

Planning and reporting the social and economic impacts of culture in ECoC Italian candidate cities: a lost opportunity?

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Abstract

Social and economic impacts of the arts and culture are a recurring topic in the literature of last two decades or more. Scepticism, in various extents, about their measurability coexists with an increasing accountability demand, and trust in quantitative score-based methods, as in SROI (Social Return On Investments), as well as in purely qualitative narrative-based techniques, as in MSC (Most Significant Change).

In many cases, efforts to reporting cultural impacts appear disembodied from any planning frame of reference. It is so in many *ex post* evaluations, aimed at recollecting *unplanned* and *unintended* outcomes and spill-overs of cultural projects of various nature. It occurs also when the only measurable or reportable things are *inputs* or *processes*, but they are disconnected from target or output indicators.

With its 30 years of existence, the European Capital of Culture Programme has increasingly developed a praxis – not only a formal procedure – for planning, monitoring and short term and medium term evaluating the desired impacts of the cultural investments, activities, events, etc. for candidate and selected cities to follow. The present paper investigates the use of impact and result indicators in the ECoC selection process in Italy (2013-2014), resulted in the adoption of Matera as European Capital of culture for 2019.

Keywords: Cultural economics, cultural impact assessment, cultural indicators, European Capital of Culture.

1. Are the social impacts of culture accountable?

Along with the economic, social impacts of the arts and culture are a recurring topic in the literature of last two decades or more (Matarasso 1997, Reeve 2002, Holden 2004, AEGIS 2005, Mirza 2006, Radbourne et al. 2010, Crease 2013, Cicerchia 2015a/b).

Scepticism, in various extents, about their measurability coexists with an increasing accountability demand, and trust in quantitative score-based methods, as in SROI (Social Return On Investments) (Ratti, 2015), as well as in purely qualitative narrative-based techniques, as in MSC (Most Significant Change) (Cicerchia, 2015a) to provide decisive evidence. If some observe that the discourse about impacts of culture is mostly anecdotal and hardly developed to a methodological maturity, others contest that in other scientific fields, like epidemiology, anecdotal methods are considered to be orthodox and reliable.

From two opposite standpoints, Francis Matarasso (1997, 2012) and Eleonora Belfiore (2006, Belfiore and Bennet, 2009) have questioned the very idea of measuring culture's impacts on society, both coming, despite their profound differences, to the conclusion that traditional quantitative approaches are not able to grasp the essential nature of those impacts. This leads Matarasso to suggest alternative, qualitative approaches, and Belfiore to more drastic conclusions.

On the practical side, the EU and its Member States trust in the development opportunity offered by cultural projects to regions and cities: in 2007-2013, the Structural Funds supported cultural projects with 6 billion euros, while the sectorial Culture EU programme barely reached 400 million (Iglesias et al. 2012). In Italy, in the same period, out of a total public ERDF funding of 30 billion, 3.3% went to culture.

But also in that case, and in general, efforts to report cultural impacts appear disembodied from a proper planning frame of reference. Often, in the Structural Funds, and particularly in the field of cultural heritage, expected benefits and impacts are described vaguely and quantified by scarce, weak and generic indicators (if any), and too frequently the only available measure is the number of admissions to (State) Museums. In different policy contexts, like national or local sectorial projects, ex post evaluations aim at recollecting *unplanned* and *unintended* outcomes and spill-overs of cultural activities of various nature. It happens also when the only measurable or reportable things are *inputs* (i.e. expenditure) or *performance* (e.g. exhibits opening days, book loans for libraries, etc.), disconnected from target or output indicators.

Montalto and Iglesias have recently (2014) stressed how culture's impacts are hardly quantified, isolated and evident in the short term. Dal Pozzolo (2015) warns against oversimplification - stressing that cultural impacts may also be sometimes undesirable and negative, at least for some groups - and excess standardisation: successful impacts may be the result of very long incubation periods of continued investment and intervention, as shown by the case of the city of Turin between the 1990s, when culture-based strategies of urban recovery were started, and 2006, when, with the Winter Olympic Games, the changes finally began to show. Dal Pozzolo adds that the

geographic fallout area of different cultural projects may vary greatly, from the international impact to the very local, *niche*, one. Metrics, he suggests, should be tailored *ad hoc*, to suit the appropriate size of the action to be evaluated. There is also a disproportion between the dimension of the investments and the impact they generate, but not always a big funding produces big social impacts: e.g. huge costly restoration programmes have indeed benefitted the beautiful historical built heritage in Viterbo at the beginning of the 2000s, but with very little if any impact on the social and cultural life of the city until recently (Follo 2014); the Banda Rustica-BandaX project, started in 2000 in one of the decaying banlieues of Rome, on an initial investment of 10,000 euros in musical instruments and a total cost of 65,000 euros, has positively impacted in 15 years over 450 socially borderline boys and girls who have become musicians and been actively involved in a marching jazz band.

A fair share of the rich literature of the last two decades documents that most of the times social impacts were largely unplanned by the cultural *agent*. An example is represented by the studies about the positive variation of the general well-being of cancer patients following a continued experience of cultural participation and practice (book reading, music, dance, theatre, and so on: see Hill, 2014).

Social accountability remains however a legitimate aspiration for cultural projects, especially so for those among them that have been expressly designed to address specific social needs or with at least a general vision of social goals to attain.

The successful EC programme “European capital of culture”, started in 1985, is an interesting and almost unique case where the development of a set of methodologies and technical tools has gradually accompanied the core cultural planning to the point that the expected cultural, economic and social impacts are set clearly from the start. While the choice of the two countries of each year follow a pre-established turning criterion, the cities are selected, five years in advance, through a domestic competition which is largely based on how robust the plan is about expected impacts, activities and resources.

2. The European Capital of Culture programme: planning, monitoring and evaluating impacts

ECoC is Europe’s most ambitious collaborative cultural project both in scope and scale, with budgets far exceeding those of any other cultural event. Until 2004, the designation of European Cities of Culture was an inter-governmental affair in the hands of the Council of Ministers, without the involvement of external experts or any formal assessments. In 1999, the European Parliament and the Council of the

European Union decided to call the European Capital of Culture scheme a Community Action, and set up a new designation process that would apply for the 2005-2012 titles. Member States were listed in chronological order so that they could take turn to host the event. An international panel was set up to assess the suitability of cities proposed by Member States and criteria for the selection formally established. The British were particularly ambitious in their 2008 bid, launching a major country-wide competition with 12 cities battling for the title. An independent panel studied the bids before recommending Liverpool to the British government. To day, a selection panel made up of experts chosen by the European institutions (Commission, Parliament, Council of Ministers and Committee of the Regions) and by the Member State concerned assesses the proposals and settles its choice on one city. The EU Council of Ministers then officially designates the city. After that, an advisory panel named by the European institutions accompanies the cities in their preparations. As well as the management of the formal selection and monitoring processes, the Commission has published a guide for candidate cities. The Commission contributes a small subsidy to European Capitals of Culture. Between 1995 and 2004, the average total budget for a European Capital of Culture has been of €8-74 million with money provided by the State, the region and the city itself. (European Communities, 2009). Now in its 30th year, the ECoC programme has gradually formalised key planning concepts and methodologies to be used during the stage of presentation of the candidate cities, their selection and the winner's four years of preparation.

An impressive work in that direction has been done by the city of Liverpool, ECoC 2008, through the Impacts 08 programme, led by the University of Liverpool, Liverpool City Council and Culture Liverpool. Impacts08 has produced a vast amount of research, data, analysis and publications and the group was subsequently involved as leading partners in the European Capitals of Culture Policy Group, funded by the European Commission's Culture Programme for twelve months in the period 2009 to 2010. The Policy Group set itself the goal of sharing good practice in relation to the delivery process of the European Capital of Culture title and developing a common research framework to assess the impact of a title year (ECoC Policy Group, 2013).

The Policy Group has provided a broad research framework that consists of two key elements:

- a) Six thematic clusters that aim to encompass the broad range of potential impacts;
- b) A small core set of priority indicators supporting each theme. These indicators have been selected for being relevant and applicable in each partner city and they provide a useful starting point for further developing a core set of internationally comparable indicators. A wider set of indicators were identified, but many have proven to be

difficult to transfer across different settings and countries. Those listed have been identified as transferable.

Themes and indicators are outlined below.

1) Cultural vibrancy and sustainability. This theme considers the programme content of the ECoC year itself and the impact upon the vitality and sustainability of the cultural system and creative economy of the event host-city. Sub-themes include: artistic vibrancy of the year (cultural offer, innovative productions); profile of the sector (number and type of organisations, facilities and jobs); sustainability of the system (e.g. skill development in the cultural sector); the ECoC contribution (e.g. direct investment/funding of the city’s cultural system) and contribution of other relevant regional, national or international institutions.

Sub theme	Key Indicator
Level of Cultural Offer	1.1 No. of original art works commissioned by ECoC
Innovative artistic productions	1.2 Establishment of new artistic collaborations that arise from ECoC activity: Inside own genre/Across genres/With business/With public institutions vs. Locally/Nationally/Internationally

2) Cultural Access and Participation. This theme attempts to understand: what is the cultural offer; how access to it is encouraged; who is accessing it; why are they accessing it; and what value do they derive from it. Answering these questions requires the assessment of demographic and geographic data on participants and non-participants in cultural activities, and access to opportunities for cultural involvement. In addition, it focuses on particular sub-cultures and groups and explores experiences, cultural values, changing levels of participation and interests, and reasons for participation.

Sub theme	Key Indicator
Number of participants and events generated by ECoC activity	2.1 Total number of ECoC events
Breadth of cultural participation	2.2 Attendance at ECoC events 2.3 Demographics of Event Participation: % breakdown of audience by socioeconomic background - age, annual income, education levels (referencing National Qualifications to European Qualification Networks, etc.)

3) Identity, Image and Place. This theme explores the perceptions and awareness of both the ECoC programme and the host city, and how these change as a result of the ECoC year. The sub-themes for this area include the positioning/repositioning of the host-city before and after becoming ECoC, the changing perceptions of the city by local communities, event visitors, and non-visitors; and the strength of local identity and self-confidence.

Sub theme	Key Indicator
Number and value of published articles and media	3.1 Number of national and local press articles with reference to ECoC: within print media, social media networks and ideally to include an assessment of the tone of the coverage i.e. % positive and negative.
National image of city	3.2 National perception of the ECoC: i.e. % recognition rate of ECoC, likelihood/desire to visit

4) **The Philosophy and Management of the Process.** This theme examines the organisational processes and philosophies underpinning the management and development of the ECoC, the engagement with stakeholders and the networks created. It also considers the impact of the year on city management and the cultural sector.

Sub theme	Key Indicator
Budget: public and private investment and earned income	4.1 Total income of ECoC delivery agency: Budget source (% and actual costs) broken down by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local/regional government • National government • Other public sector • Private sponsors/earned income • European Union
Expenditure	4.2 Expenditure of ECoC organising committee: expenditure (% and actual costs) broken down by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programming • Marketing • Administration

5) **European Dimension.** How the local ECoC programme and host city engages with Europe and incorporates a European dimension into the year. Areas of investigation may include: activities organised by the ECoC in cooperation with organisations from other European countries; citizen engagement in European projects and exchanges; the number of participants and artists from other European countries, or the changing perceptions of Europe amongst citizens.

Sub theme	Key indicator
European collaborations	5.1 Number of European cross border cooperations in ECoC events/activities: (participation of artists/operators from other European countries) - to be broken down by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Origins of cross border European cooperations (countries) • Number of new cross border European cooperations
European perception	5.2 Perceptions of European-ness amongst citizens and how ECoC changes this: e.g. a before and after question asking “would you describe yourself European” (definitely, fairly, maybe not, definitely not)

6) **Economic Impacts.** This theme includes the overall economic impact of hosting the ECoC as well as the economic impact upon key sectors, such as tourism. It could also consider the wider economic impact of the year on areas such as inward investment, employment and job creation, and the strength and quality of the local business sector.

Sub theme	Key Indicator
Additional visitor expenditure	6.1 Percentage change in visitors to city 6.2 Percentage change in visitor spend 6.3 Percentage change in international visitors to city

Recently (2013), Steiner, Frey and Hotz, dissonant voices among the general praises of the ECoC, have questioned the actual contribution of ECoC to raising local life satisfaction. Using difference-in-difference estimations, they state that a negative effect on the well-being of the regional population is found during the event. While Steiner and colleagues' critique invites serious debate and reflection, our purpose here is merely to highlight the process of planning the expected impacts of a cultural initiative, monitoring their development and assessing their attainment. In this respect, ECoC, for its characteristics and history, represents indeed a useful exercise. In the next section, we will explore how the expected social impacts are indicated in the bidbooks presented by the six Italian shortlisted candidates: Ravenna, Siena, Perugia, Cagliari, Lecce, and the winner, Matera. Bidbooks are extensive documents, often over 100 pages. We will therefore limit our selective reading exclusively to the choice of indicators of social and economic impacts.

3. Planned social and economic impacts in the 6 Italian shortlisted cities Bidbooks

Bidbooks – although very different in approach, style and content – are organised along a single structure, as required by the National and European standards, with the following chapters, in the same order:

- Basic principles
- Structure of the programme
- Organisation & financing
- Infrastructure
- Communication
- Evaluation & monitoring
- Additional information.

Impact descriptions and indicators are found in the evaluation and monitoring chapter.

3.1. Ravenna

Ravenna's bid involves the region of Romagna, in particular the cities of Rimini, Forlì, Cesena, Faenza and the Union of Romagna Faentina, Cervia, Russi and the Union

of Municipalities of Bassa Romagna. It is a region enclosed within a 50 km radius, holding more than one million inhabitants.

The evaluation model and the key indicators are presented in the figure n.1.

Fig.1 Key indicators in the Ravenna evaluation model

EVALUATION MODEL: KEY INDICATORS		
Activities	Main Aim	Indicators
Cultural Vibrancy	A coherent, joined up cultural network and infrastructure both in Ravenna and in our partner cities	Range and number of cultural activities available to view and participate in
Cultural Participation	Local people are not only consumers of culture but also producers and distributors	Audience levels Participation by specific groups Impact on those new to culture Development of cultural leaders
Image and Identity	Confidence in perceptions of Ravenna and surrounding area both locally, nationally and regionally	Media coverage Local and national perceptions of Ravenna as a place to live, work, explore and visit
Management	Culture and the social and economic impact 2019 stands for has become central to policy and decision making	Cultural budgets Culture role in city plans/ strategies City/ region reflects Cultural Organisations in decision making
Social Capital	More connected and engaged local population Culture used as "Second Strategy" (see below) to provide new focus to tackle wider social issues	Participation levels and structures to engage local people More connections and understanding between different communities Volunteering especially from previously underrepresented groups
Economic Growth	Stronger economic performance	Visitor numbers, job growth, student and creative numbers
Physical Environment	Better venues More connected City; cleaner and greener	New and refurbished venues, heritage trails etc

For what expressly concerns social impacts, the bid indicates that a special evaluation working group will be established, with key partners from organizations such as health, police, community development who will identify and set the baseline for the key social policy priorities and can develop sound baseline data from the information which currently exists already and can develop it for the Evaluation model.

3.2. Siena

While the EC guidelines for ECoC refer for the most part to Liverpool's Impact08 project, the bidbook of Siena has adopted the indicator model proposed in 2013 by the city of Leeuwarden-Ljouwert in the Netherlands. The key areas are Culture, Society, Economy, Relations. Each is divided in three areas of impact indicators, as in fig.n.2. The Siena Bidbook does not list the actual indicators, but describes an articulated and participated evaluation plan, comprehensive of ex ante, in itinere and ex post distinctive stages, involving international national and local academics and non-academic stakeholders.

Fig.2. Conceptual maps of impact indicators – Siena Bidbook



3.3. Perugia

The development of a complex system of ex ante evaluation based upon indicators has brought Perugia to adopting the logic summarized in fig.n.3:

Fig.3 – The logic of the evaluation process - Perugia

OBJECTIVES	IMPACTS	INDICATORS	SOURCES & TOOLS	TIMELINE
Monitor	Cultural	Quantitative & qualitative	Existing statistics and studies for secondary data	2013-2018: baseline & ex-ante evaluation
Assess	Social	Descriptive indicators		
Learn	Economic	Performance indicators	Interviews, focus groups, ad hoc surveys, etc. for primary data	2015-2019: project monitoring 2020-2029: ex-post evaluation of short-, medium- and long-term impacts
Transfer knowledge	imagine			
	Structural			

Indicators are then described, with their impact areas and sub-areas and data source. Although largely inspired by the Impact08 model, they are however integrated in the areas and phenomena they cover.

For the *cultural area, sub-area Cultural vibrancy*, the proposed indicators are:

- % of city budget invested in culture (including CCIs)
- % of private sponsors in cultural events
- € value of cultural programming in the city
- N. of events (festivals, exhibitions, performances, parties, other)
- Educational/training offer available locally to foster creative entrepreneurship and European project management skills

- N. of European projects presented and won in the field of culture/CCIs by the city/region or cultural operators (related to the development of skills in European project design).

For the *cultural area, sub-area Cultural participation and access*, the proposed indicators are:

- N. of visitors to cultural institutions and events (e.g. festivals)
- N. of active volunteers
- % of residents attending or participating in events, including young and immigrants.

For the *cultural area, sub-area Promotion of European culture(s)/themes*, the proposed indicators are:

- N. of activities highlighting European diversity, based on transnational cooperation (by means of e.g. co-productions, European projects, international workshops or residencies, other)
- Forms of cooperation/agreements in place with universities in Europe on culture-related projects/research of European interest.

For the *social area, sub-area Identity and local pride*:

- Sense of belonging to the city and local pride of target groups (immigrants, young people, citizens living in the periphery)
- Improved security and safety perception among residents

For the *social area, sub-area Demographics and social cohesion*:

- N. of (cultural) initiatives addressing immigrants
- Ratio of young and elderly people living in the city/historic centre
- Measure of social cohesion among immigrants

For the *social area, sub-area Decision making process*:

- Measure of citizens' participation in decision-making processes to plan and execute projects.

For the *economic area, sub-area Entrepreneurship, growth & jobs*:

- N. of new start-ups in the field of cultural, creative and high-tech industries
- N. of people working in Perugia after their graduation
- Contribution to the GDP and employment of CCIs

For the *economic area, sub-area Tourism offer & visitors*:

- % occupancy rate of hotels in the city

- N. of thematic itineraries developed (“experiential tourism”)
- Turnover of the companies/consortia offering these itineraries
- N. of visitors (arrivals and presence) in the city (nationals and foreigners)
- Expenditure of foreign visitors in the city

For the *Image & branding area, sub-area Media coverage and reputation of the city and the title*, the selected indicator is:

- Volume and % of positive media coverage of the ECoC

For the *Image & branding area, sub-area Awareness & reputation of the title and the city*:

- Awareness of the ECoC among residents (citizens, students)
- National / international recognition of the city as being culturally-vibrant and having improved image (by citizens and visitors – nationals and internationals).

For the *Structural area, sub-area Multi-layered policies*

- Culture-led long-term development strategy in place
- Multi-sector partnership in place to implement the strategy (governance)

For the *Structural area, sub-area Infrastructure*:

- N. and € value of investment in cultural infrastructure and facilities (restoration, modernisation, rehabilitation or new infr.)

For the *Structural area, sub-area Environmental sustainability*:

- N. of events implementing eco-friendly practises or obtaining the regional “ecofesta” label.

3.4. Cagliari

The bidbook of Cagliari addresses the evaluation process to 6 areas:

- context
- governance and stakeholder engagement
- the cultural programme
- financial and economic sustainability
- image
- programme impacts.

Only few process/performance indicators are suggested. For most areas, the text only proposes as *variables* broad categories of possible objects of analysis – “tourism”, “territorial structure”, “social practices and manifestations”, “rating of cultural places”; in others, lists of possible data to be collected. Only for impacts, a list of indicators is provided, if somewhat vague and generic and often hardly covered by existing data.

Economic impact:

- occupation in the cultural sector (including women and young people)
- enterprises in the cultural sector
- new enterprises in the cultural sector created in 2014-2019 and still active in 2022
- turnover of the cultural sector
- entrepreneurship and new entrepreneurship in the areas involved in the programme
- tourist movement
- tourist accommodation capacity
- maritime and air routes active to and from Cagliari and Sardinia
- tourist flows in Cagliari and Sardinia ports and airports

Social impact:

- admissions to cultural places
- participants in the cultural events
- volunteers (Italian and foreign)
- number of cultural associations
- participant associations
- young talents trained in artist residences
- new forms of cultural collaborations
- young talents operating in Cagliari after 2019
- participation of Cagliari University students in international exchange and research programmes linked to the programme
- participation of children, young and old people in the dedicated events.

Urban impact

- number of places requalified and destined to culture and connected urban spaces
- new or renewed transport infrastructures serving those places
- km of roads, metro train, public transport, biking and pedestrian lanes.

3.5. Lecce

No indicators are provided in the bidbook, but it is announced that an integrated set will be developed ad hoc. The impact areas and their objectives are in line with those of the EU guidelines – Impact08 project.

3.6. Matera

Matera bidbook does not propose impact indicators, but, in addition to the EU Policy Group list of impact areas, special attention will be devoted to:

- a) Developing skills and social capital
- b) Enhancing active citizenship
- c) Involving volunteers
- d) The project's environmental sustainability
- e) The use and effect of social media
- f) The impact of the candidacy on urban renewal
- g) The impact of the candidacy on schools and other educational activities.

4. Conclusions

While on the whole the participation process for the 12 initial Italian ECoC 2019 candidate cities, and especially for the six shortlisted, represents an unprecedented integrated cultural-territorial planning exercise, which in most cases goes well beyond the levels of overall quality, creativity, vision reached by Structural Funds-related projects, evaluation is confirmed as a recurring weakness in Italy (not only in the cultural field).

Out of six bidbooks, indeed, only one – Perugia – offers both a detailed response to the EU Policy Group proposal and a further development of possible measures of expected and desired impacts as well as targeted surveys to cover those areas for which the data are not satisfactory or available. True enough, the winner Matera lists seven additional areas of desired impact to the Policy Group model, but fails to go in any further specification as to the way to define and assess them in connection to the ECoC programmes.

Impacts, their planning and their assessment, are by the most candidate cities postponed to a next stage, after the final selection. They are – bizarre enough – not deemed relevant for qualifying the proposal in the bidbook for the national competition.

None mentions the possibility of *negative* impacts, and that missing piece alone should raise questions about the consistency, accuracy and reliability of the approach adopted.

If their creative contents and the notable effort to translate cultural activities into urban policies and projects are indeed valuable for all the bidbooks of the six Italian shortlisted cities, planning and assessment of social and economic desired impacts - and anticipation of potential undesirable ones for their mitigation – are far from being brilliant, and can be considered, alas, as a lost opportunity.

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