

Rural regeneration through creative tourism: Local discourses on cultural heritage

Regeneração do rural através do turismo criativo: Discursos locais sobre o património cultural

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Abstract | Alternative forms of tourism are gradually emerging, as tourism transforms itself and adopts new forms of consumption and development. It is therefore necessary to understand the new approaches to tourism sustainability in order to achieve more transformative results for destinations and their local communities. This research aims to identify creative tourism as the most equitable approach to achieving the sustainability and the regeneration of rural territories. Thus, the general objective is to understand how Cultural Heritage, as a tourist resource, can be used to promote regenerative impacts in a rural region of Portugal, particularly in Trás-os-

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Montes. As part of a qualitative methodology, the focus group interview technique was applied to three of the destination's stakeholders: Municipalities; Tourism agents; and Residents, to discuss the tourism promotion of a very particular heritage and its implications. The main results identify the greatest consensus among the participants, essentially regarding the suitability of creative tourism for the Cultural Heritage under study, from different perspectives. As well as five potential regenerative benefits for the destination: (i) Local Sourcing Practices, (ii) Social and Cultural Involvement, (iii) Sustainable Economic Performance, (iv) Inclusiveness Management, and (v) Education and Capacity Building, associated with nine United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Keywords | creative tourism, cultural heritage, rural destination, regenerative tourism, sustainable tourism

Palavras-chave | turismo criativo, património cultural, destino rural, turismo regenerativo, turismo sustentável

1. Introduction

Traditionally focused on financial wealth, the tourism industry has seen a significant shift toward responsible tourism production and consumption over the last decade, spurred by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Boluk & Rasoolimanesh, 2022; Mason et al., 2022). This shift emphasizes the need for collaborative action among different stakeholders. Both the private and public sectors play crucial roles in addressing these responsibilities (Allan & Allahham, 2021; Rina & Siswati, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity to reformulate and re-plan destinations, making sustainability issues a priority (Seyitoğlu & Costa, 2022). Sustainability in tourism hinges on harmonizing social, economic, and environmental aspects (Riza Chakim et al., 2023), the “three Ps” (People, Profit, and Planet) (Wise, 2019) or the Triple Bottom Line (Cranmer et al., 2023). The current discourse reflects a shift in values among all stakeholders in tourism, driven by collective well-being, generosity and creativity of tourists, residents, and institutions (Sheldon, 2022). In this context of change, complex questions arise: *Can tourism play a key role in the transition to a healthier relationship with the people and the planet, and if so, how?* (Pollock, 2019). Given

this context, emerging research on sustainable tourism aims to be both transformative and solution-oriented (Nunkoo et al., 2023).

As the tourism industry begins to rethink its implications, this study explores how intangible cultural heritage (ICH), including social practices, rituals and festive events; and traditional craftsmanship (UNESCO, 2022), contributes to the sustainability and regeneration of rural territories. Considering that some authors have already recognized the benefits of regenerative tourism for rural destinations (Kastenholz et al., 2023; Ravichandran, 2023). These ICH resources give rise to creative tourism, noted for its sustainable approach (Castanho et al., 2023; E. Duarte et al., 2022), influenced by a conscious tourist demand and the cooperative efforts of operators and creative entrepreneurs. This approach supports the SDGs through targeted policy-making, people-centered strategies, and effective resource management (E. Duarte et al., 2022). Although many studies have focused on the sustainability of tourism in peripheral areas, including the role of creative tourism, there is still a gap in understanding how it can help regenerate these regions, what impacts it can have and in what dimensions. Furthermore, few articles published to date explicitly make this association (creative tourism and regenerative tourism), for example Duxbury et al. (2021) and Qu (2024), both suggesting that creative tourism and regenerative tourism result in a mutually beneficial relationship, providing local well-being, revitalization and sustainability. Bearing this in mind, and considering the gaps in the existing literature, we developed the following research question - *How can creative tourism, through intangible cultural heritage, contribute to the regeneration on rural territories?* To answer this question, the research employed a qualitative methodology, adopting a case study approach and conducting focus group interviews to gather information from various tourism stakeholders in Trás-os-Montes, a rural region in Portugal. The study focused on the role of creative tourism in mediating and promoting a unique cultural heritage known as "Masquerades Festivities" (Festividades dos Mascarados). Two objectives were established: (I) analyze the level of agreement among local stakeholders regarding the role of creative tourism in mediating and promoting this cultural heritage, and (II) identify the potential regenerative benefits that creative tourism could bring to these rural territories. In terms of structure, the first section introduces the thematic discussion of the paper. The second one delves into the literature on tourism sustainability within cultural heritage, also creative tourism and regenerative tourism. The third section describes the methodology used, while the fourth section presents the results and the fifth presents the corresponding discussion. Finally, the conclusion is presented, along with the study's limitations and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

Tourism sustainability within cultural heritage

Tourism is increasingly seen as a positive force for the conservation of cultural heritage, which can be used to create tourist resources, educate the population and influence policies aimed at preserving it (Misirlisoy and Günçe, 2021). The Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage considers that the commercial activities that can emerge from certain forms of intangible cultural heritage can contribute to improving awareness of its importance and generating profits for its practitioners, leading to enhancing the quality of life of communities and strengthening the local economy and social cohesion. However, the same Convention highlights the need to avoid commercial misappropriation, to manage tourism in a sustainable way, to find a proper balance between the interests of the commercial party, the public administration and the cultural practitioners, and to ensure that the commercial use does not distort the meaning and purpose of the intangible cultural heritage for the community concerned (UNESCO, 2022).

According to European Commission (2019, p.8), the concept of sustainable cultural tourism involves “the integrated management of cultural heritage and tourism activities in conjunction with the local community, creating social, environmental and economic benefits for all stakeholders in order to achieve tangible and intangible cultural heritage conservation and sustainable tourism development”. The World Tourism Organization argues that social sustainability requires a fair distribution of benefits, particularly focusing on poverty reduction and emphasizing the empowerment of local communities to sustain and enhance their life support systems (UNEP & WTO, 2005). As Yin et al. (2023) explain, there is a symbiotic relationship between the tourism economy and the social well-being of the communities. This is mainly because, to promote social welfare, businesses and governments should consider the sustainable livelihoods of local residents, such as by creating job opportunities and increasing household incomes (Yin et al., 2023). As highlighted by Chan et al. (2021), encouraging local entrepreneurship opportunities helps integrating tourism into the community – including in rural areas. This can be encouraged by providing wider access to knowledge for those who lack resources or capabilities (OECD, 2022). Socio-cultural sustainability is guaranteed, amongst other factors, by the presence of identity resources within the tourism offering, as well as by the interaction between visitors and residents in activities that interest the community and that serve to enrich its culture (Stojanović et al., 2024). Sociocultural sustainability refers to strategies to prevent the negative impacts of tourism on communities and populations. It relates

to preventing social segregation, avoiding exclusive access and exclusion zones, combating cultural prejudices or the entrenchment of national or regional stereotypes, encouraging hospitality and preparing the resident population for the tourist phenomenon (Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology, 2019). In fact, as Maziliauske (2024) explains, socio-cultural capital helps to solve different challenges faced by many communities, such as depopulation, emigration of young people, declining social and cultural vitality, lack of adequate infrastructure, lack of social and cultural inclusion and the disappearance of cultural heritage. According to the results of his study, Maziliauske (2024) points out that one of the benefits of socio-cultural sustainability is the synergy of resources, inclusion and quality of life. According to Zhang et al. (2021, p.4), “the positive sociocultural impacts of tourism development include cross-cultural communication, positive changes in values and customs, and cultural exchanges that lead to the formation of harmonious relationships between different individuals and groups”. Regarding the benefits of culture the World Tourism Organization points out that in addition to its economic value, culture is also seen as a means of creating identity, stimulating social cohesion and supporting creativity (UNWTO, 2018). Creativity has been very important in boosting the tourism potential of intangible cultural heritage.

Creative Tourism

Creative tourism has become very popular in the last decade (Akdemir et al., 2023; Sousa, 2023). The first definition of creative tourism appeared in 2000: tourists and visitors can develop their creative potential through active participation in courses and experiences that provide varied learning and that are characteristic and identifiable of the destination where they are (Richards & Raymond, 2000). Creative tourism has been explored in many rural destinations (Remoaldo et al., 2020) as a more contemporary form of tourism that promotes good relations between residents and tourists (Gato et al., 2022) and its offer is characterized by small-scale local projects (Bakas et al., 2019). It is the result of the combination of different aspects, including: tourist experience, co-creation, creativity and cultural heritage (Galvagno & Giaccone, 2019). One of the most differentiating aspects is the fact that these experiences are co-created by tourists who can develop their creative potential, knowledge of the destination and of themselves (Ross, 2020). It provides authentic tourist experiences (Liberato et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2020) with unique learning activities, diversifying and specializing the destination's offer without damaging its resources, which brings multiple benefits to the host communities (Duxbury et al., 2021). In summary, it's a more contemporary form of tourism that promotes

the endogenous and sustainable development of territories. Castanho et al., (2023) also believe that creative tourism has the potential to promote sustainable development in remote regions, especially in social and cultural aspects, by preserving local culture, promoting cultural heritage and diversifying the tourist offer. It also creates opportunities for the development of projects, especially in the artistic and cultural sectors, while involving local communities in planning and execution, fostering a sense of ownership and pride.

At the core of this approach is the recognition that capitalising on the distinctive elements and cultural specificities of each location serves as the basis for building a model of creative and sustainable tourism (Duxbury et al., 2021, p.15). Duxbury et al. (2021) identify different models of creative tourism that are particularly relevant to this study: (1) Series of creative activities under a common theme: This model reinforces local identity and contributes to the recovery and revitalization of specific arts, crafts, or traditions. It promotes cooperation among organizations, functions as a brand for related activities, and supports small-scale artisanal enterprises and its cyclical organization addresses tourism seasonality by offering variety throughout the year. (2) Small-scale festivals with creative tourism activities: These festivals enhance the locale's visibility and can become part of its identity. They serve as signature events that promote a broader year-round program of creative participation. Festivals connect the local community with the external world, bringing new influences and perspectives. They provide spaces for self-expression and collective cultural activities, significantly contributing to cultural revitalization.

Regenerative Tourism

Regenerative tourism should prioritize the integration of all stakeholders in its design, to support the co-created purpose of the destination, co-evolutionary partnerships with nature and systemic thinking, and thus build the capacity of socioenvironmental systems for long-term healthy growth and mutually beneficial interactions.⁷ Oriented towards a systemic approach aimed at improving communities, regenerative tourism relies on all participants to act as managers (Boluk & Panse, 2022). Because regenerative practices require other perspectives of interacting with the world, which have been largely ignored in the tourism industry (Boluk & Panse, 2022) even in sustainability discourses, the role of stakeholders has been studied in

⁷ Available on the Regenerative Tourism website at the following address, consulted on 20/08/2024, <https://turismoregenerativo.org/2020/09/conceptos-de-regeneracion/>

regenerative tourism (Bellato et al., 2022). At the centre of this approach is collective community action led by those who can demonstrate social and cultural capital (Latham, 2023). A regenerative tourism ecosystem would require many levels of connection, both vertically - from local communities to national governing authorities - and horizontally - between sectors (Major & Clarke, 2022). And this is one of the differences in the field of Participation, which affects the whole dynamic of the tourism system. According to Ravichandran (2023), the evolving dynamics of global tourism, coupled with the challenges of managing destinations and uncertainties in delivering tourism offerings, have underscored the importance of regenerative tourism, especially in rural areas. The resilience and regeneration of rural destinations hinge on effective cooperation. Kastenholz et al. (2023) emphasize that this involves fostering collaboration and unity within the community, promoting cooperation between locals, local authorities and tourism agents, and strengthening relationships between communities. Encouraging volunteerism and active local participation in village activities is also crucial. Additionally, the professional involvement of locals in tourism activities and the development of collaborative networks play a key role. The authors further highlight that opportunities for resilience and regeneration include mutual support and assistance among actors and communities, as well as raising awareness within the community. Engaging communities in risk mitigation and prevention, creating memorable tourist experiences, fostering a deeper connection with the place, preserving local traditions and culture, and ensuring the well-being and happiness of the community are all vital aspects of successful regenerative tourism (Kastenholz et al., 2023).

Regenerative tourism is an emerging, evolving and dynamic concept that emphasizes man's relationship with himself, with others and with the Earth. From this perspective, the visitor is called to visit a place by slowing down their rhythm to live an experience that activates deep and positive connections between themselves (tourist), with the local community (residents), the place (destination) and the systems that sustain life in that territory, which must be lived with the rhythms of nature (Teruel, 2018). By its holistic nature, regenerative tourism works against the divisiveness that characterizes the current universal model of tourism, paying more attention to relationships and the integration of systems rather than their fragmentation (Pollock, 2019). From this point of view, regenerative tourism is both a mindset and a paradigm shift. Table 1 highlights some of the indicators, principles and results that demonstrate regenerative behaviour.

Table 1: Indicators, principles, and examples of regenerative practices

EarthCheck Indicators	Regenerative Travel	Example Outcomes
Sustainable sourcing practices	Local and ethical sourcing	Sustainable community sourcing of majority of supply
Social and cultural engagement	Community empowerment and cultural preservation	Proactively working with local groups to enhance cultural preservation (e.g. signage in local language, purchasing of traditional handicraft, etc.)
Economic performance	Equitable distribution of economic benefits	More than 75% of benefits remain in local area
Accessibility and inclusivity	Inclusive tourism for diverse populations	Provision of support and infrastructure to make accessible to all
Health and safety management	Well-being of tourists, staff, and communities	Community satisfaction and active engagement with tourism
Education and capacity building	Knowledge sharing, training, and local capacity	Contribution to knowledge building and training among local community

Source: Adapted from EarthCheck (2023, p.14)

3. Methodology: Case study

The methodology is grounded in the principles of the RURITAGE project, which aims to transform rural cultural elements into catalysts for development and regeneration, with a strong focus on the involvement of diverse local actors (de Luca et al., 2021; Egusquiza et al., 2021). Building on this framework, the study was conducted in the cross-border region of Trás-os-Montes in northern Portugal, specifically within the Intermunicipal Community of Terras de Trás-os-Montes (CIM-TTM), which includes nine municipalities, as illustrated in Figure 1. This region was selected for its rich cultural heritage, namely a series of rituals and festive events, including the one that takes place in the village of Podence, which was designated as Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO in 2019. Moreover, Podence's approach to tourism has already been acknowledged as a model of sustainable rural tourism (Rodrigues et al., 2021).

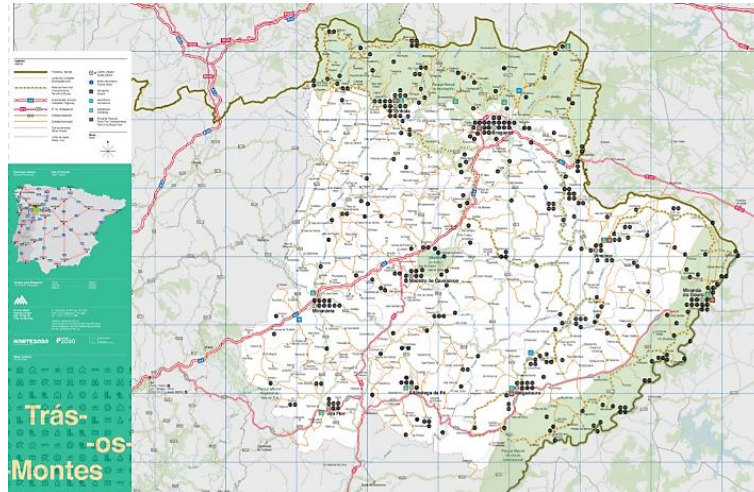


Figure 1 - Geographical context of the region under stud

Source: CIM-TTM

Cultural heritage under study

This heritage is defined by a unique set of Festivities, known as "Winter Festivities" or "Masquerades Festivities" (Festividades dos Mascarados), which are unique across the country. These festive events take place in various villages and involve a series of ethnographic rituals during Christmas and Carnival, as Figure 2 illustrates. Passed down through generations, these ancient traditions hold deep symbolic significance for the communities that celebrate them.

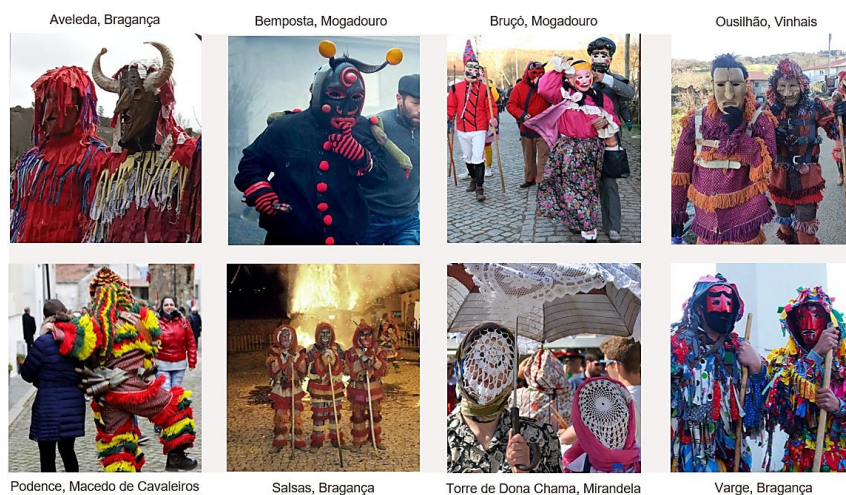


Figure 2 - Festivities considered in the study

Source: Authors' adaptation

The history of these festivities is complex and has evolved alongside the natural progression of society and the sociodemographic dynamics of rural areas. In many communities, these celebrations have diminished in importance and significance. In contrast, in other places there has been a form of regeneration that has enabled their continuity through adaptations, allowing more people, including visitors, to participate. In this “survival’s process”, Podence’s Festivity - Carnival of Caretos - has been promoted for the last decades by the resident community, resulting in a growing tourist attractiveness⁸. The Festivities selected for this study were chosen based on numerous factors, including their current level of dynamism.

Research objectives

- (I) Analyze the level of agreement amongst local stakeholders regarding tourism mediation for this Cultural Heritage.
- (II) Identify potential regenerative benefits resulting from creative tourism in this rural destination.

Focus groups applied to local discourses

Participants selection - To address the identified objectives, a qualitative approach was employed using the focus group technique to understand the stakeholders’ viewpoints, which encompasses their perceptions, opinions, beliefs, values and attitudes (Morgan, 2018). This approach is particularly effective to explore participants’ consensus extent (Flick, 2018). Stakeholders were selected through convenience sampling and categorized into three categories: public administration (Municipalities); local artisans and associations (Tourism agents); and the local community (Residents). The Municipalities group included nine participants, chosen for their professional involvement in politics, tourism, culture and heritage or territorial promotion. The Tourism Agents group consisted of six participants linked to this Tradition through local associations and craft activities. The Residents group also included six participants, selected based on their deep involvement in villages Festivities, ensuring they were well-prepared to reflect on the research theme. A total of 21 participants were interviewed

⁸ Information obtained from the National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage, available at the following website <http://www.matrizpci.dgpc.pt/MatrizPCI.Web/InventarioNacional/DetailheFicha/461?dirPesq=3>

between June and July 2021, specifically chosen to align with the discussion objectives of each focus group.

Focus group procedures - The implementation of these focus groups followed a set of recommended technical procedures (Flick, 2018), namely theoretical data saturation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) and ethical questions about important aspects such as the consent process and confidentiality (Asbury, 2016; Sim & Waterfield, 2019). Each session was moderated, with two observers present to supervise discussions and take notes. Three scripts were developed, each grounded in literature, and included similar questions across the groups to ensure a consistent exploration of key areas of consensus. The scripts share several key themes, namely the feasibility and benefits of implementing creative tourism around the Festivities, its potential to strengthen the development of local tourism, the most desired visitor profile for the villages, and how creative tourism can increase the region's global competitiveness.

Data collection and analysis - The focus groups sessions were conducted online using ZOOM, a videoconferencing software recognized for its efficiency in facilitating focus group (Greenspan et al., 2021), offering convenience, accessibility, and economic viability, especially for research involving geographically dispersed populations (Gray et al., 2020). All sessions were recorded with participants' consent for subsequent analysis. To safeguard participants' identities, in accordance with the Informed Consent Declaration, no direct identifiers were used. Each session was transcribed from the Zoom recordings, converting the audio into text. To effectively illustrate, explain, or uncover the researched phenomena, this methodology employs content analysis, which is typically organized by themes through a systematic categorization process (Laurence 2011). The data was examined without the use of automated tools, ensuring a careful analysis tailored to the specific context of the study.

4. Results Presentation

These results underscore the critical issues that generated the most substantial debate and exchange of ideas among the participants. Below is a concise summary of the discussions.

Municipalities discussion - The discussion regarding creative tourism's contribution to local cultural heritage emphasized its potential as a catalyst for initiatives aimed at preserving and enhancing both tangible and intangible aspects. In these territories, creative tourism can serve as a guardian of many activities, crafts, and rituals that are at risk of disappearing due to societal changes. This approach could help redefine the region's tourism positioning and add value to the territory. The discussion also underscored the urgency of networking among municipalities to achieve greater convergence and share information effectively. Regarding the potential for creative tourism activities, a predominant view emerged that these could be developed with active involvement and support from the community and local associations. Participants noted that creative activities could arise from handcrafts, particularly the masks, which are a central symbol of these Festivities and their associated groups. Overall, there was unanimous support for tourism initiatives based on these villages' traditional practices.

Tourism agents' discussion - The discussion on the Festivities' role in fostering creative tourism at the local level, though not deeply explored, highlighted the complexity of correlating these Festivities with tourism. Participants noted the differences in how each community organizes and promotes its Festivities. Some communities have gradually opened up to tourism, while others, for various reasons, have remained more resistant. This means that not all communities are equally welcoming to visitors. Participants agreed that any tourism activity should be organized in a way that does not interfere with the community's rituals. From this perspective, creative activities should be decoupled from the Festivities' seasonal nature, connecting with this heritage in a less intrusive, more continuous, and sustainable manner throughout the year. Concerning the profile of tourism demand, participants identified three key aspects: visitors' motivations, interests, and economic power. Economic power reflects the visitor's ability to contribute financially to the territory, benefiting local agents and impacting the local economy. From the participants' perspective, it is desirable to attract visitors who appreciate these territories' resources and attractions, and who value their identity and people through sustainable tourism practices. However, many participants expressed a lack of confidence in their villages' tourism development, particularly in the growth of the creative segment. Perspectives on implementing creative activities varied, with some participants being more receptive and others more sceptical. The conclusion was that, as creative tourism is a relatively new concept and not yet widespread in the region, its benefits are not fully recognized by the community. As a result, there are clear disparities between villages in their ability to

identify and develop creative tourism opportunities. Interestingly, in some cases, communities facilitate creative experiences without fully realizing or acknowledging it. Conversely, there are places where creative tourism is neither encouraged nor expected to flourish due to the characteristics of the community, which is often aging and not very proactive. Overall, participants recognized that this heritage plays an increasingly important role in the region's cultural identity, with the mask emerging as one of its iconic symbols. However, its contribution to tourism competitiveness is less apparent. Many participants agreed on the need for support and coordinated actions among different stakeholders to foster better synergy between tourism and this local heritage.

Residents' discussion - When discussing the profile of visitors that residents wish to attract, it was evident that, despite differences among the Festivities, they align well with the characteristics of the creative tourist. Participants generally identified cultural sensitivity, motivation, and interest in observing the Festivities and their rituals as key attributes of the desired visitor profile. They emphasized the importance of attracting people who are genuinely interested in learning about the historical significance of the Festivities, who respect the community, its identity, and its traditions. From the residents' perspective, the visitor experience should be immersive and sociologically enriching, rather than a superficial observation. Participants also noted that several factors could contribute to promoting creative tourism associated with this heritage, particularly the interest and commitment of public entities that represent the territory, local political leadership, and the motivation and entrepreneurship of local tourism businesses. The main consensus among these stakeholders was that, despite differing perspectives, all recognized the benefits of developing tourism in the region in terms of socioeconomic dynamism and the value it adds to the region's identity, resources, and endogenous products. Many participants emphasized the importance of this cultural heritage to the region's collective identity and its tourism potential. However, different positions were evident: some participants were optimistic about leveraging this heritage for tourism, while others expressed concern regarding potential negative impacts. Since all the villages involved are at a very early stage of tourism development, there is a certain level of fear and uncertainty about the implications for their communities. Table 2 outlines the main topics on which the three focus groups reached the greatest consensus.

Table 2. Overview on the highest participants' consensus

Subject	Highest consensus	Level of agreement
Creative tourism relevance and suitability to the "Mascarados" Cultural Heritage	Creative tourism could be suitable for boosting tourism within the "Mascarados" cultural heritage, by promoting its safeguarding and enhancement.	Very high among Municipalities, Tourism Agents and Residents
Visitors' participation in the Festivities and rituals of "Mascarados"	There is widespread fear of the authenticity and spontaneity loss of Festivities and rituals if they involve visitors' participation.	Very high among Tourism Agents and Residents
Traditional craft regeneration related with "Mascarados", through tourism	Handcrafts need to be dynamized and promoted, namely through workshops that allow recognition and appreciation of local artisans and their work.	Very high among Municipalities, Tourism Agents and Residents
Strengthening the rural identity of the "Mascarados" Cultural Heritage	This cultural heritage needs to be valued in the villages where the Festivities take place. It is advisable that promotion and investment are directed towards the villages and not towards neighbouring towns.	Very high among Tourism Agents and Residents
Visitors' profile most suited to the "Mascarados" Cultural Heritage	It is important that visitors have above-average purchasing power, are sensitive to rural areas identity, and are genuinely motivated and interested in cultural enrichment, based on a close and harmonious relationship with the community.	High among Municipalities, Tourism Agents and Residents

Source: Author's elaboration

The results suggest that the development of creative tourism can foster the prosperity and empowerment of these communities while ensuring the preservation of this rich cultural heritage. This evidence should support and legitimize the pursuit of this form of tourism, aiming to generate positive impacts that enhance the quality of life for the population, who should increasingly benefit from this heritage.

5. Results discussion

Analysis of the results led to the identification of five key categories, based on EarthCheck's (2023) regenerative tourism model: Local Sourcing Practices, Social and Cultural Involvement, Sustainable Economic Performance, Inclusiveness Management, and Education and Capacity Building. Within each category, we present selected quotes from focus group participants:

Municipalities (M), Tourism Agents (A), and Residents (R). This section aims to answer the research question, based on the results of the focus groups.

Local Sourcing Practices – One municipality highlighted the importance of direct interaction between tourist demand and local craftsmen, noting that *"contact between the family and the craftsman who is producing the mask [...] is also a way of giving some encouragement to the artisans that we have in our territory, so that they can realize in these dynamics a potential to create more value and obviously increase their income"* [M1]. A resident emphasized Podence's success in embracing local entrepreneurship through this heritage, noting that *"In recent years, this tradition has proven to be a fantastic attraction, and we have the usual example of Podence's village, which has managed to attract and create an unusual tourism hub in the region"*, stressing the need to maximize this heritage in all villages and ensure that it *"can't be neglected in any way"* by the local community [R2]. However, a tourism agent acknowledged the limitations of these Festivities in driving regional competitiveness but recognized the potential of creative tourism for *"stimulating the territories, for example, generating jobs, bringing people in, settling them. These are all aspects that would be very interesting and that would help our villages' development, because without people, these Festivities are at risk, they're dying..."* [A1]. Another tourism agent emphasized the need for proactive local strategies, stating that *"there's no room for lament here, it's about looking ahead and trying to break with this reality, and tourism is the quickest and most direct way to achieve some development and progress"* [A6]. This underscores the importance of leveraging local resources to ensure the sustainable development of these communities, as demonstrated by the success in Podence.

Social and Cultural Involvement - One municipality highlighted the importance of creative tourism in preserving local cultural heritage, stating, *"It's important to implement creative tourism in our territories, above all for sustainability and the projection of authenticity and also for the preservation of the cultural heritage of our people and the territory's identity"* [M3]. Another participant mentioned, *"In the municipality's latest tourism promotional video, "Bragança Naturalmente", one of the scenes is exactly the contact between the family and the craftsman"* revealing the power of this local heritage to attract visitors seeking cultural authentic experiences [M1]. A tourism agent remarked, *"The original form of my Festivity is still*

preserved, so it would be difficult for an outsider to take part. I find it easier for me as a craftsman, for example, for a tourist to have the chance to see me build a mask" [A1], emphasizing the value of this heritage in involving local community and visitors. Another agent observed that *"The mask is already a symbol of this region's identity. Most of the local population already identifies with the mask and this tradition in the villages" [A3].* A resident emphasized the importance of promoting the heritage in a national and international scale, stating: *"At events such as the International Mask Festival in Lisbon, people are curious to look up the Caretos de Podence on the internet, to find out who they are and what the festivity is all about" [R4].* This highlights how creative tourism can act as a bridge between cultural preservation and broader audience engagement, ensuring the vitality of these traditions for future generations.

Sustainable Economic Performance - One municipality underscored the economic viability of creative tourism projects, explaining that *"It's undoubtedly important as well as being much more accessible i.e., we don't have to build, we simply must implement and capitalize on what already exists" [M3].* Another participant reinforced the economic potential of these creative experiences, stating that the interaction with artisans not only preserves local traditions but also *"Creates more value and obviously increases their income" [M1].* Accordingly, another municipality noted that *"Creative tourism is important to meet the new tourism demand, they no longer simply want to contemplate nature, they want to be part of our traditions and experience them. It must be a commitment from our territory to provide these experiences, without losing the tradition, of course, with a high level of professionalism" [M2].* Similarly, a tourism agent agreed that this offer, unfortunately, doesn't exist in most of the villages, saying, *"I think that this could add some value to the Festivities and enrich them with the appearance of a certain public (tourists), which doesn't come because there isn't this creative tourism offer" [A1].* In contrast, a resident further illustrated the economic performance of Podence, noting that the village *"Has managed to attract and create an unusual tourism hub in the region" [R2].* This point is reinforced by the statement *"Here in Podence, we work privately in our craft shop... So here we are promoting tourism, as it fosters the village's development" [A6].* This underscores the crucial role that creative tourism can play in sustaining the economic vitality of these communities, as is already evident in Podence.

Inclusiveness Management - A tourism agent discussed the need for coordinated efforts in developing tourism proposals, asserting that *“There should be a concertation of the various stakeholders, with all those partnerships that need to exist, to boost a territory, to make it attractive... It must be a set of entities, even cross-border ones, that bring us closer to other territories...”* [A1]. This view was supported by a resident who emphasized the need for strong leadership, stating, *“It has to be an initiative from those who have the power, both the political and economic, to explore this resource”* [R2]. Another resident highlighted the role of the Intermunicipal Community, suggesting that *“The CIM-TTM could develop this and work on these traditions. I think it's a challenge for them to work on them for tourism”* [R4]. The involvement of local associations has also proven crucial, as evidenced by the statement *“There is also the local Association (Podence Caretos Group), which has implemented several dynamics that promote tourism in the village through the Festivity, which has already been recognized by UNESCO”* [A6]. The success of these collaborative efforts is essential for ensuring that creative tourism initiatives are inclusive and benefit the entire community, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and collective growth, resilience and happiness.

Education and Capacity Building - One municipality highlighted the importance of preserving local knowledge and capacity building, noting that *“Innovative initiatives can emerge from masks, costumes, and other types of handcrafts that we have here in our region. [...] I think it would be important to make an urgent effort to capture and record the memories of older people regarding these traditions”* [M1]. Furthermore, a resident emphasized the importance of promoting the region’s cultural heritage on a broader scale, stating *“I wish the Caretos de Podence would travel anywhere in the country or even abroad to put our village on the map. [...] That's what brings back value to the village”* [R4]. A tourism agent also highlighted Podence’s proactive approach in embracing creative tourism, mentioning that *“In Podence, we've done everything possible to keep up with creative tourism and we're receptive to it, to new ideas, and to new collaborations with different organizations”* [A6]. Regarding the most desired visitor profile, a resident expressed a preference for visitors who *“Really like the tradition and feel it with respect”* [R5], while another observed that many of these visitors are well-informed, often academics or researchers who come *“On a professional level to understand the Festivity dynamics”* [R3], both participants underscoring the educational value these Festivities provide to those seeking a deeper cultural engagement. This demonstrates the significant impact that education (raising awareness of cultural heritage value) and capacity

building can have on both preserving cultural heritage and enhancing the tourism potential of these communities.

These aspects can lead the community to become an important player in the process of regenerative tourism development. Contributing to different Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as summarized in Figure 3.

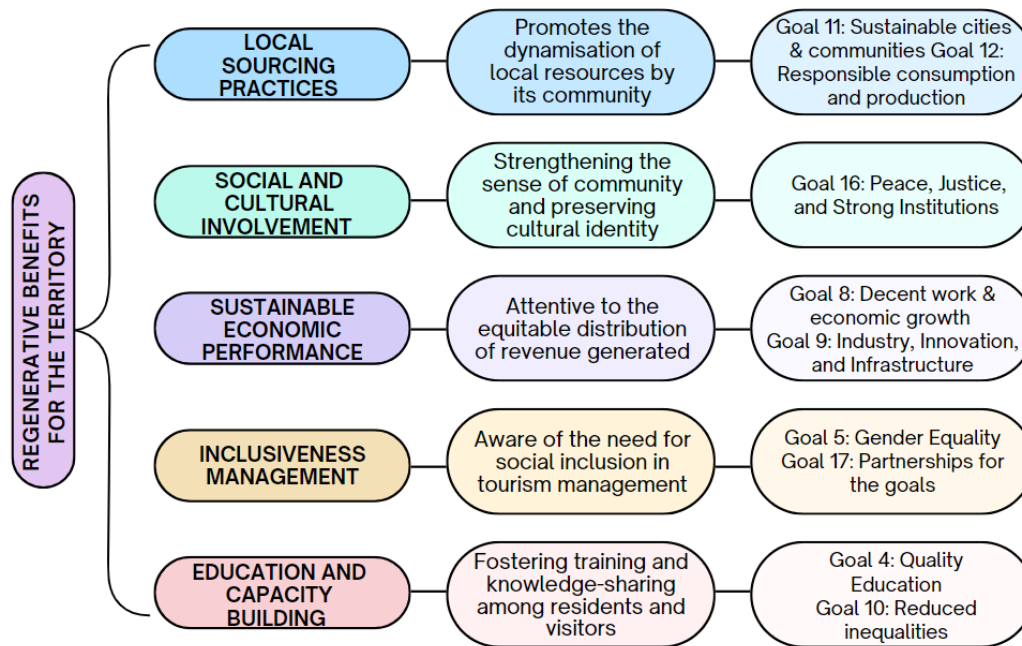


Figure 3 - Overview of potential regenerative benefits and associated SDGs

Source: Author's elaboration

6. Conclusions

The case study reveals that this cultural heritage can be a catalyst for local empowerment, showcasing significant regenerative potential by revitalizing unique local resources and skills, such as craftwork, which can be easily promoted in most villages, giving them new life and purpose. The findings suggest a positive correlation between the social and cultural domains and regenerative outcomes, including a strengthened sense of belonging and community unity, fostering pride and well-being, the attraction and connection of people who attend the Festivities with different motivations, and the celebration and reinforcement of local cultural identity. The need to focus on promotion and investment in the villages where the Festivities take place indicates the importance of equitable distribution of economic benefits, ensuring that

income is retained within these rural territories. From this perspective, several regenerative benefits emerge, including increased and diversified local income sources, boosting the economic vitality of endogenous products, the development of the handcraft trade, and securing more funding for local cultural associations. The consensus on resident community satisfaction and their engagement with creative tourism points to benefits in the effective and safe management of tourism activities within the territory. As the heritage involved is a collective asset, it significantly mobilizes the local community, ensuring effective coordination of their interests. Since creative tourism relies heavily on the local community's skills, it positions the community as both a beneficiary and an active contributor to tourism development. This dynamic fosters local empowerment and promotes the exchange of knowledge and resources between residents and visitors, deepening their understanding of respective roles.

This study has highlighted the necessity of understanding what improvements stakeholders desire, what they expect in return, and how they wish to contribute to the tourism development of their communities. Addressing these questions can practically drive the regeneration of these rural territories, particularly through creative tourism, which relies on innovation and collaborative action between local government, tourism agents, and residents. As Malek & Costa (2015) argue, social innovation requires strong community awareness of how to collectively and proactively address challenges. In line with the conclusions of Kastenholtz et al. (2023), who highlight the fundamental role of community collaboration for regeneration processes in low-density areas in Portugal, this case study underlines the importance of such cooperation efforts. The focus group findings clearly indicate that the communities view the Festivities as a vital ritual in celebrating their identity and traditions, emphasizing the significance of this heritage to their well-being. This was especially evident in the focus groups with Tourism Agents and Residents, where participants expressed that this cultural identity is a source of pride and self-esteem, fostering a deep sense of belonging to the community and creating pride in their territory. These findings resonate with the work of Cantar (2021), which suggests that preserving heritage based on its cultural significance enhances sociocultural sustainability. The results also support the notion that creative tourism acts as a catalyst for interaction between residents and tourists, facilitating social interactions rooted in creative processes of learning and sharing (Moleiro, 2023). Furthermore, the cooperative relationship between culture and tourism is well reflected in this case study, benefiting both, as also concluded by Gao and Wu (2017). From this perspective, this study further underscores the importance and necessity of having a management plan for cultural heritage to safeguard its

value, identity, and usage, as highlighted by Crespi-Vallbona and Smith (2020). Given the heritage under study, a safeguarding plan of this nature would bring multiple benefits related to the social regeneration of communities, specifically those presented by Zhang et al. (2021) including collective efficacy, community belonging, traditional social regulations, community cohesion, social networks, and community competency. This case study also aligns with the notion of a cycle of creating, appropriating, and returning social value through tourism, as advocated by Chim-Miki et al. (2023). Moreover, it demonstrates how regenerative tourism moves beyond sustainable tourism by focusing on contributing to the proactive regeneration of communities and their cultures, as Duxbury et al. (2021) considered. With this philosophy the nature of tourism shifts away from only transactional, financial activities to include ones based on relationships, creativity and other human values (Sheldon, 2022). However, it is important to note that the success of a regenerative tourism plan in this type of destination may face several challenges. Kastenholz et al. (2023) identify several constraints for their “Resilience-enhancing Regenerative Rural Tourism Model”, including lack of political will, bureaucratic processes, lack of capital, incorrect risk assessment, development of strategies disarticulated from the local context, population ageing, rural exodus, diminishing attractiveness of the destination, and perception of risk.

The results cannot be generalized, as they are limited to this case study and its very specific heritage, reflecting only the perceptions and experiences of the participants involved. However, this methodology can be replicated in other territorial and heritage contexts. This article doesn't include all the information gathered in the focus groups, so only part of the discussion is presented.

7. Future lines of research

Further research should focus on: 1) the need to improve the capacity to involve local actors and communities, and the strengthening of their management competences (Kastenholz & Gronau, 2022); 2) the connection and collaboration between different sectors in order to facilitate horizontal development (Guo et al., 2023); 3) policymakers active heritage protection and dissemination, contributing to the process of cultural heritage co-creation (Nobre & Sousa, 2022); 4) effective collaboration between academia and local communities, involved in the making of innovative and creative tourism products (Kastenholz & Gronau, 2022); 5) local and regional governance monitorization on the applied tourism strategies and local development

impacts (Castanho et al., 2023). In addition, it would be interesting to realize how creative tourism can help achieve other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (E. Duarte et al., 2022). It would also be valuable to explore the differences between rural and urban destinations to understand their varying regenerative potential and implications. Additionally, examining other forms of tourism could reveal how different territorial resources and tourist experiences contribute to regenerative tourism.

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