

Women's entrepreneurship and local sustainability: The case study of a Portuguese rural initiative

O **empreendedorismo feminino** e a **sustentabilidade** local:
O estudo de caso de uma **iniciativa rural portuguesa**

LÚCIA PATO * [mljesus@sapo.pt]

ZÉLIA BREDA ** [zelia@ua.pt]

VÍTOR FIGUEIREDO *** [vitormpfigueiredo@gmail.com]

Abstract | This paper analyses the role of a cooperative of entrepreneur women in the development of a peripheral village in Portugal. These women have been stimulated to develop entrepreneurial activities in the countryside, taking advantage of local and endogenous materials and traditional knowledge. The establishment of the craftsman's cooperative, almost 30 years ago, in the village of *Campo Benfeito*, was a result of the effort of the Institute for Cultural Affairs, which through a series of training courses, was able to organise women to work collectively in the production of fashion and home textile products, as a way to promote local crafts and (on the other hand) to revitalise the mountain area. This qualitative study reveals that this women's initiative has a sustainable impact on the village, namely supporting other projects, such as the Regional Theatre of *Serra de Montemuro* and rural tourism establishments, in the leverage of population settling and in the preservation of the architectural and cultural heritage.

Keywords | Entrepreneurship, women, sustainability, rural areas, cooperative, Portugal.

Resumo | Este artigo analisa o papel de uma cooperativa de mulheres no desenvolvimento de uma comunidade periférica em Portugal. Estas mulheres foram estimuladas a desenvolver atividades empreendedoras no campo, tirando vantagem dos materiais locais e endógenos e conhecimento tradicional. O estabelecimento de uma cooperativa de artesanato, há quase trinta anos atrás, na aldeia de Campo Benfeito, resultou do esforço do Instituto de Assuntos Culturais que, através de uma série de formações sequenciais, foi capaz de orientar mulheres para trabalharem, coletivamente, na produção de produtos de moda e de casa, como um meio de promover o artesanato local e (por outro lado) revitalizar a área montanhosa. O estudo qualitativo aqui apresentado revela que a iniciativa das mulheres tem um impacto sustentável na aldeia, nomeadamente no apoio a outros projetos, como o Teatro Regional da Serra do Montemuro e unidades de alojamento, no estabelecimento do turismo rural, na fixação da população e na preservação da arquitetura e património cultural.

Palavras-chave | Empreendedorismo, mulheres, sustentabilidade, áreas rurais, cooperativa, Portugal.

* **PhD in Tourism** from the University of Aveiro. **Adjunct Professor** at the Polytechnic Institute of Viseu. Research Unit CI&DETS (IPV) and GOVCOPP (UA).

** **PhD in Tourism** from the University of Aveiro. **Assistant Professor** at the University of Aveiro, and **Integrated Member** of the Research Unit Governance, Competitiveness and Public Policies (GOVCOPP), University of Aveiro.

*** **PhD student in Management** at the University of Beira Interior (Covilhã).

1. Introduction

The key to the sustainable development of rural areas lies in finding and developing their endogenous and traditional potential and in the promotion of this potential (Dinis, 2006). This idea reflects quite well the potential of endogenous development through local entrepreneurial actions. In this sense, nowadays an increasing number of rural areas in Europe are seeking extra sources of income by diversifying their activities and emphasising tourism and related activities, such as heritage, food processing and handicraft. Indeed, over the last years a large amount of literature (e.g. Komppula, 2007; Komppula, 2014; Jaafar, Rasoolimanesh, & Lonik, 2015) has underlined local tourism entrepreneurship and related activities as a means to achieve rural development goals. Rural women often prove to be pioneers in entrepreneurial initiatives in these sectors, which are often observed as gendered because, traditionally, the nature of such activities have been performed by women in rural areas (McGehee, Kim, & Jennings, 2007). The launching of local scale entrepreneurial actions aims at empowering their position from an invisible subordinate labour force (Brandth, 2002) to entrepreneurs and active members of local rural communities (Iakovidou, Koutsou, Partalidou, & Emmanouilidou, 2012).

Regardless the context (urban or rural), innovation is essential to entrepreneurship. Indeed, as a factor of differentiation or exclusivity, it allows offering something different in the market. This is particularly important for rural areas, which normally have limited human and financial resources (Kastenholz, 2005; Dinis, 2006).

In this study, it was observed that women have been stimulated to develop entrepreneurial activities in the countryside, taking advantage of local and endogenous materials. In fact, a successful example of women entrepreneurship in rural areas is located in one peripheral area of Portugal – *Serra de*

Montemuro (municipality of *Castro Daire*) – where subsistence agriculture and cattle raising continue to be the main economic activities. The constitution of a craftsman's cooperative, in 1985, in the village of *Campo Benfeito*, was a result of the effort of the Institute for Cultural Affairs, which, through a series of training courses, was able to organise some women to work collectively in the production of fashion and home textile products, as a way to promote local crafts and to fight desertification and unemployment in the mountain area. They learnt the art from their mothers, attended vocational training courses, agreed with the local entities to use the old elementary school and created contemporary pieces made of flax and wool, using the loom. This local craftsman's cooperative was one of the 14 winners of the Women's World Summit Foundation (WWSF) Prize for Women's Creativity in Rural Life in 2007, an international award granted for the first time to a Portuguese initiative.

The present research work aims to explore the impact of this project in the village of *Campo Benfeito*, including the leverage for population settling; the creation and establishment of other projects, such as the Regional Theatre of *Serra de Montemuro*, an internationally well-known company responsible for the *Altitudes* annual cultural festival; the revitalisation of the village through rural tourism and the creation of new tourism businesses; and the preservation of the architectural and cultural heritage of the village. The feelings of women towards the market and the commercialisation of their products is also presented.

The paper is divided in five parts. After this introductory section, section 2 contains the literature review on women's entrepreneurship. The methodology used in this study is explained in section 3, while section 4 presents and analyses the results of the qualitative research. Finally, some final remarks are presented in section 5.

2. Literature review

2.1. Promoting sustainability of rural areas through entrepreneurship

With the reduction of farm employment, rural regions are facing many problems, including the decline of residents due to out-migration, an ageing population, a lower skill base and a lower average labour productivity, which reduce the critical mass for public services, local infrastructure and business development (OECD, 2006). Considering the diversity of the rural world, this is particularly evident in the so called peripheral and lagging rural areas. Portugal, for instance, has a dualist economy in which the relatively well developed large urban centres (e.g. Lisbon and Oporto) are located on the coast and the relatively less developed regions are located inland (Dinis, 2006). Therefore, it is not surprising that the country maintains the trend towards a high concentration of population in these larger urban centres, while interior and lagging rural regions continue to lose more and more population. The depopulation in these regions are the result of a number of factors, namely the lack of employment opportunities, the crisis in the agricultural sector and the deactivation of services at the local level (EC, 2015). Thus, maintaining the same path, there is no perspective of development for many of them.

On the other hand, several opportunities emerge in rural areas, due to the increased demand for tourism and recreational activities (Figueiredo, Kastenholtz, & Lima, 2013), for quality products from the food and manufacturing sectors (Stathopoulou, Psaltopoulos, & Skuras, 2004), for natural and cultural amenities and for social capital (Smallbone, 2009). As claimed by Stathopoulou et al. (2004), the rural milieu, with all its existing socio-economic and physical conditions, is increasingly seen as a promising entrepreneurial context (Stathopoulou et al., 2004).

In this line of thought, entrepreneurship and local initiatives play key roles in rural development

approaches (Baumgartner, Schulz, & Seidl, 2013). Indeed, in modern economic theories, endogenous entrepreneurship is seen as the main tool to generate change in order to pursue sustainable economic development (Akgün, Nijkamp, Baycan-Levent, & Brons, 2010). According to these authors, the idea of regarding entrepreneurship as the key issue for rural development originates from the endogenous development theory. That is, contrary to the paradigm of development based on importing human capital and investment from outside, this theory suggests that endogenous potential and subsequent growth of endogenous companies must be stimulated in rural areas (Petrin, 1997). At the same time, endogenous development considers rational and sustainable exploitation of local resources extremely important (Shucksmith, 2000). The fundamental issue in the development strategy is no longer the capacity of the place to attract foreign enterprises but its capacity to internally generate the conditions of its own productive structures (Dinis, 2006). Thus, discourses on endogeneity, which emphasise the retention of benefits in a place by using and adding value to local resources and by focusing on the requirements, capacities and values of local people, are adopted (Edwards, Goodwin, Pemberton, & Woods, 2000). The concept of endogeneity is closely linked to that of embeddedness, in that endogenous development is built locally, emphasising economic, environmental and cultural resources that can be utilised by local innovators and entrepreneurs to establish a region's identity (Saxena, Clark, Oliver, & Ilbery, 2007). The crucial point, however, is that endogenous development must be reoriented to maximise the highest amount of benefits within the local territory by exploiting and valuing local resources – human and physical – and by focusing on the needs, capacities and perspectives of local people (Ray, 2000). Moreover, endogenous development is conducted at an appropriate level to local resources and should ideally lead to increased partnership and synergy by local people (Saxena et al., 2007).

The aforementioned idea reflects quite well the essence of rural entrepreneurship – the creation of firms in the rural space (Lafuente, Vaillant, & Rialp, 2007; Vaillant & Lafuente, 2007), by local entrepreneurs. Actually, rural entrepreneurship is crucial in sustaining the vitality of rural areas (Bryant, 1989) and, therefore, in improving their economic, social and even environmental conditions.

A rural entrepreneur is someone living in a rural location (Stathopoulou et al., 2004) and possesses “bucolic qualities”, because their business philosophy mirrors their rural lifestyle and keeps in line with the slower pace of rural areas (Smith, 2008). In order to obtain successful and sustainable development in the local environment, strong ties are required (Akgün et al., 2010). Therefore, it is important to establish networks between different stakeholders in the rural milieu: population, associations, local businesses and entities, among others.

Rural entrepreneurship is, however, a recent field of research in the literature on entrepreneurship (Wortman Jr., 1990). Moreover, despite the increased literature on rural entrepreneurship in the last years, it seems that rural entrepreneurship studies are still relatively few in the entrepreneurship literature, namely in Portugal. Clearly, the apparent differences of the rural milieu in terms of social relations and the specific effects of these relations (Akgün et al., 2010) lead us to look into the theme with more awareness.

2.2. Women and rural entrepreneurship

In the European Union (EU), many initiatives and programs have been aiming to provide support to rural development: technical, vocational and financial (Petridou & Glaveli, 2008), and, thus, to improve conditions and employment in rural areas. However, in rural areas we often see higher rates of unemployment/ underemployment for women than for men (Anthopoulou, 2010).

In this context, we argue that the flexible working conditions in some entrepreneurial initiatives

may serve as a way of self-employment and/ or stimulate small business ownership for women in rural areas. Moreover, these entrepreneurial initiatives may grant women a similar position of that typically held by men and, as argued by Iakovidou et al. (2012), thus making them active members of local rural communities. Often, these entrepreneurial initiatives are regarded as “alternative workstyle” for women that want to reconcile family and work duties (Bock, 2004). Women try to valorise their tacit knowledge and frequently see business primarily as a means of complementing family income (Koutsou, Iakovidou, & Gotsinas, 2003) and gaining independence (O’Hara, 1998), rather than as a vehicle for a professional career (Anthopoulou, 2010).

Research on rural women’s entrepreneurship reveals that an increasing number of women are actually becoming engaged in entrepreneurial initiatives, although in an often unfavorable context (Anthopoulou, 2010), such as in peripheral rural areas. These unfavorable conditions, are, however, compensated by their huge amount of motivation and effort, and the support provided by cultural groups and/or their families (Apitzsch & Kontos, 2003).

The literature reveals that these women are mostly active in the food sector (see Lassithiotaki, 2011), agro-tourism sector (see McGehee et al., 2007), as well in the homemade handicraft’s sector, producing folk art items, such as embroideries and traditional costumes (see Dinis, 2006). The literature also reveals that most of rural women entrepreneurship initiatives are based on cooperatives that try to preserve the countryside – not just economically, but also socially and culturally (Petridou & Glaveli, 2008). For instance, in Greece the promotion of collective entrepreneurial initiatives through the development of female cooperatives has its roots in the mid 1950s (Koutsou et al., 2003), and today there are more than one hundred cooperatives in the country (Iakovidou et al., 2012). They are one of the main sources of employment of Greek rural women and an important factor for the endogenous development of local economies (Petridou & Glaveli, 2008).

Actually cooperatives¹ are a prominent form of sustainable enterprise for women in rural areas, since they are often based on the assumption that the specific resources of the area – natural, human and capital – hold the key of its development (ILO, 2014). Moreover, according the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2014), there are inspiring examples from around the world of women using the cooperative business model to support themselves, their households and their communities.

For the success of these female initiatives is not surprising that institutional assistance and training interventions are need. Although the duration of these training interventions may differ, their main focus should be the development of entrepreneurial skills and the reinforcement of entrepreneurial behavior (Petridou & Glaveli, 2008). This is even more important since rural women are mainly locals, come from rural families, have lower education levels and establish the business (only) based on their empirical knowledge (Anthopoulou, 2010).

3. Methodology

3.1. Case study presentation

The cooperative *Capuchinhas de Montemuro* is located in a mountainous area of Portugal – *Montemuro* – namely in the municipality of *Castro Daire*, parish of *Gosende* (village of *Campo Benfeito*) (Figure 1).

In the area, traditionally, subsistence agriculture and cattle breeding have been the main economic activities. As in many peripheral areas of Portugal, the parish of *Gosende* is depopulated and continues to lose people – according to the last general population census (2011, compared to 2001), *Gosende*

¹ Cooperatives are enterprises controlled by people and run for the benefit of their members, where profits are held to develop the business or are returned to the members, rather than going to the benefit of third parties (ILO, 2014).



Figure 1 | Location of the village.

lost approximately a quarter of its population, with a total of 426 inhabitants registered in 2011 (INE, 2012). Apart from this, *Campo Benfeito* has a remarkable historical and cultural heritage and a natural landscape recognised for its beauty and rusticity. Moreover, houses are made of local granite and the village has typical mountain mills made of granite with thatched roofs and a pillory, which is next to the village's belvedere. In *Campo Benfeito*, there is a strong theatre tradition and here we may find the headquarters of a regional theatre (*Teatro Regional da Serra do Montemuro*). Since 2010, *Campo Benfeito* has also a rural tourism establishment, that allow tourists to stay in the village – to see its beauty and feel its environment.

The initiative of women began in 1985, as a result of the effort of the Institute for Cultural Affairs,

which, following a sequence of seam training courses, was able to establish a group of women to work together in the production of fashion and home textile products, based on local materials and traditions. These women began to create garments with wool and flax in an old hand loom, which was found in an empty house of *Campo Benfeito*. The municipality of *Castro Daire* offered a space (an elementary school), where these women decided to create a work centre. In 1987, they created a firm with the designation *Capuchinhas de Montemuro*. Due to some fiscal issues, they decided to convert the firm into a cooperative in 1999. At present, the cooperative works with six married women.

It is interesting to observe that, in the beginning, these women relied on their mothers' help to master the traditional techniques, revealing the importance of passing on the knowledge from one generation to the other: "*Then we called our mothers to come and teach us*".

The cooperative produces nowadays around 100 pieces per month, including pants, tunics, sweaters, skirts, shirts, blouses and dresses. These pieces are complemented with hats, purses, bags, slippers and small accessories. The work of these women was distinguished, in 2007, with the international award 'Creativity for women in rural areas', established by the Women's World Summit Foundation, which is headquartered in Geneva and was created following the Beijing conference on women. This award has been attributed, since 1996, to rural women around the world that have developed a sustainable project, and have used creativity in order to improve their life in rural areas. Obviously, this is a motive of pride for all the women in the community.

3.2.Procedures

This work uses a case study approach. Being qualitative in nature, it allows to investigate the phenomenon more deeply, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2009). On the other hand, the case study implies well defined physical boundaries and the use of diverse information sources. In this case semi-structured interviews, observation and documental analysis were used.

The guideline for the interviews was based on the literature review. The interviews, which took place in March 2013 in the cooperative, were tape-recorded, transcribed and subject to content analysis in order to identify the main issues of women's discourse. This content analysis involved the categorisation and systematisation of discourses, which was based on the key points raised by respondents. The interviews targeted the cooperative workers, namely six women. Four of them were interviewed, all being married with children, with ages between 35 and 48 years, earning less than the minimum wage, and possessing medium educational levels (Table 1).

The issues addressed in the interview intended to explore the perceptions of these women about the role of the cooperative in the development of tourism. It also aimed to identify what actions best result in the creation of wealth, thus helping the cooperative to better fulfil its mission and contribute to the socioeconomic development of the local community. Documental analysis, as a systematic procedure for reviewing and analysing documents (Bowen, 2009), was based on electronic documents about the *Capuchinhas's* initiative, on articles from newspapers

Table 1 | Characterisation of the respondents

Age	Salary	Occupation	Educational level	Number of children
35	less than 485€	craftswoman	9 th grade	1
43	less than 485€	craftswoman – seam	9 th grade	2
48	less than 485€	craftswoman – seam	12 th grade	2
43	less than 485€	craftswoman – weaving and knitting	12 th grade	2

Source: Own construction.

and brochures from the municipality of *Castro Daire*. Like other empirical methods in qualitative research, these documents were examined and interpreted in order to obtain meaning, gain understanding, and develop knowledge.

4. Results of the study

4.1. The local initiative and the leverage of population settling

Although the official statistics reveal a loss of population over the last years in the parish of *Gosende* (INE, 2012), it seems that in *Campo Benfeito* there was a population increase, namely an increase of school-aged children due to the presence of the cooperative: *"By the time we came here, there was only one child in the elementary school, now there are 14 children attending school in this village. They are children of Capuchinhas [women] and the men of the Theatre of Montemuro – that are couples between 30 and 50 years of age [...] [...] when this opportunity appeared, I decided not to leave the village and put behind the idea of moving to Lisbon."* Women think that nowadays the community is younger, and without *Capuchinhas* the village could have been lost – an opinion that is shared by the older generation: *"The old people of the village appreciate our presence, and say that, without us, by now the village would have disappeared"*.

Accordingly, corroborating other authors (Akgün et al., 2010), we confirm that rural entrepreneurship, specifically women's entrepreneurship, is a tool to improve social welfare in rural areas and mitigate depopulation.

4.2. The local initiative, the regional theatre and networks

The rural community of *Campo Benfeito* actually seems to be a dynamic village. This is due to the

existence of *Capuchinhas*, but also to the existence of the Theatre of *Montemuro*. The theatre consists of a team of seven people whose innovative projects bring to *Campo Benfeito* people from other parts of the country and abroad. Actors and actresses, designers, playwrights and directors go to the village to create something different, unique and authentic. Its importance for tourism is reflected essentially in the internationally known *Festival Altitudes*, which for seven days in August gathers several national and international companies, as well as thousands of visitors who remain there for several days.

As mentioned by one woman, the people of the village, including the men of the theatre, are just like a family: *"In the village we are of the same family: brothers, sisters, brothers in law or sisters in law... people that belong to the cooperative of Capuchinhas or belong to the theatre of Montemuro. We like the theatre very much because they are very talented and we cooperate with them in the production of the clothes that they use. We are always very proud to see a play where our clothes are being worn by the actors."*

In terms of networks and collaboration between entities, women say that they feel that the city council has been helping them. There is a healthy collaboration between the two entities: *"The city council gave us the place for working, which is very good for us, but it is very good for it [the council] as well, because we help in the promotion of the municipality of Castro Daire. The city council invites us to participate in craft fairs and we do it with great pleasure. Our stand always tries to give a good presentation of our work and our traditional products, and we also know that this reflects on the promotion of the municipality."* Fortunately, it seems that the municipality (*Castro Daire*) is aware that these local initiatives are important for both parties.

It seems that cooperation also exists with the neighbouring village of *Gralheira*: *"In addition, there is a great complicity and collaboration between the villages of Campo Benfeito and Gralheira, a typical village with gastronomic tradition. They send a lot of people*

here and we send many people there too. Many of our customers go there to have lunch and then come here in order to visit us and to buy some products."

The aforementioned situation, reflects quite well the importance of social capital in the rural space, that is, the ability of actors to take advantage of their social structures, networks, collaborations and ties (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000).

4.3. The local initiative, the preservation of the village and tourism

The village of *Campo Benfeito* belongs to the network *Aldeias de Portugal*² [Villages of Portugal]. Therefore, it is not surprising that the village had been restored. With this, the village has a new image – more appealing for visitors: "*With the requalification, the village has now new streets, new signage, parking spaces and leisure places, and the architecture of the houses has been restored.*"

According to the women, currently the village has a lot of visitors, mainly during the summer, Easter vacations and on weekends. Apart from the traditional tourists, some schools and other institutions come to visit the village and the initiative *Capuchinhas*, which is "an obligatory stop-over" for the visitors of the village.

Since 2010, *Campo Benfeito* has also a lodging establishment of rural tourism called *Ares de Montemuro*. The original architectural style of the building was fully respected and the reconstruction work was based on traditional techniques and materials of the region.

4.4. Market and commercialisation

According to the women, part of the textile and fashion products is sold locally. Often they sell to people that pass by and are interested in the products that they made. They also participate in fairs and other national exhibitions, which, according

to them, is a good form of promoting the products. Additionally, they also sell the products to three shops in Lisbon, *Nazaré* and *São Pedro do Sul*.

It is also interesting to note that these women started to internationalise the products that they produce. Indeed, a Japanese designer got to know about the initiative through the internet and became interested in it. Now, he creates designs and chooses the materials for the pieces he wants.

Nevertheless, the women feel the lack of demand, mainly between January and June. Apart from the Japanese designer, they do not sell internationally, which, according them, would be good. Unfortunately, these women do not know how to do that, namely how to find the right channels to make it happen: "*... internationalisation would be the way now, but it is difficult because we do not know the market and we do not know the person to do the work.*"

5. Final remarks

The new trends of society make rural resources highly valuable for a growing part of the society: a part with more purchasing power, but also with more awareness and knowledge of details linked with natural and cultural heritage (Dinis, 2006). Accordingly, this means that activities or resources that form the "invisible" economy (Dinis, 2006, p. 14) of rural areas can constitute good business opportunities and, therefore, local entrepreneurship and local initiatives play key roles in rural development approaches (Baumgartner et al., 2013). This is even more important, since many of these regions are in a dramatic process of depopulation and economic and social decline.

² *Aldeias de Portugal* is a new concept of rural accommodation in Portugal that allows people to discover the Portuguese roots, hospitality and natural life. They are "unique" rural villages embraced by idyllic landscapes that try to preserve the environment, traditions, architecture, culture and customs.

In particular, cooperatives of rural women are a prominent form of endogenous and sustainable development of local economies, since they are often formed based on the assumption that the specific resources of the area – natural and human – are crucial in all the process (ILO, 2014).

In Portugal, specifically in the *Montemuro* region there are other inspiring examples of rural women using the cooperative business model to support themselves, their families and their communities (at least partially). Thus, the cooperatives called *Combate ao Frio* and *Lançadeiras do Picão*, which have also emerged in the municipality of *Castro Daire*, work in close relationship and in complementary areas.

The initiative of *Capuchinhas de Montemuro* is a good example of a sustainable entrepreneurial initiative that has its own roots in local materials and traditions. Apart from the use of local materials and traditions, *Capuchinhas de Montemuro* have created synergies with the local community and local activities. So, endogenous development is built locally, emphasising economic, environmental and cultural resources that can be utilised by them to establish a region's identity (Saxena et al., 2007). The most important proof of the village's revitalisation is the fact that it seemed to be doomed to depopulation and today it has more children (in the elementary school). On the other hand, the village attracts nowadays a lot of tourists.

The involvement of the population and different generations in the arts and cultural traditions, such as folk music, was emphasised in 2014 in the *Altitudes Festival*, when the orchestra *Libelinha de Campo Benfeito* was presented, with about 22 members, male and female, under the age of 18, mostly born and living in the village. As their parents and grandparents, these children and young people cling to the arts and traditions of the mountain to remain in the village.

Actually, the establishment of networks is a reality in the village. As claimed by Floisand and Sjøholt (2007), networks promote good ways of endoge-

nous development. Concerning networks between *Capuchinhas* and the local theatre, for instance, women not only make the clothes for the men (of the theatre), they also sell their products during the festival. Therefore, as mentioned by Dinis (2006), we agree that the success of entrepreneurial actions in the rural space depends on cooperation and adjustment between the different actors (individuals and even organisations) that live (and bring to life) in a territory, in the same way that the success of any firm depends on its staff.

Anyway, it would be interesting to support *Capuchinhas de Montemuro* through better training in basic business skills in order to gain access to market opportunities. Without losing its traditional character, it is important to promote a business spirit (Koutsou et al., 2003). In practice, this means searching for new development potential.

In terms of future research it would be interesting to explore attitudes and behaviours of other stakeholders of the community, including local people and those related to the regional theatre.

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