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## **Cultural associativity in the Inner Areas, between vulnerability and opportunity**

*L'associazionismo culturale nelle Aree interne, tra vulnerabilità e opportunità*

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### ABSTRACT AND KEYWORDS

#### **Cultural associativity in the Inner Areas**

The Italian Inner Areas, which suffer from depopulation and territorial isolation, nevertheless possess in their local communities the social and cultural potential to engage in development processes. However, the stakeholders involved in the maintenance and transmission of the local cultural heritage encounter significant difficulties in supporting creative initiatives potentially useful for the promotion of this heritage. These difficulties are often due to the lack of material and immaterial (human, technical, economic) resources, but also to the inadequate capacity for strategic organisation to which local policies fail to respond.

In the light of these premises, the contribution proposes a critical reflection on the models, and the relative devices of a prevalently programmatic nature, implemented in different territorial contexts, capable of constituting a strategic reference for the socio-economic revitalisation of inland territories, referring in particular to the experiences of incubation and participatory budgeting.

Finally, in relation to the Sicani Inner Area in Sicily, a proposal is advanced for a management model for future local development initiatives aimed at their funding that responds more adequately to the peculiarities of the territorial context and in support of the local communities.

**Keywords:** Inner Areas, participatory budgeting, incubation, cultural festivals

#### **L'associazionismo culturale nelle Aree interne**

Le Aree interne italiane, che vivono condizioni di spopolamento e isolamento territoriale, possiedono ciononostante all'interno delle comunità locali il potenziale sociale e culturale per innescare processi di sviluppo. Tuttavia, gli attori coinvolti nel mantenimento e nella trasmissione del patrimonio culturale locale incontrano significative difficoltà nel sostenere le iniziative creative potenzialmente utili alla valorizzazione di tale patrimonio. Tali difficoltà sono spesso riconducibili alla carenza di risorse materiali ed immateriali (umane, tecniche, economiche), ma anche alla inadeguata capacità di organizzazione interna strategica, cui le politiche locali non riescono a fornire risposta.

Alla luce di tali premesse il contributo propone una riflessione critica sui modelli, e i relativi dispositivi di natura prevalentemente organizzativo-gestionale, messi in atto in differenti contesti territoriali, in grado di costituire un riferimento strategico per la rivitalizzazione socio-economica dei territori interni, facendo, in particolare, riferimento alle esperienze di incubazione e di bilancio partecipativo.

In riferimento all'Area interna Sicani in Sicilia, si avanza la proposta di un modello di gestione delle future iniziative di sviluppo locale finalizzato alla loro attivazione e al loro finanziamento, che risponda in modo più adeguato alle peculiarità del contesto territoriale e al sostegno delle comunità locali.

**Parole chiave:** Aree interne, bilancio partecipato, incubazione, eventi culturali

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## 1. Introduction

Italy's Inner Areas face problematic conditions linked not only due to the well-known phenomena of isolation and progressive depopulation, but also because of socio-economic difficulties affecting those who remain: from the ageing of the population, to the emigration of young graduates, to the difficulty of access to public services and mobility networks. In this context, the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI) defines a particular geography for these areas, based mainly on the distinction between that poles provide essential services (health, education and transport) and municipalities that are distant from these services, a condition defined as 'peripherality' (Moscarelli and Fera, 2024).

In addition to the difficulties related to access to essential services, these territories, usually small rural and mountain municipalities, are characterised by processes of social and economic marginalisation. In fact, with regard to demographic size, Italy's Inner Areas have recorded a significant decline especially in the decade 2014-2024, a period in which the population decreased by 5%. This phenomenon is even more evident in the South (-6.3), compared to the North (-2.7%) and also in Central Italy (-4.3%) (ISTAT, 2024a). Moreover, ageing affects the entire national territory, but especially the inner areas where the population over 65 increased from 19.6% to 24.3% between 2002 and 2024. The population up to the age of 14, on the other hand, decreased over the same period from 14.8% to 11.8% (ISTAT, 2024a).

These problems, which are also found in the Sicilian inner areas with the aggravating circumstance of insularity, are distinctive of the area of interest of this contribution: the Sicani Inner Area. This area is made up of twelve small rural, hilly and mountainous municipalities in the province of Agrigento. Despite the socio-economic and functional problems prevalent in such contexts, local communities inhabiting the area's small towns maintain deep-rooted traditions and cultural and festive expressions that could contribute significantly to socio-economic revitalization process, particularly by attracting emigrants and tourists at specific times of the year (Regione Siciliana, 2021). However, this social and relational potential, partially implemented through different organisational forms, by non-profit institutions, collectives and formalised and non-formalised groups, faces a relevant endogenous condition of vulnerability. Due to depopulation and emigration, especially of young human capital, but also due to the weakness of institutional policies, the territory as a whole is unable to effectively impact in local development initiatives that leverage these cultural activities

Considering these conditions, in the following sections, immediately after the theoretical framing of the subject addressed, the contribution critically reflects on certain models and related programmatic devices from various other local development experiences, useful for providing, on the one hand, resources for the management and sustainability of project activities, and on the other, technical support to active entities and groups to improve the design and implementation of their cultural initiatives. Specifically, this paper refers to the experiences of incubation and participatory budgeting through an analysis of the available bibliography, and by presenting some concrete cases of the use of these tools in the Latin American, Spanish and Sicilian contexts.

With respect to the case study, the contribution also focuses on the difficult conditions experienced by the local situation of the Sicani Inner Area, highlighting the potential of the material and immaterial heritage existing. In the last section, a proposal is advanced for a management model of cultural initiatives aimed at their funding to respond to the territorial peculiarities of the Sicani area and of the communities engaged in local development processes. This paper aims to answer the

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following questions: what challenges the local agents and associations in the Sicani area face in carrying out their cultural initiatives? Which models and tools can be useful to provide resources as well as technical and organisational support for implementing innovative cultural projects?

## **2. Potential and challenges of cultural policies related to local community action in local development processes**

This section addresses some key concepts in relation to the support of cultural initiatives, local events and festivities, and innovation-driven entrepreneurship projects within local development policies. These contributions, which focus on the cultural sector, clearly illustrate the connections and impacts on the social and economic spheres at local level.

The regeneration of inner and marginal areas, and the contribution that cultural production might provide in this process, is based on a key interpretation that considers both the cultural heritage and the involvement of local stakeholders involved in the ‘cultural production project’, while also integrating external resources or support that cannot be directly activated by local organisations (Bruschi and Vignieri, 2021). This implies that in planning experiences, local stakeholders leverage both internal and external available resources, in order to establish a link between ‘territorial capital’ and cultural initiatives; a connection that is crucial to overcome commodification processes and avoid an excessive focus on the tourism dimension.

From this perspective, the role of local administrations and development agencies is significant supporting local initiatives, via defining guidelines and promoting interventions in the cultural sphere. According to the scientific literature available, Salone and Arfò (2020, 9) states that policy actions for local development in the cultural sphere can contribute significantly in at least two dimensions of intervention, which are relevant to the subject analysed above. The first dimension concerns ‘policies for cultural and creative industries’, which rely on the valorisation of existing cultural heritage and the activation of district networks of knowledges and local productions. In this case, mention is mainly made of the intangible component of heritage. Oral traditions, religious and popular festivals, and other social and ritual practices belong to the intangible cultural heritage, which can be reproduced and reactivated by communities in correlation with their history and environmental context. This heritage, which is not immutable over time, in turn stimulates cultural diversity, creativity and sustainable development (Genovese, 2013).

A second dimension of intervention involves ‘social and cultural integration policies’, which focus on objectives such as social inclusion and integration, employment opportunities, and the redefinition of local identity (Salone and Arfò, 2020). In this regard, Devesa et al. (2012) highlight that cultural festivals contribute socially by fostering a sense of place within communities, activating interrelationships and cooperation networks, strengthening community cohesion and trust, as well as promoting civic values and sharing experiences. This significant social aspect of cultural festivals emerges particularly in certain events within rural sicilian contexts (Tuttolomondo, 2021). Along this line, Buttitta (2010, 234) analyses the contemporary carnivals that are widespread nowadays in the Sicilian small inner municipalities, highlighting their key functions, such as fostering moments of ‘festive collective re-aggregation’, and offering opportunities to promote the image of their own community towards the external audiences, for the benefit of an undefined market and public.

Regarding this social dimension, Argano (2021) argues that cultural events play a significant role in fostering solidarity around locally shared elements. This may arise through a cultural programme aimed at consolidating events that are already rooted in the territory, oriented towards supporting co-design and citizen participation initiatives, and promoting forms of connection between different urban centres. In most cases, in the context of inner areas, cultural programmes rely on individual citizens and local associative forces, as non-formal collectives or institutionalized non-profit entities, who committed to improving local living conditions, carry out projects that activates cultural, social, or economic resources.

As noted by Propersi (2016), the non-profit sector in Italy is characterised by a few entities that, thanks to their economic resources, are better able to sustain themselves, and by a large percentage of small entities, including volunteer associations, which are widespread in inner areas and face fragile financial conditions. These institutions, which operate in social, cultural or environmental services, cannot charge fees proportionate to their operating needs. In relation to this problematic condition, the gap between the potential of local agents and their ability to influence the key variables that allow access to financial resources becomes evident. Thus, it becomes necessary to explore the mechanisms that enable this connection, with particular attention to the so-called accompaniment of active local agents, including associations and non-formalised groups, to achieving their initiatives.

One of the main difficulties affecting the development of the associative sphere, particularly relevant, is the challenge posed by the accessing process for more complex calls for proposals (Benedettelli, 2023). With respect to this issue, Bianchi (2023) points out that the non-profit sector risks investing too much time in the constant search for funds through calls for proposals aimed at maintaining the organisation survival, while overlooking its main missions and objectives. This produces a perverse trend that entails restructuring the sector to adapt to the demands of calls for tenders, rather than the reverse.

Returning to the difficulties in access to external financial resources, a recent analysis developed by the Regione Toscana (2022) reveals that 80% of the third sector organisations in the region have experienced resource reductions, reporting difficulties even in covering ordinary operating expenses (e.g. relative to assuring the safety conditions of their workers). In addition, there are difficulties in covering extraordinary expenses, which nevertheless often represent a significant channel for accessing innovation.

In view of these premises, the following sections offer a critical reflection on the potential of two particularly widespread devices/mechanisms whose application has facilitated experience to be gained in the design of local development policies aimed at valorising intangible cultural heritage: participatory budgeting and project incubation.

### *2.1. Participatory budgeting*

Participatory budgeting is a tool designed to foster citizen participation in local public policy making, at times successfully directing policy choices oriented towards public spending in specific areas of collective interest through deliberation and proposal on a variety of issues (Correa and Hepp, 2021). This model originated in the 1990s in South America, particularly in Brazil, has gradually spread globally, adapting to various contexts. Despite the different ways in which it is applied, participatory budgeting must adhere to minimum criteria for community involvement (Sintomer et al. 2012). As pointed out by Pérez-Cosín and Méndez-López (2022), these instruments provide a 'binding process' in which investment

proposals put forward by the community, which are technically and legally feasible, are incorporated into the municipal budget following a selection process that involves the community.

The main features of this mechanism are: its openness to all local residents; the combination of technical requirements to filter and define feasible projects and the free selection of proposals by the participants; the process evolves as a continuous learning process to consolidate the proposals and ensure their implementation. Finally, the instrument typically leverages the outcomes of previous practices, which, through negotiation by the participating community, help to shape the direction of the operational framework governing the entire process. This process of reaching agreement is referred to as 'self-regulation' (Correa and Hepp, 2021, 97). The main elements of the organisational structure include the call for participation, the assemblies or the working groups, and the control and monitoring committee, which served as mediator between the participants and municipal technicians. Subsequently, it is essential to set up the 'steering group', which may be composed primarily of citizens but can also include technicians and politicians who are sensitive to the subject, and in remains active throughout the entire process. The steering group possesses in-depth knowledge of the proposal and is able to communicate it, making it a key factor to the success of the project.

In participatory budgeting, the local administration acts as the guarantor of the process. Pérez-Cosín and Méndez-López (2022) emphasise the significance of the of the municipal institution's broader vision, also in ensuring coordination with other initiatives and, potentially, with other municipalities. To consolidate the shift of perspective towards participation, it is essential to consider a team of professionals that maintains a certain continuity in their work. Indeed, according to Correa and Hepp (2021) the application of this model is almost exclusive at the level of local governments because, at this scale, mechanisms of deliberative democracy are easier to implement due to the closer relationship between institutions and citizens. In Chile, which has an interesting development of participatory budgeting experiences, particularly between 2001 and 2017, the model has introduced participatory practices in areas traditionally only addressed from a technical perspective and within narrowly defined scopes of interest. In other words, projects initiated by individuals or private entities that were nevertheless aligned with the collective interest were generally selected.

Although municipalities play a central role in the implementation of participatory budgeting, remains an unresolved issue the extent to which they adhere to participatory processes and establish impartial mechanisms in place, which are essential to ensure the efficiency and transparency of the system. It is also crucial to examine how the application of such models differ between urban and rural contexts. According to the experience reported by Comas (2010) in Spain, in small municipalities participation tends to be higher, where the working methods are simpler. Furthermore, in this context it is easier to manage participatory practices and to share and discuss proposals through digital resources or in local assemblies. Voting on proposals fosters a high level of citizen consensus on the model, which positively impacts by increasing the community's interest in other areas of participation and enhancing internal cohesion among the participants.

With regard to the presence of younger generations in participatory budgeting, various studies consistently report low levels of participation. This condition is related to the inability of such processes to engage younger stakeholders with topics that link with their interests. Consequently, there is a need to focus more closely on specific interest groups and the way in which topics are communicated. According

to Comas (2010), some aspects to be considered promote youth participation include recreational and leisure activities as motivating factors, while avoiding the requirement of formal associative membership. Additionally, the allocation of a portion of the available resources to address the needs of young people, using appropriate communication tools and formats, may help to engage this groups.

In Italy, participatory budgeting had its significant start in the early 2000s, incorporating several elements of the Brazilian model, especially those aimed at enhancing the level of communication between administrators and citizens (Sintomer et al., 2012). More recently, analyses by Badia (2022) show that many of these processes have been initiated by municipalities. However, it is observed that only a small portion of the municipal budget is allocated to participatory budgets. Despite these limitations, intangible positive spin-offs have been observed, specifically related to the training of citizens in the formulation and realisation of project proposals, the fostering of a sense of trust in institutions, and the improvement of a sense of community derived from collaborative practices.

## 2.2. *Project incubators*

Project incubation is a support process that nurtures the development of new businesses by providing stakeholders with access to resources and services (Cirule, 2022). The incubation mechanisms have been widely employed in the last two decades to facilitate the launch of new activities and mitigate the risk of failure by offering services such as access to physical resources, financing, administrative, strategic and management support, as well as opportunities to connect with broader networks. Interest in project incubators has primarily focused on analysing experiences from public entities that aim to promote economic development (Boschetti et al., 2011). Nevertheless, most incubator experiences are private, although they are often supported by public entities.

Private incubators have become especially prominent in recent years with the rise of knowledge-based businesses, whose role is to accelerate the development of new activities by providing capital during the start-up phase, guiding the definition of the business model, and supporting the development stages. Fithri et al. (2024) highlights that the performance factors for knowledge-based technology incubators, particularly in relation to information and knowledge management, include facilitating team communication, providing learning opportunities, and promoting information sharing.

However, the different support areas in the incubation process are oriented towards value generation, which is not guaranteed and depends on various success factors (Franco et al., 2018). The incubator's contribution to the start-up is reflected in its ability to transfer resources and/or expertise. Resources can be tangible, such as financial resources, physical space or technological equipment, or intangible, such as information, knowledge, and reputation. The transfer of competences can occur through mechanisms such as: generic core competences, necessary for the start-up, legal or fiscal; business methodologies, executive support and strategic consultancy in marketing, commercialisation, organisational design and recruitment; or business-specific competences, such as know-how related to the business idea, contracts with complementary activities, and the recruitment of experienced personnel (Boschetti et al., 2011).

Analyses by Auricchio et al. (2014) on the services offered by incubators in Italy reveal different patterns between the North West and the South of the country. Particularly in the South, logistics services -such as location, facilities, contacts with research institutions and intellectual property support- are the most significant



components of the basic package, although mentorship activities are still crucial. The model that currently seems to be more effective is the ‘network of relationships’ model, where the incubator facilitates connections between start-ups and companies or other sources of support, without directly owning the resources or expertise involved (Boschetti et al., 2011, 338).

Among the different incubator models, the Corporate Business Incubator (CBI), originates from the initiatives of large companies, while the Independent Private Incubator (IPI), represents a profit-oriented approach but is smaller in scale and not aligned with the interests of large private corporations. Within the context of this work, the IPI model appears more suitable. Incubators of this type are typically established by private initiatives or groups that invest in newly founded companies using their own resources or venture capital funds (Ibid, 334). Fithri et al. (2024) note, however, that one of the main obstacles for entrepreneurs and researchers is the difficulty in securing initial funding, which is crucial for effective knowledge and information management.

Two fundamental dimensions can be identified for classifying incubators:

- Profit orientation, which includes both profit and non-profit options. IPIs and CBIs founded by private individuals fall into the profit category, while Business Innovation Centres (BICs) and University Business Incubators (UBIs), typically established by public entities, belong to the non-profit category.
- The origin of the business idea. Can be either internal or external to the organisation managing the incubator. UBIs and CBIs prioritise ideas generated within their organisations, generating academic or institutional spin-offs. On the other hand, BICs and IPIs seek business ideas from external sources, so they fall into the second category.

**Table 1. Categorization of incubator models**

		Prioritized origin of the project idea	
		Internal	External
Profit orientation	Profit	(CBI) Corporate Business Incubator	(IPI) Independent Private Incubator
	Non-profit	(UBI) University Business Incubator	(BIC) Business Innovation Center

Source: prepared by the authors.

For the case analysed below, it will be necessary to identify which elements of these models are most appropriate, regardless of their profit orientation, but capable of integrating project ideas from outside the institutions. Although the UBI model focuses on internally defined research lines, universities could be integrated into the local territories by offering technical support to projects initiated locally.

An illustrative example is the BIC model, which emphasizes the transferability of physical resources, information and visibility, both through external sources of support and within the value chain itself. The case of BIC Liguria is particularly relevant to this analysis because it also leverages public resources (from the municipality, region, or EU) by sourcing ideas from outside, without predefining investment areas. In the case of UBIs, they offer a broader and more structured range of services, focusing on the practical application of internally developed research, transferring skills from within to external stakeholders. An example is the Milan Polytechnic incubator, where ideas are evaluated by a university committee, with a clear focus on engineering disciplines. Some internal collaborations, such as the involvement of ad hoc thesis students or interns with scholarship. In this instance,

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companies remain in the system for a period of three years. Along similar lines, analyses by Auricchio et al. (2014) show that 72% of incubators set a limit of 48 months for companies to remain within their spaces.

### *2.3. Promotion and incubation of cultural and research projects*

An interesting case of an incubation process with a cultural focus is the Incubator Cultura Viva (ICV), a collaborative initiative of the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande, the Diretoria de Arte e Cultura and the Ministério da Cultura of Brazil. The ICV project offers a program of training, counselling and monitoring that facilitates student interaction in order to develop their proposals, fostering autonomy, leadership, and self-recognition as active subjects that participate in the activation of culture, embedded in a creative, productive and multiplying environment. The initiative focuses on the recognition of the cultural heritage of the community and the territory chosen for the development of cultural actions. Pianowski, Da Costa and Ferreira (2017) highlight the importance of the support provided by the ICV team for cultural and community projects that emerge spontaneously, both from the external community and from academics and staff within the institution.

On the other hand, the 'Incubadora Expresiva de Santa Fé' in Argentina focuses on cultural entrepreneurial initiatives. It provides access to training, technical support, cultural equipment and coordinates funding opportunities from the Universidad Nacional del Litoral, as well as offering guidance on obtaining resources from other sources. This model includes four stages of incubation: the call, where business ideas are presented and selected; pre-incubation, which involves the assignment of a mentor and the implementation of a training program in marketing, intellectual property, legal issues, budgeting, and human resources. Subsequently, the incubation phase begins, offering direct assistance, support in securing (primarily public) funding, connections with companies, and the provision of workspace. The process usually concludes within a period of three years (Santiago and Segui, 2021). Similar to the previous example, this model includes a pre-incubation phase to help structure the proposal before start-up.

The Research Project Incubator of the 'Research Institute in Design' of the Universidad de Palermo, Argentina, applies the incubation mechanism to generate new projects from external proposals, initiated by researchers and professionals. The incubation process is divided into several phases. In the initial phase, ideas are received, and contacts and collaborations are organised with potential participants. A 'project guide' is then developed to define the structure of the project. The development phase involves the initiation of the planned activities, culminating in the production and presentation of content in an interview. The process concludes with the publication of the results in one of the institute's journals (Centro de Estudios en Diseño y Comunicación, 2022). This case exemplifies research incubation, where the university plays an active role in providing technical support, evaluation and disseminating results through a scientific publication.

Other initiatives incorporate elements of the incubation model, without being labelled as such, while still carrying out actions to support, finance and monitor initiatives, with a focus on young people in rural areas. One such example is 'Made in Rural VII', developed by the collective 'JDR Jóvenes dinamizadores rurales' (Young rural energizers) in collaboration with the 'Laboratorio de Aragón Gobierno Abierto' which is part of the Autonomous Community of Aragon in Spain. This initiative launches a call for projects for young people in the region, covering various topics but aimed at generating innovative responses to the needs of rural communities. The project follows several phases: submission of ideas, which are

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then selected by a committee; a project development phase, financially supported by the organisation; final presentation of the project to the evaluation committee; implementation of the project, which must be completed within a year; and dissemination of the results through websites (JDR, 2023).<sup>1</sup>

The various examples analysed here offer critical insights to consider in the subsequent analysis. Incubation processes are complex and involve multiple steps that can be valuable for starting a project, but they require significant funding and extended technical work. On the other hand, technical support for creative projects can benefit from the involvement of various institutions -public or private, academic or administrative- which manage resources from diverse sources. A potential strategy to be adopted in problematic or marginal contexts could involve combining successful elements from these experiences, adapting them to the specific characteristics of the territory, and implementing them through the direct involvement of willing participant stakeholders.

### 3. The case of Sicani inner area in Sicily

#### 3.1. The territorial context

The Sicani Inner Area is identified by the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI) as one of the supra-municipal intervention areas, defined by its peripheral condition. This condition is assessed in relation to the distinction between urban poles provided with health, education and transport services, and the municipalities that are distant from these services (Moscarelli and Fera, 2024).

In addition to the peripheral conditions mentioned above, the case analysed is characterised by social and economic vulnerability, primarily due to demographic decline. In fact, in the Sicilian Inner Areas, the population decreased by 3,6% between 2011 and 2021, while in the Sicani Inner Area specifically, the decrease was 11%, nearly double the demographic decline in the Mezzogiorno (-6.3%) (ISTAT, 2023). Furthermore, the population under the age of 14 is 11.7% (lower than the regional average of 15.2%), while the population over 65 is higher (26.1%) compared to other Sicilian Inner Areas (24.5%) (Formez PA, 2022). Another significant phenomenon is the emigration of human capital, specifically young graduates aged 25 to 39. Between 2002 and 2022, inner areas show a net loss of 160,000 young graduates, considering both those who emigrated and those who returned (ISTAT, 2024a). In terms of accessibility, Sicilian Inner Areas also show greater distances between central and peripheral municipalities compared to other Italian Inner Areas and the national average (Formez PA, 2022).

**Table 2. Demographic trends and age groups**

	<b>2011-2021 decline population</b>	<b>Population under 14 2021</b>	<b>Population over 64 2021</b>
Sicani Area	-11.0%	11.7%	26.1%
Sicilian Inner areas	-4.1%	13.3%	24.5%
Sicily region	-3.6%	15.2%	29.4%
South Italy and Islands (Mezzogiorno)	-6.3%	13.2%	22.3%

Source: Prepared by the authors with census data, ISTAT.

Given the aforementioned social and functional challenges, investing in the valorisation of local capital -rooted in the historically constructed relationships

between a community and its environment- emerges as a potential alternative. This human and social capital, according to Petino and Scrofani (2020), can trigger a process of engagement among the agents involved in the ‘chain’ of cultural and landscape heritage, aimed at the activation of local development dynamics.

The Sicani Inner Area possesses the cultural and environmental heritage necessary to foster such processes. As highlighted in a study by the Sicilian Region (2021), the area is characterised by diverse and remarkable natural and archaeological assets, as well as a rich calendar of events linked to local culture and traditions, although these haven’t yet fully exploited. In this context, local organisations and stakeholders enable a more effective allocation of resources and funds, directing them toward the real needs of the communities.

From this perspective, Benedetelli (2023) emphasises that inner areas require the strategic action of social welfare, particularly through local associations, the third sector, and the volunteer work. These non-profit institutions (NPIs) represent, according to Crobe (2022), a ‘second welfare’, capable of providing social programs and interventions to meet citizens’ needs in light of the weakening of traditional welfare systems. In this regard, Bruno (2023) highlights the disadvantage faced by southern Italy in terms of associationism and volunteering. More specifically, while in the Southern Italy and the Islands, non-profit institutions experienced significant growth in the number of entities (30.2%) between 2015 and 2021, in Sicily this increase is slightly lower (28.3%), but still above the national average (24%). Sicily has also fewer non-profit institutions (4,7 per 1,000 inhabitants) compared to the Mezzogiorno (5) and Italy (6.1). Most of Sicilian NPIs are associations (84.7%), which have very few employees (0.74 employees per association), especially when compared to foundations, which make up only 1.2% of NPIs but employ an average of 9.4 employees per foundation.

**Table 3. Non-profit institutions (NPI) and employees**

	NPI x 1000 inhabitants	Total NPI	Associations %	Constitution period			Employees			
				Until 2014	2015-2021	% 2015-2021	Total empl.	% 2020-2021	no. per association	no. per foundation
Sicily	4.74	22,747	84.6%	16,312	6,435	28.3%	47,070	1.6%	0.78	9.35
South Italy and Islands	5.02	99,256	85.5%	69,270	29,986	30.2%	185,058	1.7%	0.5	9.6
Italy	6.11	360,625	84.9%	271,037	89,588	24.8%	893,741	0.9%	0.54	13.19

Source: Prepared by the authors with data from Permanent Census of non-profit institutions, ISTAT, 2021.

More specifically, associations in the ‘cultural and artistic activities’ sector have an even lower number of employees (0.23 per institution) (ISTAT, 2024b). This low number of employees may be due to both the limited availability of resources for staff recruitment and the legal constraints imposed on associations, that require them to have an organisational set-up based mainly on voluntary work. According to 2022 data processed by CeSVoP, Sicily has shown stability in the total income of the third sector, compared to the national trend, which shows signs of improvement. Moreover, the region exhibits lower levels of volunteer participation than the South, a decrease in the share of donors, and an increase in fundraising revenue, but below the national average (Bruno, 2023).

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### 3.2. *The challenges of local associations*

One of the key difficulties faced by social promotion associations in the Sicani area, as well as at the regional, national and EU levels, is the lack of funding for their operation. Some of these difficulties are highlighted by Tuttolomondo (2021) in his analysis of various youth-led cultural events in Sicily, where local organisers encounter numerous barriers in accessing both material and immaterial resources to carry out their projects. Most of the funds these organisations receive must be fully allocated for the activities performed, to operational expenses, such as purchasing materials and equipment, leaving professional and administrative work often unfunded and reliant on volunteering.

More specifically, the inability to finance salaries and fees in the vast majority of projects activated by associations, particularly in rural areas, results in economic and employment insecurity for the operational teams of these entities. These teams dedicate a significant part of their time to social, cultural and environmental projects of crucial significance for the territory. This challenge also threatens the continuity of these entities, which represent the main active social capital in rural and inner areas, as their small teams often need to seek other paid work alternatives or emigrate to urban areas. This is intensified by a charitable perspective towards local associations, where many of them oppose the remuneration of the undertaken social work activities, with the motivation that associations should not pursue profit.

This bias is also evident in the subsidies for the development of economic activities. Indeed, in the Sicani area, for instance, the public call published in June 2024 for non-agricultural start-ups, as part of the LAG (Local action groups) Sicani strategy, limits the allocation of funds for professional fees to 12% (LAG Sicani, 2024). A recent initiative designed to support the growth of innovative start-ups is the public notice 'FAre Impresa in Sicilia - FAInSicilia' published in 2023, which provides non-repayable financing for 90% of the expenses related to the purchase of goods and services required for a single business project (Sicilian Region, 2023). However, this initiative does not cover the running costs of the organisation.

In light of this funding limitations, alternatives have emerged in Spain, such as the *Ticket Rural* in the Autonomous Community of Asturias. This initiative was born from the needs identified by LAGs in rural communities and was promoted by the Government of Asturias in accordance with EU Regulation 1305/2013 on EAFRD funds. It provides a lump sum to support the establishment of small or individual business, also to develop professional services, targeting unemployed persons. Unlike other forms of funding, it is not subject to expenditure justification, requiring only the maintenance of the activity and compliance with the business plan (READER, 2020). This subsidy is compatible with aid for the development of non-agricultural activities under the LEADER programme.

In addition to the described funding limitations, associations, communities, and groups active in the territory face technical difficulties in accessing subsidies, participating in existing calls for proposals, and implementing their projects. These initiatives could benefit from improved coordination and integration between entities and active groups, as well as between territories, to enhance the overall positive impact. In this regard, it is necessary to provide accompaniment throughout the project submission and implementation processes, through the establishment of working groups in the territory. These groups, collaborating with local agents, could activate mechanisms for coordination, collaboration, and monitoring of actions, which ensure greater economic sustainability for the projects over time.

### 3.3. *Incubation and Participatory budgeting in Sicily and in the Sicani area*

The research conducted by Barbera et al. (2022) on young people in Italian inner areas reveals that entrepreneurial activities are concentrated in the sectors of culture, hospitality and traditional trades. This highlights the need for support and accompaniment not only for business start-ups but also for accessing public funding aimed at the development of innovative and cooperatively driven start-ups. In fact, it is suggested that this accompaniment should be continuous, on an ongoing basis and include monitoring. In the context of the Sicilian Inner Areas, the need for business assistance, guidance on accessing public funding, and counselling and training towards the needs of young people is noted.

The promotion of entrepreneurship for the birth of SMEs through incubation is now part of the Sicilian Region's guidelines in the construction of the Territorial Strategies (TS) in both functional urban areas and Sicilian Inner Areas. These guidelines have been defined under sector 025 'Incubation, support for spin-offs, spin-outs and start-ups', within Policy Objective 1: 'a more competitive and intelligent Europe through the promotion of innovative and smart economic transformation and regional connectivity to ICT' as defined by the European Structural Funds regulation (EU, 2021).

At the regional level, the 'FAre Impresa in Sicilia - FAInSicilia' initiative, for example, does not provide support for incubation or accompaniment processes. At the local level, the Local Development Strategy 2023-2027 of the Sicani LAG includes funding for creative start-ups in the sociocultural and tourism spheres, and in the agrifood sector. Despite this, the Strategy does not explicitly promote incubation processes, although it forecasts the launch of community projects aimed at strengthening creative, cultural and entrepreneurial processes:

(...) reinforcing spontaneous paths of social innovation and the significant network of young local innovators and cultural creative agents, also organised into small, more or less structured communities, which prefigure the possibility of enhancing the dynamics of entrepreneurial birth (GAL Sicani, 2023, 28).

A supporting and accompanying role in the analysed territory, especially in the municipality of Palazzo Adriano, plays the Maghweb association which, with the aim of promoting cultural, artistic and recreational activities with a social impact, offers assistance to local organisations during the planning process, and subsequent phases of project development. This support focuses mainly on fostering an organic internal vision and particularly in communication and information sphere:

What we have tried to do in recent years is to support associations in the area that we already knew, and that asked us for help. We tried to assist them to understand the focus of their ideas by offering design support (Fabrizio Cacciatore of the Maghweb design area, interview, 5 August 2024).

The 'Community Catalysts' group, recently formed through an initiative by the Sicani LAG, aims to provide technical, planning, and methodological support across the LAG's area of 29 municipalities, based on the experience this collective of young people has gained from their social work in the area (Maghweb, 2023). Although this technical guidance role is not yet fully operational, it will be implemented as part of the LAG's new Local Development Strategy.

Regarding the participatory budgeting model, the existing tool in Sicily is the 'Democrazia Partecipata' (Participatory Democracy) call, which has become widespread across most of the region in recent years. This model, introduced by Regional Law 5/2014, Article 6, paragraph 1, obliges all Sicilian municipalities to allocate at least 2 per cent of the resources received annually from the Region

through forms of participatory democracy. The law results in the issuance of municipal notices inviting the community to submit proposals, which are then selected through citizen involvement tools (Sicilian Region, 2014). Each municipality sets its own criteria and thematic areas that can be supported.

Data on the ‘Spendiamoli insieme’ (Spend it together) website, which monitors the Participatory Democracy Fund, indicate that the number of municipalities using this tool has increased since 2016. The platform was activated by Parliament Watch Italia (PWI). Specifically, in the Sicani Inner Area, trends have varied since the beginning of PWI’s surveys. As the data on the amounts spent reveal, several municipalities in the Sicani Area do not use all the available resources, while others do not provide up-to-date information. Moreover, an overall decrease in the amounts spent in the area was observed between 2016 and 2023. While in 2016 the regional data indicate that the amount spent by these municipalities totalled €136,563, by 2020 there is a decrease to €79,970.74, before rising again in 2023 to €124,592.18 (Table 1).

**Table 4. Resources of ‘Participatory Democracy’ in the Sicani Inner Area**

Municipality	2016		2023	
	Avaliable €	Amount spent €	Avaliable €	Amount spent €
Alessandria della Rocca	23,497.52 €	23,500.00 €	21,080.65 €	20,450.00 €
Bivona	18,910.85 €	0.00 €	18,036.23 €	18,036.23 €
Burgio	11,153.30 €	26,977.06 €	8,945.90 €	9,000.00 €
Calamonaci	8,637.60 €	8,637.00 €	7,985.95 €	7,985.95 €
Cattolica Eraclea	15,802.82 €	16,800.00 €	17,000.00 €	17,000.00 €
Cianciana	15,537.93 €	15,538.00 €	16,000.00 €	16,000.00 €
Lucca Sicula	9,851.24 €	9,851.24 €	9,600.00 €	No data
Montallegro	11,942.40 €	11,351.46 €	13,085.70 €	No data
Ribera	15,152.57 €	10,822.39 €	No data	No data
San Biagio Platani	11,910.07 €	0.00 €	13,400.00 €	13,400.00 €
Santo Stefano Q.	13,086.60 €	13,086.60 €	14,120.00 €	14,120.00 €
Villafranca Sicula	6,441.12 €	0.00 €	8,600.00 €	8,600.00 €
	161,924.02 €	136,563.75 €	147,854.43 €	124,592.18 €
			<b>Variation 2016-2023</b>	-8.77%

Source: Prepared by the authors with data from ‘Associazione Parliament Watch Italia (PWI), based on information collected from Municipal and Sicilian Region websites. Available at: <https://www.spendiamolinsieme.it/>.

In addition to the non-utilisation of part of the available resources, in several cases funding is allocated without adequate citizen participation. Indeed, it often happens that some municipalities do not provide information on the number of citizens involved, while others explicitly state that no citizens participated (Giuseppe D’Avella, PWI vice-president, interview, 5 September 2024).

The way this tool is managed at the municipal level has led to a wide variety of approaches, some of which do not ensure participation in the processes, limit the topics for intervention, do not allow project submission, do not envisage a public assembly, or involve only a few people in the voting process. Not all municipalities in the area explicitly allow cultural projects for funding. In 2023, the municipality of Cattolica Eraclea was the only one in the Sicani Inner Area that met all the conditions of the participatory process and provided the documentation required by law (regulation, notice and outcome). However, it did not disclose the number of people

who participated in the vote.

The absence of public assemblies in most municipalities does not encourage broad and informed access to citizens. The assembly serves as a fundamental support and information mechanism provided by Participatory Democracy for citizens that expect to submit proposals. Given this, it is crucial that these tools remain genuinely participatory, ensuring that spending decisions respond to the needs of the territory, and at the same time integrate technical support in the implementation of projects submitted by the community. This lack of technical support is particularly critical for voluntary associations, which, in addition to often lacking technical teams to identify calls for proposals, developing project ideas and implementation, do not have enough resources to pay external consultants for it (Salvatore Greco, President of Sikanamente Association, Prizzi, interview, 5 September 2023).

#### *3.4. The case of the Carnival in Sicani area*

In the Sicilian Inner Areas, the vulnerability of associations and both formal and non-formal youth groups -in terms of financial difficulties and limited access to available public funding- restricts their ability to make an impact remain operating in their territories of origin by carrying economic, creative and cultural activities. In the Sicani Area, several events with identity relevance involving younger generations have, in recent years, seen a gradual decline in youth participation in the organisation and a decrease in audience attendance.

With respect to the panorama of events of cultural interest that the area offers with a certain continuity, the Carnival event is analysed below as a significant example of these organisational difficulties, with a focus on its economic aspects. According to Buttitta (2010, 214), Carnival in Sicily is a festival that, in its 'traditional' form integrates ritual elements that characterise many celebrations of the annual cycle, whose archaic message is deeply rooted in the island's agro-pastoral vision.

Although today's Carnival in the Sicani, as in many small towns in southern Italy, does not reflect the peasant expressions of the past, it remains a key for community participation and a platform to 'make one's voice heard', attributing new meanings to the intangible heritage (Broccolini and Ballacchino, 2016, 138). In this regard, Buttitta (2010) emphasises the aggregative and identity-affirming nature of the contemporary Carnival in the Sicilian rural world. Similarly, Mirizzi (2016) points out that Carnival is an event that plays a significant role in the construction and definition of local cultures.

This event, which today has a local rootedness similar to that of religious festivities and some agri-food promotion events, has seen a decline in local participation in recent decades, partly due to depopulation. However, the event remains active in many municipalities in the area. In fact, between 2023 and 2024, it was organised in ten of the twelve municipalities of the Sicani Inner Area, despite experiencing a progressive reduction in the resources received from local administrations and the increasingly limited participation of youth groups:

When we used to organise it (the Carnival) it was very beautiful, but lately it has diminished, mainly because the old artisans, the good ones, no longer participate. They have pulled back for various reasons, particularly family reasons, and because they are getting older. In addition, the economic issue affects these choices; and when the funding is inadequate, one rightly wonders if it is worth it? So, recently Carnival has become smaller. Carnival used to be something serious, something important (Salvatore Cacciatore, musician from Santo Stefano Quisquina, interview, 9 January 2023).

In this context, it should be emphasised that the Carnival event has less access to



economic resources compared to food festivals, supported by some local agro-food producers because they are opportunities for direct trade (Fontefrancesco, 2020), and religious festivals, historically sustained by confraternities, feast committees and parishes -local institutions where social alliances, local power, and political affiliations converge (Buttitta, 2013, 66). Among the cultural events on the Sicani Area's annual calendar, Carnival is instead organised, by youth groups not formally constituted as associations. Just some other cases, the organisation of the event is entrusted to one or more local associations that receive funding from the municipality. Those spontaneous youth groups struggle every year to obtain meagre amounts from local government (generally between €500 and €3,000) for the purchase of materials needed to build the allegoric floats. Additionally, they collect small contributions from local businesses to help finance part of the event.

(The impact) could be even greater; much more could be done. In the past, the municipality contributed a minimum of €5,000 to the construction of the floats, now we are around €2,000, i.e. (we work with) very low costs. How do you make structures, beautiful things? People are stimulated in this way. If there is a prize, we pay for everything and we try. If you lose you put your pockets into it. In this way you try, you are more stimulated to spend, to make a top dress (Alessandro Circhirillo, Pigrecolab Association, Alessandria della Rocca, interview, 19 February 2023).

Moreover, the commitment of the youth groups that organise Carnival in the Sicani area is shared by young 'emigrants' who return in February to be present in the festivities or during the weeks of preparation. These young people, who carry out permanent activities in other cities while maintaining ties with groups that organise events in Sicilian Inner Areas, are defined by Tuttolomondo (2021, 76) as 'supporting communities'. They participate in events when they return to their hometowns. Despite being held in winter, Carnival manages to generate a significant participatory process, serving as an opportunity for meeting, social aggregation, and building social bonds.

The event described, historically present in all the small municipalities of the area, faces today the lack of sufficient and accessible forms of financing and could benefit from technical support and guidance in the organisational phases. Currently, there is no inter-municipal coordination or participatory processes aimed at fostering joint actions among the local actors of the various municipalities. These deficiencies threaten the continuity of the event and limit its growth potential, as well as undermine the social bases that sustain it, which are still rooted in the territory.

More specifically, the associations and groups organising Carnival in the Sicani area require resources that are not available internally (Bruschi and Vignieri, 2021) but are essential to launch the event, and are based on relationships and cooperation networks (Devesa et al., 2012) that support the logistical organisation. The lack of resources and adequate logistical management, including from municipalities, endangers the ties of 'support communities' (Tuttolomondo, 2021) and the chances of seasonal return of the emigrant population.

A multi-year support mechanism, such as the cultural incubation tool described by Santiago and Segui (2021), which is currently absent in the area, could help not only to consolidate the event but also to strengthen the organising groups. The lack of secure access to economic resources, training opportunities, and key contacts - elements typically provided by incubation processes- limits Carnival's contribution to the cultural economy today (Torres and Amores, 2023). Furthermore, these events are not part of a coordinated system of cultural activities, aimed at promoting experiential tourism.

The problems observed in relation to municipal management of participatory budgeting, analysed by Badia (2022), are crucial to consider when designing a

participatory tool to support local associations. While the experiences of Maghweb and Community Catalysts offer examples that, on a small scale, can help guide the associative world with technical and communication tools. A further opportunity lies in the recreational aspect of Carnival, which encourages youth participation (Comas, 2010). This opportunity is today depotentiated by the reduction in resources for floats and prizes; elements that once stimulated competition and the aggregative function, proper to contemporary Carnival.

#### **4. Significant Aspects of the Support Mechanisms: Towards a Proposal for the Sicani Inner Area**

In light of the critical issues identified in the analysis developed, but also considering the material and immaterial resources present in the Sicani Inner Area, the following is a reflection of a proactive nature aimed at the definition of a device to support local development initiatives linked to cultural heritage. At the methodological level, the proposal draws on the integration of key strategic components deriving from the project incubation and participatory budgeting experiences discussed earlier, contextualised to the specific characteristics of the territory in question. Furthermore, in relation to the context of the inner and rural areas, and the budgetary and logistical constraints that such a condition entails, the new model could focus its efforts on one or two types of cultural events and activities related to local cultural heritage, fostering the greatest possible complementarity between territories and local communities around these events. With respect to this broader vision, it would be useful to emphasize the importance of inter-municipal coordination to ensure the connection and complementarity of actions, as seen, for instance in the Union of Municipalities of the Madonie in Sicily (Area interna Madonie, 2016).

In light of the above considerations, the following aspects of the incubation mechanism can be taken into account:

- The technical team should be formed by local non-profit organisations, associations, consortia (LAGs) or universities, and should not depend on the local administration. This can prevent each municipality adopts different participatory criteria, as is observed today with Participatory Democracy.
- The entity leading the process should provide resources previously managed, whether of public or private origin. These would not be its own resources, which will later be allocated through participatory processes.
- A pre-incubation phase may be considered to provide support and accompaniment during the design phase, ensuring that ideas are presented in a clear and structured manner. This phase may be conducted if feasibility analysis and participatory definition of collective proposals are not foreseen.
- Guiding principles and basic themes should be established first, and project ideas and implementation mechanisms should be developed afterward. The principles should be innovation, inter-municipal collaboration, and social inclusion. The basic theme should focus on locally rooted cultural events that incorporate cultural elements that can be recognised as intangible heritage.
- The accompanying period should be divided into several phases in order to allow the project to carry out several annual editions over a period of approximately three years. Each phase should achieve expected results, including improvement in the areas agreed upon at the beginning of the process and a greater consolidation of the event at the end of the incubation period.

Some aspects from the participatory budgeting methodology that can be considered:

- Establishment of a technical (steering) group to mediate between the local

- government and the participating organizations or collectives.
- Establishment of a joint assembly or working table, where representatives of the bodies and collectives from the different territories involved participate to define common objectives and targets, collaborative actions, and shared criteria.
  - Application of the ‘self-regulation’ criterion in defining a joint project, with the aim of establishing valid standards for shared objectives and activities between multiple municipalities.
  - Recognition of the cultural purpose and social approach in the accompaniment process. This is intended to provide organisational guidance to the project with a focus on achieving results within the defined period.
  - Activation of an ex-ante evaluation process to assess the technical and logistical feasibility of projects.
  - Adoption of democratic and transparent mechanisms for selecting projects, reaching agreements and determining common courses of action. These mechanisms could help to strengthen participants consensus in decision-making.
  - Ensuring the monitoring of the implementation process by the technical group.
  - Proper reporting and dissemination of results at the end of the project.

There are also common elements between both models, such as the assignment of a mentor for each local project, the management and allocation of economic resources at the end of the process, and support during the design and implementation phases. The diagram in Fig. 1 illustrates the elements from which the proposed device, called ‘participatory incubation’, draws inspiration from the incubation and participatory budgeting models analysed. Some elements are present in the same timeline of both models, with some differences, but in the proposed device is indicated the modality preferred. This device integrates some elements of each model and is structured according to four project phases: preparation, design, support and accompaniment, and conclusion.

**Figure 1. The proposed ‘participatory incubation’ device and its integration with the reference models (Incubation and Participatory Budgeting)**

Phases	Incubation	Proposed device	Participatory budgeting
Preparation		Inter-institutional Coordination	
	Establishment of the technical group	Establishment of the technical group	
	Intern or open Call for proposals	Disclosure and public call for participation	Disclosure and public/open call for participation
Design		Initiation of working tables/assemblies	Initiation of working tables/assemblies
	Pre-incubation	Pre-incubation	
		Technical feasibility and budget analysis	Technical feasibility and budget analysis
Support and accompaniment	Incubation process (medium-long term)	Project Incubation - Advice, Support and Accompaniment	Advice, support and accompaniment in implementation
	Monitoring Results	Monitoring Results	
Conclusion		Reporting	Reporting and Evaluation
		Dissemination of results	Dissemination of results

Source: Authors’ elaboration.

The proposed mechanism integrates the elements described above with the following

objectives: 1. Identify locally rooted cultural events with a positive impact that need to be strengthened; 2. Establish a technical team to provide mentorship for the projects presented. In this process the universities can play a role; 3. Convene the various associations, organisations and local administrations that manage cultural events; 4. Set up incubation, accompaniment, and monitoring instances for the development of permanent and integrated cultural initiatives; 5. Develop participatory project management models that integrate associations and territories; 6. Manage funding and collaborate in the implementation of projects; 7. Guide the project towards measurable results, ensuring accountability until the process is closed.

Within this proposed model, the university could play a key role, not necessarily by setting up an incubator internally, but by providing staff with expertise, coordinating the technical team, contributing to the analysis of project plans, monitoring progress, conducting final evaluations or publishing results, as outlined by the Centro de Estudios en Diseño y Comunicación (2022).

In the light of the above, the new intervention model could allow the following results to be achieved:

- Improvement of inter-institutional and inter-municipal collaboration; enhancement of the territorial integration of initiatives; integration of the different cultural components present (material, intangible, event-related). This should ensure the support of at least one project per municipality (in the 12 municipalities of the Inner Area) per year.
- Activation of a participatory mechanism (assembly or technical working table) for the selection of projects and accompaniment in their implementation, including initial feasibility analyses (or pre-incubation), monitoring of the process and reporting at the end of the project.
- Installation of permanent spin-offs from the project, which can nurture an active strand of cultural policies for the territory, to be continuously integrated and strengthened.

Considering the policy instruments already active in the Sicani Area, the new mechanism could possibly be inserted into the Local Development Strategy of the Sicani LAG through the activation of a ‘community project’. This project, with the aim of reinforcing a transversal cultural event across the municipalities of the area, would establish a new technical group for participatory support to local associations, or strengthen already existing groups such as the Community Catalysts. Alternatively, the tool outlined could be activated through one of the actions of the SNAI programming, which is currently being planned. These options align with the mentioned above PSR Sicily, which foresees for support in incubation.

It is important not to underestimate the challenges imposed by the territorial and institutional context in implementing the proposed instrument. Among them, one of the main obstacles is related to the initial funding to establish the technical group and ensure its continuity over at least a three-year implementation cycle. Although the Sicani LAG Strategy offers economic support that could be directed towards this type of initiative, a detailed planning process and resource search would be required to be able to install the proposed instrument. Another critical challenge lies in the weak functional collaboration between communities and associations across different municipalities, which is necessary for the functioning of the technical working groups proposed in the proposal. To address this difficulty, it is necessary an ongoing engagement with local communities in the territory, coupled with strict adherence to deadlines and commitments in order to strengthen mutual trust. A third critical issue concerns the municipalities themselves, which often face management

inefficiencies, slow procedures for the activation of local development projects, and limited willingness for inter-municipal collaboration. This problem cannot be avoided, but it can be mitigated by adequately programming the necessary procedures for the activation of the proposal and giving central management to an independent incubator.

In view of these limitations, it is crucial to set up the steering group, which in collaboration with an inter-municipal coordination committee, in order to manage the Project in a shared manner. This coordination committee can be made up of specific figures that local governments make available to the rest of the municipalities, depending on their human resource capacities.

## 5. Conclusions

The analyses conducted reveal that indeed the associative world and collectives working on cultural projects in the Sicani Inner Area in Sicily, face today numerous difficulties, mainly due to the limited capacity of the territory to influence the breaking variables of the local development processes. The active project capacities in the territory, addressing the effects of depopulation receive little economic and technical support. This impacts not only associations but also local administrations, which are unable to manage available resources in an adequate and participatory manner. Specifically, the analysis of the Sicani Area highlights problems in the use of resources within the mechanism of ‘Democrazia Partecipata’ and a lack of incentives for incubation processes aimed at cultural and research purposes.

Some non-profit institutions and organised groups dedicated to technical and participatory support, such as Maghweb and the Community Catalysts have a significant role to play in this respect. However, they are currently not sufficient to meet local needs and have limited human and financial resources to support projects on a supra-municipal scale.

One of the cultural events affected by the challenges outlined above is Carnival, which could represent a type of local event to be strengthened through an incubation tool that fosters participation and accompaniment. This process could help reinforce the youth collectives and associations involved in the organisation, consolidate the event through multi-year support, enhance the intangible heritage elements present in the activity, and integrate the area’s municipalities through networking.

Building on the analysis presented, this contribution attempts to imagine a project proposal that addresses the difficulties of accompaniment and activation. The two tools/devices analysed for supporting innovative projects within local development strategies -namely, project incubation and participatory budgeting- offer useful elements for the proposed project. Through a combination of aspects of both models, a system suitable for the territorial context under review could, for example, include an incubation process led by a private-associative entity with a supra-municipal scope, in order to avoid dependence on individual municipal administrations.

The non-profit profile organisation would be oriented towards seeking project ideas from outside the organisation, allowing flexibility in themes selection but within the framework of the cultural, social and heritage sphere. The involvement and participation of local communities is a key element of the accompaniment process, which should also consider inter-municipal dialogue.

The activation of such a tool requires a series of actions that, within the framework of ‘policies for cultural and creative industries’ (Salone and Arfò, 2020), are carried out in a participatory manner, involving the different stakeholders: the associative world, local administrations and, if necessary, universities. This operation entails

obvious complexities, both in the allocation of resources and in the formation of a technical group, but most importantly, in the political management required for inter-municipal coordination. The latter has been highlighted by the slow process in activating the Unions of Municipalities in sicilian Inner Areas.

### Notes

1. 'Made in Rural' project can be found on the website: <https://dinamizomipueblo.es/made-in-rural-8-te-vienes/>

### Author Contributions

Alejandro Gana-Núñez: Conceptualization; Investigation; Resources; Data Curation; Writing - Original draft preparation.

Vincenzo Todaro: Methodology; Validation; Formal Analysis; Writing - Review & Editing; Supervision.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### Originality

The authors declare that this manuscript is original, has not been published before and is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere, in English or any other language. The manuscript has been read and approved by all named authors and there are no other persons who satisfied the criteria for authorship but are not listed. The authors also declare to have obtained the permission to reproduce in this manuscript any text, illustrations, charts, tables, photographs, or other material from previously published sources (journals, books, websites, etc).

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