Community Archives as Innovation Driver for a Network of Territorial Enterprises in Inner Areas

Caterina Loffredo, Benedetta Grieco(✉), Ludovica La Rocca(✉), and Maria Cerreta(✉)

Department of Architecture, University of Naples Federico II, Via Toledo 402, 80134 Naples, Italy
{caterina.loffredo,benedetta.grieco,ludovica.larocca, maria.cerreta}@unina.it

Abstract. This contribution explores the role of community archives as enabling infrastructures for territorial regeneration and entrepreneurial innovation in inland areas. The research is developed within the framework of the "Archivio Atena" project, promoted by the Department of Architecture of the University of Naples Federico II in collaboration with the Municipality of Atena Lucana, a small town in Southern Italy involved in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) programme for the regeneration of historic villages. The study investigates how a community archive can evolve from a mere tool for preserving collective memory into a relational and operational innovation driver for local enterprises by fostering a new territorial business network. The contribution proposes and tests a methodological decision-making framework based on mutual learning and value-oriented territorial development, involving multiple actors and structured around four interconnected phases: identification of territorial values through the archive; co-design and reciprocal learning processes; experimentation between students and local enterprises; reintegration of results into the archive through a circular knowledge process. The experimentation, carried out between 2024 and 2026, highlights how community archives can support the emergence of collaborative networks, the strengthening of local skills and the transformation of cultural heritage into strategic resources for community-led development models.

Keywords: Community-based archive · Participatory mutual learning · Urban and cultural regeneration · Community enterprises · Collaborative decision-making

1 Introduction

1.1 The Research Context

Inner areas, which are considered peripheral in relation to urban and metropolitan centres, have served as a testing ground for new spatial planning and socio-cultural regeneration approaches for several years [1]. Since 2012, when the National Strategy for Inner Areas

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(SNAI) [2] was introduced, the first public policy in fourteen years to address Italy's most peripheral territories, there has been a significant shift in planning, particularly due to the change in cohesion policy towards place-based approaches [3]. The strategy aimed to allocate the structural funds available during the 2014–2020 and 2020–2027 periods to regions based on their development potential and challenges [4]. This policy is primarily aimed at recognizing the social and physical vulnerabilities of remote areas and communities, while strengthening the delivery of essential public services to combat depopulation [5]. This place-based approach is grounded in the idea that areas experiencing marginalisation and underdevelopment possess the knowledge needed to overcome these issues. The place-based approach aims to restore territorial balance by reducing social exclusion and underutilization of local resources through long-term action involving multi-level governance. Intervention in the local area must be based on a thorough understanding of the place and be subject to monitoring and evaluation [6]. The SNAI was subsequently replaced by measures introduced by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR).

The PNRR encourages public institutions and third-sector organizations to collaborate on initiatives aimed at inland areas. Its objectives include bridging regional disparities, as well as gender and generational gaps. On the other hand, the SNAI has encountered significant difficulties in collaborating and implementing the strategy due to its limited ability to function as a genuine inter-municipal system [7]. It has overlooked the importance of planning. A detailed analysis of the Strategy Documents for the 72 areas covered by the 2014–2020 programming period has revealed that a total of 14 areas are considering the possibility of drawing up a territorial plan as part of the implementation of their Strategy. The Vallo di Diano internal area includes, among the measures set out in the 'Strategy Document', a Strategic Tourism Plan aimed at enabling the territory to manage its tourism offering in a coordinated manner [8].

This research is therefore part of a wider framework of initiatives that promote the development of inland areas and encourage dialogue and co-design between different stakeholders through projects. Recent research highlights that regenerating these places requires integrating transformative local-level interventions with cultural and social innovation programmes that actively involve communities [9]. This multi-level approach, combining culture and public policy, is considered essential for ensuring a sustainable future for inland areas and reducing depopulation and abandonment.

1.2 From the Community Archive to Local Enterprises

According to the above perspective, this paper stems from an action-research initiative that brought together academics, researchers, local administrators and entrepreneurs to discuss cultural and territorial enterprise in inner areas. The aim was to reflect the full diversity of perspectives and activate a constructive dialogue and cooperation. The process serves as a methodological framework for interweaving research, teaching, and design experimentation to explore the role of enterprises in territorial transformation and regeneration processes. The initiative involves local businesses and university students. It is part of a wider educational project promoted by the Department of Architecture (DiARC) at the University of Naples Federico II, in collaboration with the Municipality of Atena Lucana, and implemented some territorial actions of the "Archivio Atena"

project, which won the public tender "Attrattività dei Borghi" (The Appeal of the Villages) under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan [10], funded by Next Generation EU.



Fig. 1. The Municipality of Atena Lucana

The Archivio Atena project aims to create a community archive in Atena Lucana (Fig. 1), a town of 2,400 inhabitants in the province of Salerno. Located in the inland areas of the Campania region (Fig. 2), in Italy, the project seeks to preserve and promote the town's historical and cultural heritage through innovative tools for collective participation. Community members have been involved in all stages of creating the archive, from defining the themes of the survey of tangible and intangible cultural heritage to identifying and describing the collected materials.



Fig. 2. The Municipality of Atena Lucana

The archive thus becomes a genuine "social space" [11]. Materials are collected through the digitisation of private photographs, the organisation of photography campaigns, the production of audiovisual material within the local area and the launch of

training courses. The community archive thus becomes an open cultural infrastructure [12] in which the collected memories and materials serve as tools for constructing a local community's narrative and initiating transformative processes Active involvement of the local population through mutual learning workshops, focus groups, surveys, residencies, art collectives, and participatory practices has enabled us to identify specific needs, strengthen social bonds, and highlight new heritage-related values [13].

The initiative took place within this decision context, involving students from the "Business networking" teaching course of the "Sustainable Development and Territorial Networks" degree programme at the Department of Architecture of the University of Naples Federico II, as well as businesses that won the "Imprese Borghi" ("Borghi Enterprises") call for proposals, which was promoted by Invitalia, the Italian National Agency for Development, [14] for municipalities that had won the previous competition. This educational experiment facilitates mutual learning [15] between students, entrepreneurs, and the archive. It develops ideas that can innovate the economic model, contributing to the identification of new synergies and multi-level collaborations based, in part, on cultural heritage [16]. Against this backdrop, there is a clear need for a methodological framework that can translate the values embodied in the community archive into practical resources for local regeneration and entrepreneurial innovation.

The proposed framework aims to achieve this by linking cultural heritage with local economic development through a circular, multi-stakeholder process, involving different local communities, universities, businesses, and institutions. The programme as a whole aims to enhance local professional resources and support projects of local interest, with a particular focus on collaborative networks. The mutual learning programme comprises lectures, explorations and discussions with experts, local stakeholders and students. These activities contribute to the creation of an open, dialogue-based learning environment.

1.3 Research Questions

This paper focuses on the following research question: how can a community archive trigger processes of cultural, social and economic regeneration? The research is set in inland areas characterised by territorial fragility and socio-economic fragmentation, as well as the underutilisation of cultural heritage and identity assets in local development processes. While the place-based policies introduced by the SNAI recognise the importance of territorial resources and multi-level governance, many initiatives have encountered challenges in establishing stable collaborative systems and translating cultural resources into shared projects and economic opportunities. Against this backdrop, there is a pressing need to identify operational tools that can effectively connect memory, community, innovation and territorial development.

The community archive is therefore not merely understood as a place for preserving memory, but also as a relational infrastructure that is accessible and reusable for project purposes. From this perspective, it can encourage new forms of cooperation between citizens, institutions, associations, and local economic actors, thereby triggering processes of territorial innovation. This paper proposes and tests a methodological framework for a collaborative decision-making process based on the mutual learning approach and the development of a value-based, multi-stakeholder local ecosystem.

The paper is structured as follows: Sect. 2 introduces the theoretical foundations on which the entire experiment is based. Section 3 presents the adopted methodological approach. Section 4 illustrates the main results emerging from the experiment. Section 5 presents the conclusions and possible implications for future research.

2 Theoretical Foundations: Values and Community

2.1 The Role of Values

Within this framework of action research [17], one of the central issues concerns the role of values in territorial processes. Certain types of values can serve not only as a starting point but also as a perspective through which transformations are dynamically guided. In this sense, value is not a static category but an incremental element that is constructed and redefined over time in relation to the territory [18]. Thinking in terms of values implies recognising a plurality of economies and approaches [19]. It is no longer a question of referring exclusively to a traditional economic model, but of considering a complex set of tools and practices that include economic, social, cultural and environmental dimensions. The territory thus emerges as a system of complex values [20] in which values help to define identity and opportunities for development.

From this perspective, cultural heritage, understood in both its tangible and intangible dimensions, plays a central role in regeneration processes [21]. However, harnessing its potential requires the ability to recognise the diversity of viewpoints and to address the conflicts that inevitably arise from them. The emergence of complex values, in turn, requires integrated assessment approaches.

Integration concerns both the dimensions of value and the tools used to analyse it. It therefore becomes necessary to bring together economic and non-economic values, recognising their interdependence in transformation processes [22]. It follows that decisions must be situated: rooted in local contexts, mindful of available resources and sensitive to specific needs. This implies that project proposals cannot be generic, but must emerge from a progressive and in-depth understanding of the Atena Lucana area.

Particularly relevant, in this context, is the issue of relationships. Alongside traditionally recognised values, importance is attached to those values which, in Anglo-Saxon literature, are defined as ‘glue values’ [23], or ‘binding’ values. These are values capable of fostering cohesion, strengthening bonds between people and sustaining relationships over time. When such values are put into practice, they set in motion self-generating processes, akin to autopoietic dynamics: systems that regenerate themselves and become vital to the community. In this sense, bonds prove to be more stable and generative than relationships, helping to build continuity and solidity in local processes. It therefore becomes essential to identify and build enabling contexts capable of fostering the emergence and consolidation of such bonds. The traditional dichotomies between public and private are insufficient to describe the complexity of the processes underway; it is necessary to adopt a broader perspective that brings together the public, private and social dimensions, recognising people as key actors.

Collaborating, cooperating and building alliances are distinct processes involving different levels of interaction. Understanding their specific characteristics is fundamental to building economic models capable of coexisting and integrating. Shared objectives

are not a prerequisite, but the result of a progressive process, built up over time through dialogue and negotiation. In this context, the workshop dimension takes on a central role. Co-design workshops provide a space in which the concepts learned are translated into practical action [24]. Participants are called upon to work on the creation of a values manifesto and the development of locally-rooted cultural enterprise ideas, defining models of sustainability and governance consistent with local resources. The outcomes cannot be predetermined, but are co-created through complex deliberative decision-making [25] and social learning processes.

2.2 Beyond the Concept of Community

Values thus act as unifying elements, contributing to the formation of communities that are not necessarily stable: on the contrary, they may be temporary, evolving, and continually redefined over time. The temporality and transformation of relationships, therefore, become structural components of the process. It is therefore necessary to explore the meaning of the word "community", not in the abstract, but starting from concrete experience and from certain theories that have shaped its evolution.

In the contemporary debate on urban and cultural regeneration, the word "community" is used with ever-increasing frequency; such persistent use risks weakening its meaning, especially when the term is used without being adequately rooted in a specific practice or context. The conception of this community experience draws inspiration from the legacy left by various authors, such as Elinor Ostrom [26]. The concept of community never coincides with an abstract or purely identity-based notion, but takes on a relational and institutional meaning [26]. For Ostrom, communities are groups of people involved in the use of a shared resource, which necessitates cooperation. What makes them significant is not merely proximity or territorial affiliation, but the presence of shared values and norms of behaviour. They share a common perception of collective problems and a diversity of preferences, elements which influence the spheres of action within which decisions are made. From this perspective, the community, viewed as a complex social structure, characterised simultaneously by mutual trust and local knowledge, as well as inequalities and conflicts, becomes a genuine institutional actor, capable of self-organisation, establishing rules, monitoring behaviour and applying sanctions, without relying exclusively on a state institution.

Ostrom demonstrates how communities can manage common-pool resources effectively and sustainably over time and generate robust organisations when there are shared mechanisms for participation, accountability and collective learning [26].

At the same time, for Bell Hooks, the concept of community is understood as an intentional and transformative practice, not as a given or spontaneous condition [27]. A community, for Hooks, does not arise from the simple sharing of identities and affiliations, but is built through a continuous and conscious commitment aimed at dismantling internalised and structural forms of domination, such as racism, sexism and classism, which prevent authentic relationships. It requires a willingness to navigate conflict and difference, overcoming the fear of the other, in order to cultivate bonds founded on reciprocity, responsibility and care [27]. According to this perspective, community is an ethical, political and pedagogical space: a place where we learn together how to live in non-oppressive relationships and how to transform ourselves and society. For

Hooks, "building community", therefore, means actively practising values of justice and inclusion, making the community not an abstract political ideal, but a daily process of collective learning.

Furthermore, Ivan Illich sees the community as a network of mutual learning; the community is conceived as a convivial network of direct relationships between people, founded on reciprocity, proximity and the shared use of tools and knowledge [28]. Unlike industrial and bureaucratic systems, which tend to monopolise skills and make individuals dependent, the community, according to Illich, is a space of collective autonomy, where individuals retain the capacity to act together, learn from one another and care for one another without delegating their lives to external organisations. It manifests itself in the possibility of self-production, the exchange of knowledge and informal learning, transforming every moment of life into an opportunity for active participation and solidarity. In this sense, the community is not a social or identity-based given, but a practical and relational process that promotes freedom, shared responsibility and conviviality among people.

Taken together, the contributions of Elinor Ostrom, Bell Hooks and Ivan Illich present a picture of the community as a multi-layered concept that cannot be reduced to a single dimension; in all three perspectives, it is a place of mutual learning. Whilst Ostrom's approach helps us understand how communities are structured and function over time through shared rules and institutions, Hooks' perspective shifts the focus to why and for whom the community is built, examining the conditions of justice, inclusion and the transformation of relationships. Finally, Illich prompts reflection on where and through which tools the community takes shape, placing conviviality and autonomy from external control systems at the centre. It is in the interplay of these levels, institutional, ethical-political and convivial, that the community emerges as a situated and dynamic practice, capable of serving as the appropriate setting for addressing the contemporary challenges of urban and cultural regeneration [29].

Looking back at the evolution of processes of territorial transformation, a link emerges between collective well-being, ethical progress and economic growth, which directs our thinking towards the many factors that contribute to a community's 'public happiness' [30].

3 Methodology

This paper proposes a methodological framework for a collaborative decision-making process designed to integrate community archives into territorial regeneration and entrepreneurial innovation [31, 32]. The framework is based on an approach in which the values embodied in local cultural heritage, as documented in the archive, are progressively transformed into operational resources for business innovation. The theoretical-methodological premise identifies the community archive as a dynamic mechanism, capable not only of preserving but also of articulating and activating the territory's identity values, thereby guiding decision-making processes [33]. These values, understood as knowledge, practices, memories and relationships, constitute elements of the community's tangible and intangible heritage and represent the starting point of the methodological process. They can be transformed into strategic resources and are dynamically

reinterpreted, acquiring new meanings and functions consistent with emerging needs. From this perspective, the framework is based on the identification of community shared values and their translation into project materials and collective actions, subsequently reworked by local businesses within their own innovation processes.

This methodological framework takes the form of a multi-stakeholder territorial ecosystem [34], based on mutualistic relationships between the various parties involved: the community archive, local businesses, the university, the inhabitants, non-profit associations and local administrators. Each stakeholder contributes to the process according to specific needs and skills: the archive articulates and organises the values; businesses translate them into products and services; the university plays a role in mediation, facilitation and knowledge transfer; the community of inhabitants and non-profit associations participates as both a source and recipient of the processes [35]; institutions support and guide development through governance tools. From an operational perspective, the framework of the collaborative decision-making process is structured into four interconnected phases (Fig. 3).

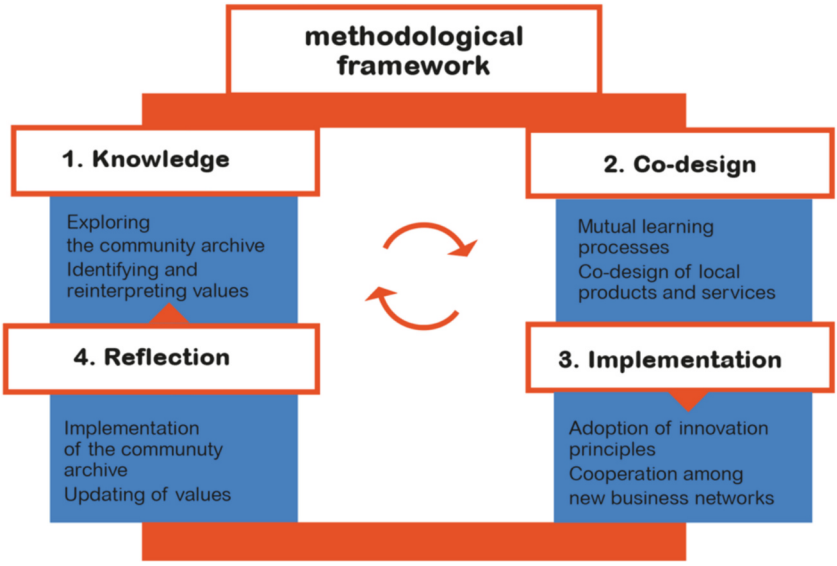

Fig. 3. Methodological framework: phases and steps

The first phase of the methodological process is one of knowledge and interpretation, aimed at identifying and systematising local values. This phase involves an exploratory process that encompasses both the values expressed by local businesses and those emerging from the community archive. Through analysis and cross-referencing of tangible and intangible sources, the values that emerge are subsequently shared amongst the various stakeholders involved and subjected to a process of collective reinterpretation in a contemporary context.

In the second phase, that of co-design, processes of mutual learning are developed amongst students, researchers, businesses and the community. It consists of training

programmes aimed at strengthening local skills and supporting the emergence of new entrepreneurial initiatives; this is also a design phase in which the values identified are transformed into resources that can be utilised in economic processes. Local businesses develop their economic models with the support of students, who apply the skills they have learned in a real-world context. Together, they initiate processes of product, service and organisational innovation.

The third phase concerns the implementation and sharing of innovation processes. Each business adopts the innovative principles that have emerged and shares them with the other organisations involved, triggering a process of continuous exchange. This interaction generates synergies that form the basis for building more structured alliances, such as a business network. Innovation is made possible by the recognition of the values expressed and acknowledged by the community and by the networking stimulated by the methodological framework. In this way, innovation develops simultaneously on two levels: on the one hand, it strengthens the individual enterprise through place-based processes; on the other, it consolidates systemic relationships between actors, contributing to the construction of a collaborative local ecosystem.

Finally, the fourth phase concerns the reflection and circularity of the process: the results of the experiments are reintegrated into the Atena Lucana archive and shared with the community, fuelling a continuous process of updating values and generating new knowledge. Institutional support and governance tools contribute to the consolidation and replicability of the model.

The methodological framework is characterised by a circular and incremental logic, in which the community archive plays a central role as a cognitive and relational infrastructure, capable of triggering innovation processes rooted in local values. In this way, social and cultural regeneration intertwine with entrepreneurial development, contributing to the construction of a culturally innovative ecosystem. The entire process is supported by a collaborative team comprising local administrators, cultural facilitators, entrepreneurs, community members and university researchers, which acts as a coordination and facilitation mechanism, contributing to building the enabling context for generative interactions.

4 Results

The testing of the methodological framework took place between 2024 and 2026 and involved entrepreneurs from Atena Lucana who had won the “Imprese Borghi” (“Borghi Enterprises”) call for proposals, which was promoted by Invitalia, the Italian National Agency for Development and students on the “Business networking” teaching course of the “Sustainable Development and Territorial Networks” degree programme at the Department of Architecture of the University of Naples Federico II. The experience highlighted how the establishment of ongoing relationships between universities, businesses, the local community and the administration can foster processes of territorial innovation in inland areas, transforming the cultural heritage and values emerging from the community archive into operational resources for local economic development. An initial outcome concerns the exploration of the community archive, which, combined with site visits and interactions with the cultural operators involved in the project, enabled the

recognition of tangible and intangible heritage as a strategic resource for the territory. Local memories, traditional practices and widespread knowledge were reinterpreted, contributing to the construction of new territorial narratives and the emergence of shared values.

During the co-design phase, the university teaching course fostered a dynamic of mutual learning between students and entrepreneurs. The students organised themselves into working groups, each linked to a participating business, to analyse its needs, challenges, potential and prospects for development. The interviews and focus groups coordinated by lecturers and researchers, using various analytical and decision-support tools, created opportunities for direct exchange between different areas of expertise, enabling businesses to acquire new interpretative frameworks and students to apply the knowledge they had learnt in a real-world context (Fig. 3).

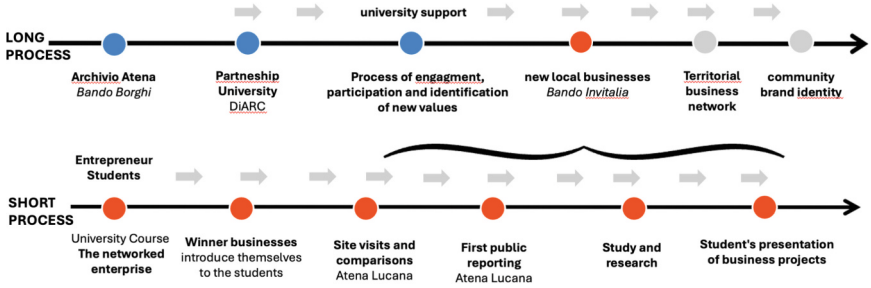

Fig. 4. Diagram of the dual mutual learning process

The diagram of the dual mutual learning process (Fig. 4) shows two interconnected pathways within a single mutual learning process, involving universities, students, entrepreneurs, the administration and the local community. The dual learning framework, structured around two parallel, interrelated processes, describes a long-term institutional pathway and a short-term educational pathway.

The first pathway outlines the overall process led by the university, which supports the creation of a community archive through stages such as engagement, participation, the identification of shared values and the development of an evaluation framework. This begins with the Archivio Atena call initiative, followed by a collaborative phase involving the Department of Architecture (DiARC) of the University Federico II. This is followed by a participatory process characterised by stakeholder engagement, community involvement and the identification of emerging local values.

These dynamics foster the development of new, locality-based enterprises which contribute to the formation of territorial business networks and the consolidation of a community-based brand identity. Throughout the entire process, continuous university support emphasises academia's role as a facilitator of long-term territorial development. The second pathway focuses on the experience developed between businesses and students and represents the short-term process, which is focused on educational and entrepreneurial learning activities. It originates within a university course and the

associated enterprise network. This involves interactions with selected and/or award-winning enterprises, followed by field visits and comparative analyses in Atena Lucana. These activities culminate in an initial phase of public reporting, which is then developed further through independent study and research. The pathway concludes with student-led presentations of business project proposals, reflecting the application of acquired knowledge in a practical context.

The two processes are visually connected, indicating the dynamic interplay between long-term territorial development and short-term educational practices. This interconnection highlights a reciprocal learning mechanism whereby academic research, local engagement and experiential learning reinforce each other mutually. This process of mutual learning helped to bridge the gap between academic education and local practices, fostering the development of relationships based on reciprocity, trust and cooperation.

The structuring of a training programme has fostered the exchange of skills and ideas and led to the development of projects capable of innovating the economic model initially proposed by the businesses and contributing to the identification of new synergies and multi-level collaborations, drawing on the values and suggestions from the community archive. The synergies and opportunities for collaboration between businesses have been made evident. Among the future actions, the establishment of a network of local businesses and the development of a community brand identity stand out in particular.



Fig. 5. Meeting with the winning enterprises and students, Department of Architecture at the University of Naples Federico II

In the next phase, the projects developed were shared both with the scientific community, through an academic seminar, and with the local community, via a public meeting aimed at the citizens and institutions of Atena Lucana. On both occasions, content, values and project perspectives emerged that will continue to enrich the community archive (Fig. 5).

In a context such as that of inland areas, where economic and demographic resources are limited, the creation of a local network is an achievement that ensures resilience and competitiveness. Tools such as Business Networks [36] and Local Business Networks [37] act as mechanisms for collaborative governance capable of fostering social, cultural and economic innovation, and promoting work-life balance.

This process has highlighted the specific nature of doing business in an inland area: where value lies not only in economic investment, but in the ability to build connections and transform territorial constraints into shared resources.

5 Conclusion

This paper explored the potential of the community archive as a mechanism capable of triggering processes of cultural, social and economic regeneration in inland areas, by linking heritage, values and local entrepreneurship. The results of the pilot project carried out in Atena Lucana demonstrate how the archive can evolve from a tool for preservation into a dynamic infrastructure, capable of generating knowledge, fostering relationships and guiding processes of place-based innovation. In particular, it emerges that the value dimension represents an enabling element in local processes: values act as operational resources which, if interpreted and shared, can guide the construction of new development trajectories. In this sense, the community archive acts as a mediator between memory and planning, making local knowledge and practices accessible and actionable within entrepreneurial processes. The proposed methodological framework has highlighted the effectiveness of a multi-stakeholder approach based on processes of mutual learning, negotiation and co-design. The role of relationships and so-called "glue values" proves to be a determining factor for the sustainability and continuity of processes over time.

In fragile contexts, such as inland areas, the ability to build stable and generative bonds is more strategic than the availability of economic resources. In this regard, the gradual development of a network of local businesses and support for the emergence of organisational forms as concrete outcomes of the process act as levers for endogenous and collaborative development. The community archive can therefore be interpreted as an enabling infrastructure for the construction of integrated local ecosystems, in which cultural, social and economic dimensions reinforce one another.

According to this perspective, the definition of a community brand identity represents a possible strategic evolution, capable of enhancing the recognisability of the territory and connecting heritage, local production and tourism dynamics, without reducing the complexity of local identities but rather enhancing them within a shared vision. The process analysed converges on the construction of a shared territorial agenda as the result of a continuous process of negotiation and collective learning among different actors, where the role of institutions is supporting these dynamics through tools of inclusive governance and policies, capable of ensuring continuity and consolidation over time.

The results of the implemented process open the way for further research opportunities; it seems relevant to investigate the conditions for replicating the framework in other territorial contexts. From this perspective, the focus on paradigms such as the economy of well-being and public happiness invites us to rethink development models for inland areas in a cooperative, inclusive and quality-of-life-oriented manner.

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