

#Peripheral Encounters: rural networks for art, culture and youth in Alto Palancia territory, Spain

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- **Scale of activity:** regional
- **Actor/s:** association, CSO, rural inhabitants, youth
- **State of the activity:** started in Sept. 2019, ongoing
- **Keywords:** culture; youth, arts, depopulation, rural areas, network, exchange, collective intelligence, gathering, study visit



Summary

The “Peripheral Encounters” project supports Arts, Culture and Heritage as tools to fight youth depopulation in rural areas. The project offers safe and collaborative spaces for local based projects fostering attractiveness of rural territories among young people. The activities were organised in order to:

- generate local working groups involved in cultural, educational and social projects in rural areas;
- get them involved in defining territory diagnostics and planning youth strategies;
- arrange study visits and inspirational encounters abroad;
- arrange local events promoting and supporting creative work in rural areas in Europe.

Background

After the success of the European seminar "DinamizART", in Almedijar village in March 2019 on the topic of art and culture to combat depopulation in rural areas, the association Europimpulse Network and the cooperative Canopia reflected on the options to follow on. After presenting the idea in "Rural Experimenta" and receive feed back from experts, both entities sat down with the Extension Program of the University Jaume I of Castellón to define the path these #Peripheral Meetings could follow in a pilot territory: Alto Palancia region.

Objectives

The aim of #EncuentrosPeriféricos is to break the isolation of cultural, social and/or educational agents who work in rural areas. It generates spaces and

moments of gathering between these actors so that they can get to know, exchange ideas, inspire and support each other.

The project puts the focus on the collaboration between these change-agents as a fundamental element for potential local initiatives. It implements mechanisms and collective intelligence tools that promote mutual learning, as well as the design of collective solutions for shared problems.

Activities

#EncuentrosPeriféricos has been implemented in Alto Palancia region as a pilot project : its main objective is to define a methodology of intervention in the peripheral territories in order to turn them into more attractive spaces for the youth. The stages of this process have been:

1. Creation of a steering committee

It was set up in the summer of 2019 by EUROPIMPULSE NETWORK association, CANOPIA cooperative and Extension Programme of the University Jaume I of Castellón



2. Setting up a local working group

In September 2019 this steering committee launches a call to select four local initiatives and build a working group to assess the cultural potential and needs of the territory. and then propose a series of meetings to meet with other entities, groups, etc. and design collective solutions together.

The selected initiatives are:

- “Almedijar Vive” association: a space for meetings, exchange and organisation between Almedijar inhabitants to fight the village depopulation and to propose concrete solutions to its challenges (welcoming of new inhabitants, reopening of the school, development of new economic channels...);
- Alto Palancia feminist group: it claims the recognition rural women through awareness and prevention projects, socio-labour insertion and the creation of support networks;
- Libelula Negra group: it works on the organisation of "InTeresa", a performing arts festival. Its first edition was foreseen in Teresa village from 17 to 19 April 2020 and includes theatre, a street arts exhibition, an art workshop for young people and a collaborative exhibition based on intergenerational exchange.
- the artist Ángela Teruel: she works in the organisation of a sound happening, "Deja que te cuente", based on soundscapes of Almedijar.

3. Study visit to Corsica

The group's visit to Corsica (France) from 21 to 25 November 2019, was co-financed by the Erasmus+ programme. The objective was to learn from experiences and cultural practices in rural areas of the French island.

Participants visited “l'Aria” association and its theatre which offers trainings for all audiences; the village of Lama (210 inhabitants), whose Film Festival attracts more than 6000 visitors every year ; finally, the association VOCE which is based in the village of Pigna (80 inhabitants) and manages one of the eight national centres of musical creation in France, and promotes the fusion of sounds of the world with the musical tradition of the island.



4. #Peripheral meetings in villages of Alto Palancia

After this inspiring experience, the project partners worked together and planned four meetings to be organised in different villages of Alto Palancia.

During these meetings the following activities have been developed:

- public presentation of local initiatives;
- training related to common needs identified by the group;
- debates and round tables on "peripheral issues";
- cultural events or artistic creations;
- spaces to build links and create networks;
- informal moments such as picnics, heritage workshops.
- any activity proposed by the members of the network that promotes local networks.

The first meeting took place in Teresa village (242 inhabitants), on January 25, 2020 and was co-organised with Libelula Negra group and dealt with the subject of funding of cultural actions in rural areas: it included a training session on funding tools in culture; the presentation of FAVA365 (Festival of Arts of the village of Vilanova de Alcolea) and finished with a tour of the village to discover different spaces available for the organisation of the festival "InTeresa".

The second meeting was organised in Almedijar (254 inhabitants), on February 22, 2020, with a focus on participation and creativity to fight rural depopulation.

It gathered about 50 people who listened to the experiences of “Almedijar vive” association (Almedijar alive) and the forum Nova Ruralitat (New Rurality). It ended with a participative workshop to learn how to “make miracles” facilitated by Heterotopia.

Unfortunately we had to postpone the last two meetings because of the health crisis generated by Covid 19 and the state of alarm decreed in Spain on March 13, 2020.

5. From physical to virtual meetings: creativity and resilience in rural areas

The lockdown of Spain sets out a radical change in the paradigm of rural peripheries. In a few hours, they went from being forgotten territories to becoming refuge areas to get away from the epicentres of the health crisis. As the meeting (although virtual) is the best weapon to fight isolation, we continued organising these peripheral

meetings adapting to the rules imposed by the situation: developing mechanisms and using technological tools that allowed us to communicate, to learn about local initiatives and to follow networking.



Since then, four peripheral meetings have been held virtually where local initiatives were presented and training sessions were offered.

- On March 20, the Alto Palancia Feminist group presented its project for a travelling exhibition entitled "Rural Women We Had to Be";
- On March 27, Gregory Damman, from Canopia Cooperative, gave a training on mechanisms and digital tools for collaboration and networking.
- On April 3, an introduction to the Erasmus + Youth programme was given; two experiences were presented: "Rural Experimenta" which tests projects with peers and an idea of cycling project with young people to be organised in Alto Palancia in 2021 –on which participants could give inputs through on-line participatory tools.
- On 10th April, presentation of the sound happening "Deja que te cuente" (Let me tell you).

The project should have closed on April 10th. However, we have decided to follow holding virtual meetings based on training needs and presentation of initiatives proposed by the participants.

Lessons Learned - Towards New Peripheries

The new situation created by the containment for health reasons has allowed us to stop, reflect and be aware of the broader interpretation that can be done of a simple meeting.

After talking with people already involved in the project as well as other ones related to local development in different territories, we have become aware that not only physical meetings are necessary (although they are fundamental for direct contact as peers and to share informal moments): **we could broaden our scope of activity through the on-line meetings.**

These 2-hours virtual meetings have allowed the **attendance of interested people from the territory who were not available a whole Saturday.** They have also allowed to meet other people and projects, cover more territory and thus to follow networking around shared interests.

They are also a way to **maintain the initial objectives** of the meetings such as presentation of local initiatives or training sessions that have been useful not only for the local projects but also for other participants.

These virtual meetings also open **complementary perspectives to the strategies implemented locally:** we can organise meetings and generate collaborations between initiatives and groups that may be physically distant in Spain or in the rest of the world or even in the same rural territory, when travelling may be difficult.

The online sessions of the #EncuentrosPeriféricos as well as the materials are available online under a Creative Commons license.

As I write this, it is still difficult to predict what impact the pandemic and its consequences will have on rural areas, but it is very likely that the current paradigm will change quite a bit and that these areas will have to reinvent themselves at a fast pace in order to welcome and integrate new populations in search of healthier and more sustainable ways of life.

#Peripheral Meetings is based on the realities of the people and territories involved. It proposes a new narrative about these spaces considered as peripherals and takes advantage of the benefits of being organised far from the epicentres (urban, cultural, economic...) to think about new paradigms and to experiment with creative and sustainable solutions to face the great challenges of our time.

Source and contact



Information gathered at: #Encuentrosperiféricos; (6 April2020)

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Available on Forum Synergies' website: http://forum-synergies.eu/bdf_fiche-experience-213_en.html/