

Cultural Heritage Alliances for Sustainable Urban and Rural Development

Elena Borin, Fabio Donato

Purpose – This paper aims at investigating the potential of creating alliances between cultural heritage in cities and in rural areas for promoting sustainable development at a regional level and in minor rural centers. More specifically, the paper has the objective of better understanding the potential characteristics of governance and management schemes in the partnerships between cultural heritage organizations in cities/rural areas.

Design/methodology/approach – The research uses a qualitative approach, presenting a case study analysis of the project *Terre degli Uffizi*, implemented in the Tuscany region (Italy). The case has been selected based on the criteria of relevance and representativeness and analyzed through the triangulation of data as indicated by Yin (2017).

Findings – The project *Terre degli Uffizi*, promoted by a famous museum in Florence, the *Gallerie degli Uffizi*, and a bank foundation, *Fondazione CR Firenze*, with the cooperation of the Tuscany region, represents a best practice of partnerships between famous city museum and small cultural organizations located in rural areas. From the analysis, it emerged that, though the project was a top-down initiative, one of its main peculiarities was its flexibility and its capacity to tailor-make the cultural initiatives giving key roles to minor organizations. This creates the basis for the creation of a cultural ecosystem spread in the territory.

Originality/value – The results of the analysis contribute to the debate on the cooperation between cultural heritage organizations in cities and rural areas for regional sustainable development, as well as to the reflection on governance systems and management models for unlocking the potential of cultural cooperation for the territory.

Keywords – sustainable regional development, public-private partnerships for culture, cultural ecosystem management and governance.

Paper type: short paper.

1. *Introduction*

The importance of cultural heritage as leverage for urban regeneration and innovation (Aureli, Del Baldo & Demartini, 2021) and new societal models (Dameri & Demartini, 2020) has been deeply investigated in managerial literature. Recently, in line with the SDGs and with a general trend of reflection on the post-pandemic scenarios, there has also been an increasing interest in exploring the role cultural heritage can play in the processes of rural development, especially about the cultural heritage of cities (Escolar & Moyano-Pesquera, 2020). This paper aims at investigating this latter topic, reflecting on the potential of alliances between cultural heritage in cities and rural areas (Borin & Paunovic, 2016) to not only rebalance tourism flows but also promote increased wealth and more sustainable socio-economic development.

More specifically, the paper aims at answering the following research questions:

- What is the potential of alliances between cultural heritage organizations in cities and rural areas?
- How are these alliances established in terms of public-private partnerships and cooperation schemes? What is the role and relationship between urban and rural partners in the governance system and management model?

To address this topic, the authors carried out qualitative case-study research on the program *Terre degli Uffizi* (Lands of Uffizi) promoted for the period 2021-2026 by the Uffizi Gallery in Florence (one of the most visited museums in Italy and the world). The initiative has been launched in connection with previous cultural-enhancement initiatives and is part of a long-term strategy to boost the region and its cultural heritage and to foster widespread and more sustainable development in the area. This program aims at exhibiting works from the Gallery's collection in minor museums located in the Tuscan territory outside the traditional tourist destinations. The analysis focuses on the collaboration established for the program, involving both public and private entities among which museums and bank foundations, thus testifying to an ecosystem approach in addressing the sustainable development of the territory.

After this short introduction, the paper will be divided into four main sections. The first section presents a concise review of the literature on the topic of cultural heritage and urban/rural regeneration and development, with specific reference to the development of the theoretical reflection on cultural ecosystems, public-private, and multi-stakeholder partnerships in rural areas. After this section, a short presentation of the

research design and methodology will be provided. The third section will present the results of the qualitative analysis. In section four, the authors will give some concluding remarks concerning the theoretical and practice debate.

2. *Literature review*

The interest in understanding the role of cultural heritage in processes of urban regeneration, development, and innovation has been increasing over the last two decades and has been addressed according to various approaches, mainly related to sociological perspectives (Whelan, 2016), urban planning (Guzmán, Roders, & Colenbrander, 2017; Skrede, & Berg, 2019); tourism (Philipp *et al.*, 2022; Silvestrelli, 2013), but also from a managerial and economic perspective (Aureli, Del Baldo & Demartini, 2021; Pendlebury & Porfyriou, 2017; Zhong, 2016).

In these discussions, cultural heritage is often analyzed as a trigger for creativity and tourism and is primarily related to the reflection on cultural and creative districts (Andres & Chapain, 2013; Comunian, Chapain, Clifton, 2010; Cooke, & Lazzeretti, 2008; Duxbury, Cullen, & Pascual, 2012; Florida, 2005 & 2017; Hristova, Sestic, & Duxbury, 2015). Recently, the reflection on urban regeneration and development through cultural heritage enhancement has been linked to the sustainability topic (CHCfE, 2015; Nocca, 2017; Veghes, 2018), in line with a global trend of research on the role of culture and creativity in sustainable development (Lazar & Chithra, 2022; Montalto *et al.*, 2019; Wiktor-Mach, 2020). The reflection on culture and sustainable development has not only focused on urban territories but also on rural areas, pushing for a rethinking of the relationship between these two dimensions of local development. The possibility to work remotely has questioned the need to live next to industrial areas and enhanced the attractiveness of rural spaces: there is therefore an increasing need to improve the quality of life in these areas (Lange *et al.*, 2022), to which culture and creative initiatives could contribute.

Moreover, improving cultural initiatives in rural contexts could contribute to more sustainable development in many ways. It can help balance urban and rural territories in terms of tourism, offering a solution to overtourism and proposing a model for tourism sustainability (Pechlaner *et al.*, 2015). It can push for the democratization of culture by granting access to it in peripheral areas and to different types of publics, at the same time increasing the connections with different local entities, boosting a sense of belonging, contributing to accessibility and cultural education

(Ayers, 2022; Borin and Paunovic, 2016). In this vein, the theoretical and policy debate led to a reinterpretation of rural areas as ecosystems, loci of interaction among diverse local entities (either public, private or civic, cultural or belonging to other sectors) through dynamic mechanisms based on multi-stakeholder interactions.

Over the past 20 years, the concept of ‘ecosystem,’ derived from the field of biology, has become increasingly popular and adapted to different contexts and domains (Costanza *et al.*, 1997). Among these, there is increasing use of the concept in business and management studies (Basole, 2009; Iansiti & Levien, 2004; Peltoniemi, 2006; Stam 2015). Among many initial definitions, Moore (1996) described business ecosystems as interconnected systems of diverse stakeholders (customers, suppliers, funding bodies, trade associations, labor unions, NGOs, government agencies, and other interacting stakeholders) whose activities support each other. The ecosystem concept was soon embraced by several other sectors and became central to European industrial development strategies (EC, 2020a and 2020b), including the cultural and creative sector. Among the early studies, Holden’s (2004 and 2015) work stands out for his attempt at a definition of cultural ecosystems based on the “ecology of culture” approach. His model – which identifies three main spheres of interaction, namely “commercial culture,” “publicly funded culture,” and “homemade culture” – has been criticized for limiting the domains of cultural ecology to an analysis of the relationships between the cultural and creative industries alone. It has since been complemented by other studies that interpret cultural ecosystems based on the connections and contributions of cultural and creative organizations to an area and its stakeholders (Borin & Donato, 2015; Barker, 2020). A significant stream of research focuses on entrepreneurial ecosystems in the cultural and creative field and explores the motivations for collaborations among components of cultural ecosystems (Ballico, 2017; Protogerou *et al.*, 2016). Other studies have addressed governance issues (Oakes, 2019), exploring the potential of public-private partnerships and multi-stakeholder partnerships (public, private, and civic) as tools for coordination and sustainable exchange among actors operating in a cultural entrepreneurial ecosystem (Borin and Jolivet, 2021; Malshina & Firsova, 2018). Indeed, in cultural ecosystems, heritage institutions work alongside cultural and creative enterprises, government authorities, and local communities, while also entering into partnerships with other sectors (Andres & Chapain, 2013; Borin & Donato, 2015). At the level of economic-managerial analysis, talking about cultural ecosystems at the territorial level means above all reflecting on governance systems and management models (Biondi *et al.*, 2020; Dameri & Demartini, 2021) of the territory and the companies operating there, in

line with studies on PPPs (Public-Private Partnerships) and MSPs (Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships) at the territorial level (Borin, 2017; Wojewnik-Filipkowska & Węgrzyn, 2019), which more appropriately reflect a real ecosystem approach. The attention to culture ecosystems and sustainable territorial development has increased during the last ten years, linked to the reflection on the relationship between urban and rural areas (Cerquetti, Sánchez-Mesa Martínez & Vitale, 2019) and has been further stimulated by the pandemic period when the limitations imposed by lockdowns and social distancing have positively impacted on the need to redistribute people flows and inhabitants between urban and rural places (Cerquetti & Cutrini, 2021; Escolar & Moyano-Pesquera, 2020).

Research related to this last point seems particularly interesting in this specific moment when the pandemic emergency is declining, the sustainability issue is pressing and the need to design new models of development that could lead to a more balanced growth of cities and regions is demanding the contribution of different disciplines and economic-social sector for a profound change.

From a cultural management perspective, it could therefore be promising to focus on best practices of cooperation between cultural heritage organizations in cities and rural areas, on their governance systems and management model, to understand the potential of such schemes for the above-mentioned rebalancing of urban and rural areas in light of the debate on urban/regional development. This research aims to address this topic, via preliminary empirical findings that will be presented in the following sections of this paper.

3. *Research design and methodology*

As introduced in the previous sections, this paper aims to address the main research questions using a qualitative case study analysis following the case study methodology for single case study research introduced by Yin (2017). The qualitative approach has been adopted since it is generally considered the most suitable for understanding a phenomenon in-depth and for exploratory research (Silverman, 2016).

To answer the main research questions, the authors selected the case study of the cultural project *Terre degli Uffizi* (Uffizi Territory), a multi-stakeholder partnership realized in Tuscany (Italy) connecting the famous museum Gallerie degli Uffizi in Florence with small museums located in rural areas. The partnership was promoted and involved a private bank foundation as well as regional and local authorities in the Tuscan region.

The case was selected based on the availability of data and on the criteria of relevance for the research topics (it presents a suitable case to explore in-depth the research questions), as well as for its representativeness of best practices in terms of urban-rural development (Suri, 2011).

The case has been analyzed through a triangulation of data sources (Yin, 2017), specifically through document and output analysis and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. The data collected were manually coded through an axial coding methodology that allowed the identification of the main themes related to the research issues.

4. *Presentation of the results of the empirical research*

In 2021 The *Fondazione CR Firenze*, a bank foundation located in Florence, and the *Gallerie degli Uffizi*, one of the most famous Florence museums and among the most visited museums in Italy, announced a five-year agreement to launch the initiative *Terre degli Uffizi*, a major project aimed at enhancing Tuscany's art history by cooperation with small museums of the region. The *Terre degli Uffizi* project was launched by the *Gallerie degli Uffizi* to bring new life to the region's lesser-known areas, focusing on local art history to attract a broad and varied audience: the initiative indeed proposed diversified events, exhibitions, and cultural actions to promote and familiarize people with the region's cultural heritage. The project walks the steps of a previous initiative promoted by *Fondazione CR Firenze*, called "*Piccoli Grandi Musei*" (Small Big Museums), which took place from 2005 to 2014: it consisted in promoting and supporting 96 small museums in the province with funds for restorations and renovation, new layouts of the exhibition spaces and publication of scientific catalogues to raise awareness and offer a new narrative of the historical and artistic heritage spread throughout the territory. The initiative was also described as an opportunity to rationalize, renew, and propose a different managerial approach to the cultural assets of the Tuscany museums.

The project *Terre degli Uffizi* is also part of a larger plan to disseminate knowledge of the region's art treasures promoted by the *Gallerie degli Uffizi* under the name *Uffizi Diffusi*, (*Diffusi* meaning "spread over the territory") which aimed at fostering decentralized, sustainable, and territorial tourism while shining a spotlight on the superb art heritage housed in lesser-known museums through loan and joint initiatives between the famous *Gallerie degli Uffizi* and smaller museums of the province and rural areas. *Uffizi Diffusi* undertook an important activity of delocalization and valorization of the art in the Tuscan territory proposing a renewed model of fruition

of the *Uffizi* Galleries' collections. Through the project, the *Uffizi* worked in synergy with the peripheral museums located in the territory, loaning the *Gallerie*'s deposit artworks to them, to foster more sustainable tourism capable of bringing art closer to the territories: *Uffizi*'s works of art were thus made accessible through exhibitions in local museum spaces through jointly organized initiatives.

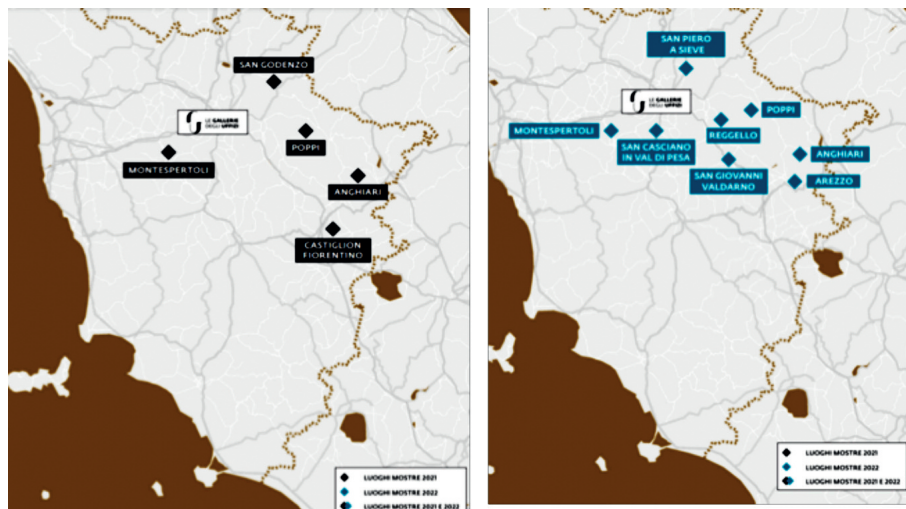
In this broad context, the *Terre degli Uffizi* project represents one of the instruments for the realization of the broader vision of fostering new forms of decentralized, sustainable, territorial tourism, while at the same time enhancing the extraordinary artistic heritage of some of Tuscany's lesser-known museum realities and creating connections between cultural heritage in cities and peripheral areas. The project aimed also at the creation of small local ecosystems triggered by cultural heritage cooperation.

For the implementation of the project, the *Gallerie degli Uffizi* and *Fondazione CR Firenze* have signed a five-year memorandum of understanding, for the period 2021-2026. In the first year of operation, the collaboration took the form of five exhibitions that are part of the celebrations for the 700th anniversary of Dante Alighieri's death, and at the same time deepen the link between the territory and the museum's collections. As declared by the Director of the *Gallerie degli Uffizi*, "an immediate and concrete implementation formula has been found in the first five exhibitions, all dedicated to sophisticated topics but also firmly anchored to the target territories. These are not initiatives aimed solely at increasing tourism, which was still faltering after a year and a half of the pandemic: they are intended above all for the local population, intending to strengthen the sense of belonging and identity that is at the roots of the highest, noblest civic sense" (Source: *Terre degli Uffizi* website, 2022).

The five exhibitions of 2021 were located in small towns in Tuscany, such as Poppi, Anghiari, and Castiglion Fiorentino (in the province of Arezzo), San Godenzo and Montespertoli (Florence). In 2022, the program increased, involving museums located in Arezzo (a medium size city) and seven small cities: Regello, Poppi, Monterspoli, Anghiari, San Giovanni Valdarno, San Casciano Val di Pesa, and San Piero a Sieve (see Fig. 1 below).

Fig. 1 – Exhibitions organized for the Terre degli Uffizi project
(on the left: year 2021; on the right, 2022)

(Source: <<https://www.uffizi.it/terre-degli-uffizi#map>>, accessed 20 December, 2022)



An innovative formula will allow small museums to loan the *Uffizi* artworks over the medium or long term, to consolidate the benefits beyond the usual duration of a temporary exhibition. To ensure the maximum impact of the initiative, an extensive communication and promotional campaign were implemented targeting the *Uffizi* large social audience with the creation of dedicated pages and content both on the website and on the Florentine museum's social channels. Visitors were provided with even unusual visitor routes, made easy to consult thanks to attractive and simplified graphics designed specifically for the project.

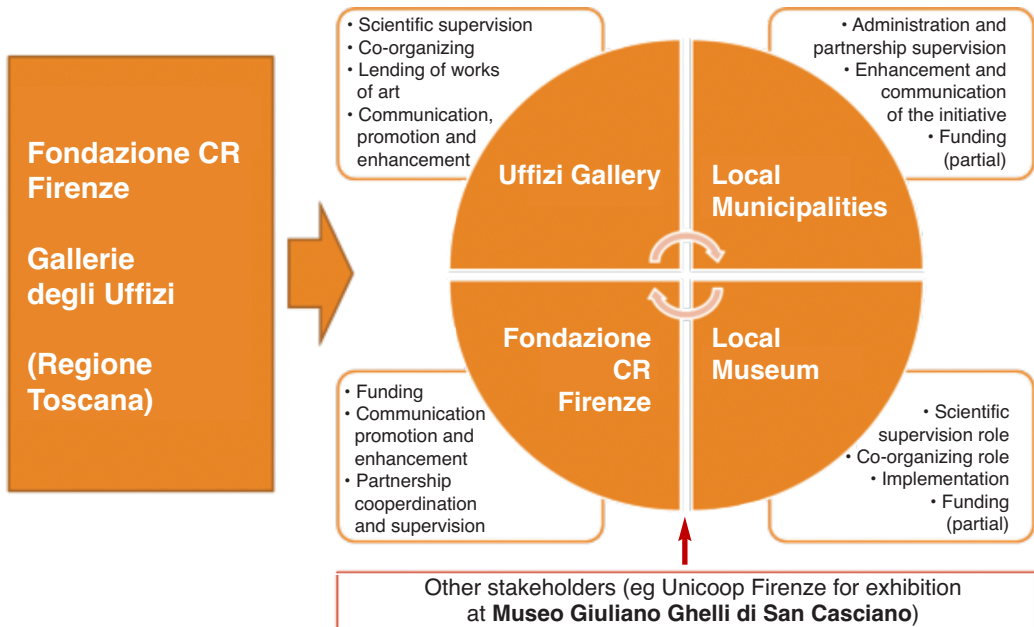
In the first year of operation, the project reached a total of 36,131 visitors distributed among the five exhibitions (as of December 2021), and an average increase of 16% in the number of visitors compared to the same period of the previous year to the museums of Poppi, Anghiari and Castiglion Fiorentino (respectively, +18% in Poppi, +14% in Anghiari and +18% Castiglion Fiorentino). According to the results of a visitors' survey launched by the promoters of the initiative, 83% of those interviewed stated that it was the first time they had visited the museum and that the main reason was the *Terre degli Uffizi* event, although they were planning to visit again the museum and the territories in the future. The available data, although partial and concerning just the first period of operation, showed that the exhibitions acted as an attraction point for lesser-known centers,

which also had the opportunity to make their artistic and historical heritage known to a wider public.

The governance of the project is regulated by a memorandum of understanding signed by the *Gallerie degli Uffizi* and *Fondazione CR Firenze*, with the cooperation of the Tuscany region. The organization and governance of each project are however tailor-made for each event and on the characteristics of the museum. For each of the *Terre degli Uffizi* exhibitions, four main subjects cooperate with different roles: *Gallerie degli Uffizi*, *Fondazione CR Firenze*, the local municipality, and the local museum or cultural heritage organization, with the general supervision of the Tuscany region (see Fig. 2 below).

Fig. 2 – Partnership scheme of the *Terre degli Uffizi* project

(Source: author's elaboration)



Gallerie degli Uffizi provides scientific supervision and co-organizes the event, guaranteeing the lending of the artworks and boosting the event through communication and enhancement of the exhibition and related initiatives through its media and communication and PR channels guaranteeing a wider resonance of the event. The local authority where the exhibition takes place is *de facto* in charge of the organization of the

exhibition, with administrative and partnership supervision roles, enhancement and promotion responsibilities for the event, while also providing part of the funding. The local museum, instead, had the role of co-organizer especially in terms of scientific aspects and implementation of the exhibitions, also providing parts of funding (mainly with in-kind contribution). The role of the *Fondazione CR Firenze* is mainly related to funding, communication, and promotion, as well as supervision of the partnership and project implementation.

For the organization of each exhibition, a further protocol of cooperation is signed by the Tuscany Region and the local authority. Indeed, the Region cooperates with each exhibition and related initiatives providing part of the technical services (e.g. part of the funding and granting the use of spaces for the events, while helping the diverse organizing entities to promote the event) and a part of the funding. Moreover, other cooperation had been signed specifically for each event, involving other local stakeholders (for instance, Unicoop Firenze a local economic entity partnered for the exhibition organized at the Museo Giuliano Ghelli of San Casciano).

Thus, the *Fondazione CR Firenze*, *Gallerie degli Uffizi*, and Tuscany Region constitute the governance authorities of *Terre degli Uffizi*, but the project is based on a flexible scheme in which relevant tasks are delegated to small local stakeholders (namely the local authorities and museums), using the visibility and funding of bigger entities to increase the impact of the cultural events on the territories. The coordination among the various actors guaranteed by the two main promoters enables the project to have a potentially long-lasting impact both in terms of local development and in rethinking tourism development as more balanced between the main city museum and the rural small museums. As emerged during the interviews, the project is perceived as a trigger for territorial development, and sustainable tourism development, thus creating value for the territory. But it also contributes to the creation of competencies and skills in the different stakeholders involved, thus stimulating the creation of a thriving cultural ecosystem in which each entity cooperates in a dynamic and interlinked approach.

5. *Concluding remarks*

The research presented in this short paper investigates the potential of alliances between cultural heritage organizations in cities and rural areas for territorial development. It explores the topic through a case study

analysis of the *Terre degli Uffizi* project, a best practice in the implementation of a multi-stakeholder partnership between a main museum and foundation and small museums and local authorities located in rural territories. The results of the research showed that the project started as a top-down initiative by the major entities, but it was successful thanks to the flexible partnership scheme, delegating key roles to small partners in the scientific implementation of the events.

The main limitations of the research are related to the fact that the results are associated with a single case study and are referring just to the first year of a six-year project. Further developments could therefore analyze a broader period from a longitudinal perspective and compare this case study with similar cases in other locations to identify common frameworks and characteristics.

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