Remote Places, Public Spaces

The Story of Creative Works with Ten Small Communities

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4. Challenges in Working in Remote Places: Measuring Social Impact

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The SMOTIES project is part of a broader debate that seeks to challenge current trends through academic research and practice to understand how design can improve social innovation. Design for social innovation is a field of investigation that is constantly evolving, creating knowledge that emerges in the dialogue between reflective practitioners and researchers who aim to define the processes, methods, and tools needed for social change, and measure the social change achieved. In this chapter, the design concept for social innovation will be linked to impact and the measurement of social change. The introduction explores a broader understanding of the topic, underlining the gaps in defining specific impact assessment methodologies in the design field. These gaps have been addressed in the SMOTIES project through co-design sessions with partners and residents involved in developing creative works in small and remote places in Europe. This chapter will examine the work done throughout the project, while presenting new possibilities for further reflection.

Measuring social impact in public space projects: a design perspective in European contexts

Innovations have long been seen as essential drivers for advancement and development, and primarily accepted as a positive good in the framework of human technoscientific progress, as opposed to stagnation and resistance to change (Suchman & Bishop, 2000). Although the focus has predominantly been on economic and technological innovations, a shift in perspective has emerged over the years, leading to a more comprehensive view of innovation, its sustainability – environmental, social, and economic – and, specifically, social innovation and its impact. Social innovation has become a key focus and one of the integral components of the innovation ecosystem at various levels (Murray et al., 2010; Terstriep et al., 2021; Manzini, 2015), including local, regional, national, and supranational levels (Kleverbeck et al., 2019). Accordingly, its developmental process entails change within complex systems, often multidimensional and uncertain, and involves aspects not easily captured or mapped through conventional approaches. This change requires long-term, responsible investment to enhance how social relations transform and grow, are interwoven into the socio-environmental fabric, and are embedded in processes of situated relationality (Mouffe, 2000; Rooke, 2013; Tsing, 2015; Di Salvo, 2015; Akama et al., 2019; Huybrechts et al., 2021).

Social innovation must be evaluated to understand the effectiveness and quantify the estimated value of related initiatives in addressing societal challenges and improving the well-being of communities (Krlev, Bund & Mildenberger, 2014) However, despite its relevance, insufficient data and measurement approaches to social innovation are among the primary obstacles practitioners face when supporting and evaluating projects (Krlev et al., 2014). While there are existing frameworks and methods for measuring impact in various sectors, such as economic or environmental, measuring social impact poses unique challenges. Unlike other forms of impact, social impact encompasses a wide range of subjective and intangible factors that are difficult to quantify and standardise. Measuring social impact, which originated in a positivist approach, narrowly defines social innovation as a product or service instead of a process (Antadze & Westley, 2012). The evaluation questions, range of impacts and values considered, and assessment methods used within this established paradigm are limited compared with what is necessary to fully capture all impacts when considering social innovation as a process involving change within complex systems. However, this broader understanding of social innovation has the potential to bring significant social change by contributing to extensive and enduring change in social relations, communities, and behaviours. Measuring and assessing the impact of social innovation initiatives is often conducted informally and qualitatively, if at all. Given the complexity of the evaluation process, it is essential to recognise that there are various evaluation criteria applicable to social innovation. Stakeholders have different concerns, interests, and evaluation requirements, which evolve throughout the stages of social innovation and within various contexts (Antadze & Westley, 2012). The aspects evaluated regarding impacts and targets vary across evaluative criteria, as would the extent to which impacts are potentially felt. Evaluation purposes and criteria call for diverse types of evaluation, evaluation approaches, methods, and tools. The criteria would also change depending on the social innovation, stage of the social innovation process, and implementation environment. Different evaluation approaches would also be necessary in the case of different interpretations and views on social innovation, particularly regarding whether it is primarily characterised by tangible outcomes, such as products, services, and activities, or the process by which it unfolds. This diversity means that there is a need for evaluations to be designed and implemented in a way that suits the purpose and context, instead of being standardised, which is usually proposed by existing frameworks. Most tools commonly employed in social impact measurement were not explicitly created to assess social impact (Alex et al., 2019). Instead, they are rooted in conventional economic techniques and financial accounting, reflecting a stronger connection with perspectives and requirements from the field of social finance rather than from organisations striving to enhance or monitor their activities' effectiveness. Economic-based tools are not inherently designed to capture social impact and frequently fall short of representing these impacts' full value and complexity.

In the design field, there is an increasing recognition of the importance of accurately evaluating the impact of interventions and subsequently communicating these results (European Commission, 2013; Westcott et al., 2013; Drew, 2017; Björklund et al., 2018). Evaluation has now been established as a vital component in the design process, enabling practitioners to assess the effectiveness of their interventions and make well-informed decisions

for future projects. Design-led approaches have long been prominent in driving innovation, especially in addressing intricate business and societal issues (Buchanan & Margolin, 1995). Nevertheless, research is still being done regarding how to assess innovation, particularly social innovation. A design approach to measuring social impact is especially valuable owing to its emphasis on understanding human behaviour, user experience, and the needs and aspirations of the context of the study, as well as considering the contextual factors that could influence innovation processes (Foglieni & Villari, 2015; Liedtka, 2017; Foglieni et al., 2018). As a direct result, a design approach is essential in design for social innovation. These practices are not only aimed at empowering communities with effective, long-lasting, scalable, and replicable solutions but also at challenging and reshaping the public realm, stimulating the involvement of citizens and other local stakeholders, including associations, administrators, and policymakers, in the democratic discourse about the public sphere. Integrating design principles into the social innovation assessment can enhance the process, making it more user-centric and context-sensitive (Yu & Sangiorgi, 2018), leading to a deeper understanding of the impact and effectiveness of initiatives, ultimately guiding the development of more responsible and impactful strategies. Incorporating design-centric methods into the evaluation of social innovation impacts can improve our understanding of how these endeavours tackle societal issues and advance socially responsible behaviours.

In the context of public space projects, where social impact is a primary concern, the SMOTIES project addressed the evaluation of support processes for the regeneration of meaningful social settings from a methodological perspective, which examined how reflecting on impacts at an earlier stage in the project can greatly inspire creativity instead of limiting it, contrary to what is usually thought. In this article, we will explore impact and impact indicators when remote places and their social dynamics are regenerated and how designers and creativity can play a role in rethinking the very concept of impact evaluation.

Small and remote places and the social impact of cultural and creative projects

Measuring the impact of cultural and creative innovations on people, their well-being, and social cohesion is a core challenge when acknowledging the role of culture and creativity as enablers of sustainable development. Creativity and cultural expressions can contribute to well-being, participation as an active member of society, shared values, social inclusion, and the development of intercultural dialogues, as well as a free, pluralistic, and diverse media environment (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2021).

In SMOTIES, creativity has been the key driver for social change in 10 small and remote places in Europe. The kinds of social innovations documented throughout the project demonstrate that new approaches are needed to go beyond collecting only economic and quantitative evidence. This challenge has been common to other recent research programmes for better advocating for culture and creativity in Europe, in an effort to address the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and achieve the European Green Deal and New European Bauhaus goals. In 2019, the European Commission published the Cultural and Creative Cities Monitor as a tool to support cities in shaping their policies and measuring the impact of culture (Montalto, 2019; 2023; Montalto et al., 2023). It aimed to create a methodology to show how culture plays a role in contributing to implementing the UN SDGs. Since SMOTIES focused on small towns and the impact that cultural and creative projects could have on their future development, the Cultural and Creative Cities Monitor was considered a starting point for reflecting on the type of impact that could be measured when looking at the cultural and creative performance of cities, based on UNESCO's Thematic Indicators for Culture in the 2030 Agenda.

Although it is commonly known that culture and creativity play an essential role in our changing societies, how we measure their impact is less clear. When we refer to the creation of new jobs or the establishment of cultural institutions (such as museums), a quantitative approach could work; but when our impact has to do with bringing people closer together, building a sense of community and belonging, and encouraging citizens to be active members of society, we may need to rethink our methods.

The Cultural and Creative Cities Monitor allows a better understanding of what it means to measure change in a city and evaluate how culture can make cities more attractive and thus strengthen cohesion and participatory development. In the tool, cities were divided into different scales according to their population and geographical size (L-large, M-medium, and S-small);

however, when applying this model to the small and remote places identified in SMOTIES, numbers were very low, and most indicators had a baseline of zero. Hence, there was a need to better understand how such a framework could support the project and what needed to change to be applied to an extra small, or XS, city.

Throughout the project, the impact assessment process was developed in co-design sessions in tandem with brainstorming specific creative interventions. Understanding how impact could be achieved and measured also influenced the ideation phases, creating a constant link between ideas and impact. Thus, impact was not perceived as something that needed to be measured after the project; instead, the creation of impact pathways became an integral part of the creative process. The visions and scenarios developed to frame changes in small and remote places (Auricchio et al., 2023) have been reinforced and informed by the social impacts that each SMOTIES partner defined in conversations with the relevant local community. The project scenarios were therefore interpreted based on the specific place the project was being carried out in, enhancing the design process to provide a better understanding of the impact of the situated creative intervention, which was tailored to a specific remote community.

Because of the lack of specific frameworks, during the SMOTIES project we developed a step-by-step process that allowed the partners to, first, understand what impact pathways are and, second, how to introduce and involve the local communities in their ideation processes. A final reflection on how these interventions have influenced the communities, their relationships and agency in the territory reveals how the measurement of impact is not only related to the final design of creative works in public spaces but also in the participative process itself, allowing the community to be actively involved in giving space to the future of the environment they live in.

SMOTIES: creating a methodology to define impact pathways

The remote places in which SMOTIES has operated offered different situated contexts. To identify the challenges related to measuring social impact in each remote place, semi-structured interviews involving representatives of all 10 SMOTIES partners were planned. In these interviews, partners were asked to list and explain the most significant challenges they had faced in their impact assessment work, and to answer two additional questions pertaining to each challenge: (i) to rate the challenge's significance on a scale from 1–5, with 1 representing "not significant at all" and 5 representing "extremely significant"; and (ii) to assess whether the challenge had been more significant in a small and remote place than it would have been in a node of creativity.

In total, the interviewees listed 10 challenges, two of which were mentioned by only one interviewee, while there was overlap in the other eight challenges the interviewees identified. The challenges were broken down into two clusters. Five challenges were identified as place-specific (i.e., more significant in a small remote place than they would have been in a node of creativity), while the remaining five challenges were more general (i.e., not more significant in a small remote place than they would have been in a node of creativity).

Table 1 opposite lists the five general challenges identified by the SMOTIES partners. Since many partners had limited experience in impact assessment before the project, it is not surprising that understanding impact measurement was a significant challenge. As one interviewee said, "Wherever you are and whatever you're doing, you have to know what you're doing. However, it took our team some time to understand what the impact of our project could be and how we could measure it." Another challenge was the lack of standardised metrics, which in some instances hindered partners from selecting appropriate indicators for their targeted impacts.

The open-ended nature of the participatory process adopted by SMOTIES also posed a challenge. One person explained: "We've been working very experimental and open-ended, making it hard to decide on an appropriate measurement approach. If you work with a community and take on board what they find interesting and relevant, then your project may change direction, and you may end up in a different place than you'd expected. And what you initially wanted to measure may not be relevant any more." Internal delays exacerbated this challenge for one of the partners, which impeded the roll-out of a digital tool intended to support the impact measurement process.

The most frequently cited challenge, mentioned by more than half of the SMOTIES partners, was the difficulty of measuring non-quantitative aspects. One interviewee commented: "In a place like ours, which is very small and remote, we must capture all the impact we can. But predicting when things can be assessed is challenging, as meetings

Table 1: General impact assessment challenges identified by SMOTIES partners, the number of partners affected by these challenges, and the average significance ascribed to them on a scale of 1 ("not significant at all") to 5 ("extremely significant") in a sample (i.e. 18)

General challenges	Partners affected	Average significance
Internal delays	1	3.00
Lack of standardised metrics	2	3.00
Open-ended nature of the participatory process	2	3.75
Understanding impact measurement	3	4.33
Measuring non-quantitative aspects	6	3.25

Table 2: Place-specific impact assessment challenges identified by SMOTIES partners, the number of partners affected by these challenges, and the average significance ascribed to them on a scale of 1 ("not significant at all") to 5 ("extremely significant")

Place-specific challenges	Partners affected	Average significance
Geographical remoteness	1	5.00
Limited data availability	2	4.50
Cultural differences	3	3.33
Gaining trust from the local community	4	3.13
Engaging diverse stakeholders	5	3.50

often happen organically. And even if they are planned, it can be difficult to assess things in a non-intrusive way." Another person expressed dissatisfaction with the results obtained using standard measurement tools: "We have mostly used interviews and questionnaires to gather qualitative data, but the replies are often predictable. People will say, 'Yes, things are better now, the community has a stronger identity, and we are prouder of the village. We even hosted a panel designed by designers and artists, but the results were similar.' People said, 'Yes, we know more about the valley's heritage now, and we will also travel by bike instead of by car.' But will they really? We have found that people are willing to engage with us and value projects like SMOTIES, but whether there will be any changes in their everyday lives is another matter. Maybe the long-term impact of our intervention will only become clear in five or ten years."

Several partners developed their own creative approaches to gathering qualitative data, but this could prove challenging, too. One interviewee recounted: "We decided to use postcards to assess the impact of SMOTIES events on the community. We designed beautiful postcards and asked people to write about how the village has changed. We even made a special post-box that people could put the cards in. But it didn't work. People felt intimidated. They thought, 'Who do I have to write to? And what am I supposed to write?' Many children thought they were supposed to write postcards to Santa Claus. Other children just played with the postcards; one had a chicken on it, and a girl kept playing with the chicken. There were a lot of things that went wrong, which we as a project team hadn't predicted. Often, people only tell positive stories when they hear about creative interventions. But reflecting on things that don't go well is also important."

Table 2 above lists five challenges identified by the partners as more significant in a small and remote place than they would have been in a node of creativity. Perhaps surprisingly, the geographical remoteness of the places in the SMOTIES network was not a significant challenge. It was only mentioned by one interviewee, who pointed out that the challenge was, in fact, primarily related to creating impact rather than measuring it.

A more critical challenge the partners faced was limited data availability, primarily due to the low number of local inhabitants who had contributed to the impact measurement process. Half of the interviewees reported that, with engaging diverse stakeholders being a challenge, it was difficult to collect sufficient data. As one person explained: "There are not that many people that engage with our project. And it's often the same people. We work with some associations, with schoolchildren, with the local authorities, but it's difficult to capture the voices of other village residents." This sentiment was echoed by another interviewee, who said: "We have a core group that is incredibly engaged, but out of the 600 people living in the village, there are many whom we haven't been able to reach. We have very little data on people between the ages of 18 and 35, and we have struggled to engage men over the age of 50."

Several partners believed that the issue of limited engagement was closely linked to the challenge of gaining trust from the local community. One interviewee emphasised the crucial importance of trust: "Trust is incredibly important for the kind of work we have been doing, but it takes time to build." Another person pointed out: "It's always difficult to come in as an outsider with what may be perceived as a 'saviour project'." Moreover, EU-critical views occasionally exacerbated the situation in some small remote places. As one person explained: "If you tell people you're working on an EU project, half of them will like it and the other half won't." There was disagreement on whether it was more difficult to gain trust in a small remote place than it would have been in a node of creativity. One person said that "people in small remote places sometimes have a stronger sense of ownership of the place", while another argued that there was no difference: "I don't think it's related to the remoteness of a community. It has to do with us being external. If we were working in a city, we would be working with a community anyway, and we would be from the European Union anyway."

Finally, several partners highlighted the challenge of navigating cultural differences between small and remote places and nodes of creativity. As one interviewee said: "I don't think we realised what it implies to live in a small remote place, to grow up and live in such a place, and what it means in terms of relationships with people from the city." Another person described how these cultural differences prompted the project team to reassess their entire research approach, not only concerning impact but also more generally: "We knew that working in a small remote place would be different from working in a city, but we're realising now how much these differences are changing some of our key concepts. What does it mean to innovate? What does it mean to transform? Our references for these concepts are places like New York or Milan. But we're reflecting now that places that have gone through slower evolutions don't need to follow the same trajectories as cities. Maybe we can learn from small remote places or test other ways of doing things."

The role of participatory designers in stimulating engagement in the local political discourse

The impact analysis technique was designed carefully considering the "impact pathways" or "pathway to impact" concept, as stated in the Horizon Europe application materials. These pathways represent the logical processes that led to attaining the expected project impacts over time. A pathway incorporates the project's outputs and how they will be distributed, used, and communicated. It plays a role in achieving the anticipated results within the project and, eventually, in generating broader scientific, economic, and societal implications. It is a time-sensitive representation that captures the intricate non-linear structure of research and innovation activities, incorporating quantitative and qualitative approaches and instruments. Using this linear model allowed us to link the development of long-term scenarios (Auricchio et al., 2023) – meant to drive emerging project areas and potential design trajectories – with an understanding of the complex transition. Undoubtedly, envisioning future change is a source of inspiration for any research project. However, it is crucial that any complex transition – particularly those beyond the project's scope – can initially be explained, understood, and accepted, and subsequently be observable and impactful to all relevant stakeholders to facilitate meaningful change (Spallazzo & De Rosa, 2022). During the development of the SMOTIES project, it turned out that engaging territories with untapped potential but without effective backing for regeneration projects can lead to unforeseen impacts much more quickly. The sheer existence of the project and the 'first citizen' engagement activities had a significant effect in stimulating or endorsing new ideas outside the project. The fact that co-design processes

could spark debates is indeed one of the most significant outcomes that may be achieved through design for social innovation practices; we were surprised when the effects of design for social innovation went beyond the scope of the participatory activities. The research teams found that initiating a conversation about public places and economic resources led to the re-emergence of underlying debates and increased citizen agency and proactivity. Assessing the extent to which the SMOTIES actions influenced this proactivity was challenging. In this scenario, the unique bond formed between the SMOTIES teams, and the local communities played a vital role. Initially, the distance between them was seen as a barrier to building trust and a sense of ownership among the locals. However, the teams' external perspective proved beneficial by offering unbiased input to the community. This prevented individual stakeholders from manipulating the project to serve their own economic and political agendas. We contend that this did not hinder the locals from taking on the responsibility to drive the revitalisation of their communities but fostered a strong sense of active citizenship among them. The current population decrease in small and remote regions has created an opportunity to develop a new type of local leadership: innovative individuals are assuming leadership roles, collaboratively shaping their communities' future, and actively engaging in transforming the local community. This enabled remote communities to take charge of their own development, going beyond mere participation to become self-governing entities. Citizens are forming new cultural associations; existing associations are expanding their partnerships with consultancy studies to apply for regional funding for the development of projects; and initiatives are being developed with a view to greater community involvement. Designers have successfully established a secure environment where all voices may freely express themselves democratically (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017), fostering a shared platform for a more inclusive and collaborative approach. The design process emerged as a political and placed act that contributed to the entanglements' complexity of the issues at stake and brought to the fore an agonistic perspective (Hillgren et al., 2016; Mouffe, 2013; DiSalvo, 2010) on engaging in political discourse.

As one of the partners of the project stated in the interviews mentioned above, perhaps the impacts of the SMOTIES project will be measurable only in five or ten years from now, and what we are looking at today, when some projects are being finalised, are first reflections on outputs and outcomes and how we gave shape to impact pathways, which were context-based and driven by scenario building processes. In thinking about how these remote places have allowed us to paint a picture of the future and our desired social change, we know that the social long-term impact will need time to be realised.

Working on these projects allowed us to understand how that foresight enhances impact measurement and addresses the relevant challenges. The insights that emerged when working on impacts, impact indicators and how designers and creativity play a role in rethinking the very concept of impact evaluation in remote settings, can be summarised in the following points:

- Design for social innovation should be considered as a process involving change within complex systems.
- Impact pathways should become an integral part of the creative process, as understanding how impact can be measured will influence ideation by bridging the gap between ideas and impact. Reflecting on impacts at an earlier stage of the project can greatly inspire creativity, instead of limit it.
- Design principles applied to social innovation assessment can enhance the process to be more user-centric and context-sensitive. Human behaviour and user experience perspectives on impact pathways could change how we measure a project's success; co-design processes could spark debates, which are significant outcomes achieved through design for social innovation practices.
- Empowering communities with effective, long-lasting, scalable, and replicable solutions, while challenging and reshaping public spaces, can enhance their involvement in the democratic discourse about the public sphere, so that there is no longer simply participation but self-government.

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