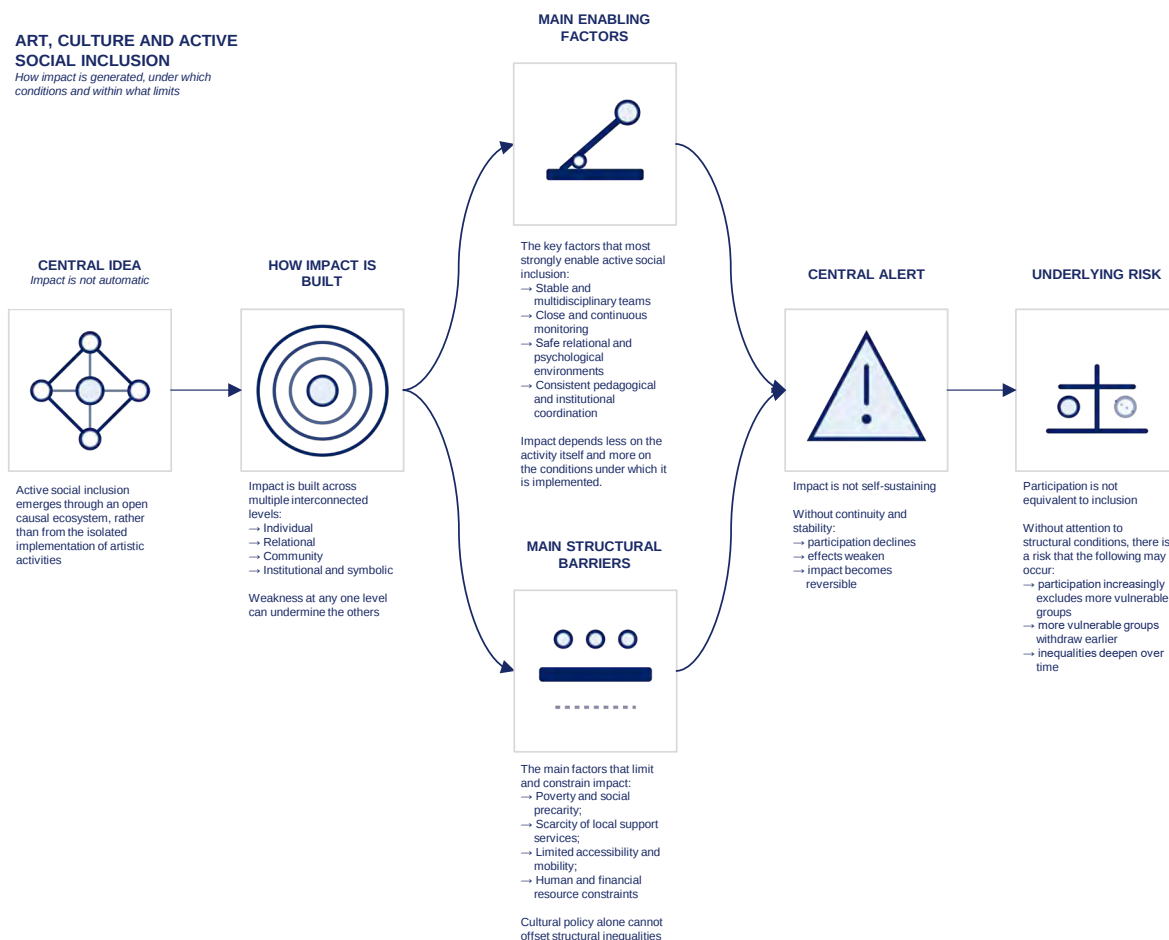
A limited set of key enabling conditions accounts for a significant share of the observed impact, while multiple structural barriers, such as poverty, social precarity, territorial isolation and institutional scarcity, constrain its consolidation, regardless of the artistic quality of the activities delivered.

What are the key messages?

- A&C activities do not generate social impact by themselves; impact results from

- the articulation between artistic practices, human mediation and territorial context.
- The impact of A&C policies depends more on how they are implemented than on the artistic activities themselves.
- Teams, monitoring and relational environments are infrastructures of impact, not ancillary costs.
- Social impact is fragile, uneven and potentially reversible without continuity of intervention.
- Evaluations focused solely on outputs conceal risks of impact erosion and inequality.

Figure 1 – What generates impact, under which conditions and within what limits



Source: Own elaboration.

Policy Options and Recommendations

Planning

R1. Anchor planning in the critical conditions that drive impact

Planning should explicitly recognise that impact generation depends on factors such as team stability, close monitoring and the existence of safe relational environments. These elements should be treated as core pillars of impact,

rather than as ancillary components of the intervention.

R2. Differentiate planning according to territories and target groups

Planning objectives, instruments and indicators should be adapted to the specific structural contexts of low-density territories and to the profiles of target groups, avoiding uniform

approaches that overlook relevant territorial and social asymmetries.

R3. Safeguard continuity and internal predictability

The accumulation of social impact requires temporal regularity and relational stability throughout the life cycle of projects. Planning should therefore prioritise intervention models that safeguard the continuity of teams, dynamics and relationships with participants.

R4. Integrate an explicit recognition of the structural limits of cultural policy into planning

Planning should clearly acknowledge the limits of what cultural policy can achieve in isolation in territories marked by structural vulnerabilities. This realism strengthens the credibility of public intervention and creates better conditions for coordination with other areas of public policy, thereby increasing the likelihood of sustained social impact.

Monitoring

R5. Reposition monitoring as a systemic approach

The monitoring of interventions should go beyond verifying formal compliance with activities and indicators and should focus instead on the effective functioning of the critical enabling conditions through which impact is generated. In particular, it is important to monitor team stability, the quality of mediation and the robustness of relational dynamics as central components in the production and maintenance of social impact.

R6. Prioritise longitudinal approaches

Monitoring should prioritise longitudinal readings centred on the analysis of participation and engagement trajectories over time. This approach makes it possible to identify patterns of stabilisation, erosion or withdrawal that are not visible through isolated reporting points.

R7. Distinguish structural barriers from operational shortcomings

Monitoring should clearly distinguish barriers arising from persistent structural conditions, such as poverty, isolation or institutional fragility, from operational shortcomings within projects. This distinction is essential to avoid penalising interpretations and judgements of

interventions operating in structurally more fragile contexts, while preserving analytical fairness and the usefulness of monitoring for public decision-making.

Evaluation

R8. Prioritise evaluations centred on impact trajectories

Evaluation should shift the focus from isolated results to the analysis of participation, engagement and change trajectories over time, making it possible to understand processes of accumulation, stabilisation or regression in social impact.

R9. Explicitly integrate the reversibility of impact

Evaluation exercises should recognise that generated impact may be fragile and reversible, integrating this dimension into the interpretation of results and avoiding overly static or conclusive readings.

R10. Analyse the effective distribution of impact

Evaluation should incorporate an analysis of who effectively benefits from interventions, identifying patterns of exclusion, withdrawal or concentration of impact among specific participant profiles.

R11. Distinguish lived impact from institutionalised impact

It is essential to differentiate effects at the individual and relational levels from transformations with organisational, community or institutional expression, avoiding the overstatement of impacts that lack capacity for structural consolidation.

R12. Integrate the analysis of implementation conditions

Evaluation should explicitly consider the organisational, relational and territorial conditions under which results are produced, thereby strengthening its interpretative and explanatory capacity.

R13. Adapt evaluation criteria to territorial contexts

Evaluation criteria should be sensitive to territorial and social asymmetries, avoiding direct comparisons between projects embedded in structurally non-equivalent contexts.

R14. Strengthen the strategic function of evaluation

Evaluation should primarily serve a strategic and formative function, oriented towards institutional learning and the informed adjustment of public policy over time.

Conclusion

Public policies in the fields of Arts and Culture (A&C) can play a relevant role in promoting active social inclusion in low-density territories. However, impact does not result automatically from the implementation of A&C activities alone, nor can it be ensured solely through project funding. The impact is contingent, uneven and structurally dependent on the specific conditions of implementation and on the territorial contexts in which interventions take place.

The evidence produced shows that the policy operates as a complex intervention system, in which impact emerges from the interaction between artistic practices, human mediation, project organisation and the structural constraints of territories. The absence of self-reinforcing mechanisms means that impact does not consolidate by inertia; it must be continuously produced, protected and stabilised. When the critical enabling conditions become weakened, whether organisational, relational or contextual, effects tend to stagnate or regress, even when activities formally remain ongoing.

In this sense, it is essential to move beyond linear and fragmented readings of the policy and to adopt a systemic approach to intervention, centred on understanding the conditions that enable impact to be generated,

the conditions that allow it to remain stable over time, and the factors that explain its erosion. This shift in approach requires a reorientation of policy focus: from activities to implementation conditions; from isolated results to impact trajectories; and from formal evaluation to a dynamic and context-sensitive reading of processes.

A systemic approach makes it possible both to strengthen the effectiveness of public policy and to protect its legitimacy. By distinguishing structural barriers from operational shortcomings, it avoids penalising projects operating in particularly adverse contexts. By recognising the limits of what A&C policy can achieve in isolation, it also creates space for more realistic and strategic coordination with other areas of public policy, particularly in the fields of social policy, education and territorial development.

In low-density territories, where structural vulnerabilities are persistent and cumulative, effective policy decisions require realism, continuity and learning capacity. This policy brief offers an analytical and operational framework to support more realistic, informed and sustainable public decisions on the use of A&C as instruments for active social inclusion in low-density territories.

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