

RURAL ISSUES, RURAL PERSPECTIVES

Creative rural regeneration

Fernando Garcia Dory

The INLAND Europe network sees socially engaged art practice as a crucial component for community empowerment in rural development. It is based on the strong belief that creative investment can contribute to the revival of declining rural areas. The network calls for a European Working Group on rural arts and culture to promote the best approaches.



Fernando Garcia Dory*, an artist and agroecologist, is initiator at INLAND Europe, which was a project and now a network of actors using arts and culture as a rural development tool.

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INLAND started in 2010 initially as a three-year project with support from the Spanish Rural Development Network. It developed art projects in 22 villages, driven by the manifesto of 'Art, agriculture and territory', and has since extended to other European countries, creating a transnational network.

We believe that artists can bring a crucial set of skills to unlock critical thinking and creativity, expand the vision of the community and communicate and share results. We want to break the urban-centric, 'high art' approach and confront it with new territories and within social processes that can validate its pertinence and utility in the rural development context.

ENGAGING ARTISTS WITH LOCAL QUESTIONS

INLAND project locations include a forested area in northern Finland, vineyards in southern Italy, an island of Denmark and high moorlands in Scotland. All of these are relatively remote rural places, with limited access to cultural production and distribution and often at high risk of progressive abandonment and decay.

We start to work by bringing artists together with rural communities and **building alliances** with established art institutions, farming organisations, rural associations, LAGs and all levels of government bodies in each country.

An important aspect of the approach is **to accompany the artist** so that they are effectively engaged with local questions. A good idea is to create a core group made up

of the artist and community leaders to ensure local buy-in to the project from the beginning.

In this context it is essential to understand that the process is one of **'co-creation'** between the artist and the community. The artist is the catalyst for the work in which the rural community plays a full part, not only providing 'material' for the artist's work.

The **productive sectors** of farming and forestry have a central place within the approach, since it is in the production of our food, the direct management of natural resources, agro-biodiversity and rural landscapes that the whole narrative of a new rural Europe has to be built.

The methodology of insertion of the artist in the rural development processes goes through **three stages**: 1. analysis and mapping of the local situation and need; 2. training the participants and production of a project; and 3. sharing and evaluation of the results and outcomes. Each stage is important for ensuring the initiatives have a tangible impact on the ground.

DELIVERING IMPACT

The basic premise of our intervention is that creative investment can develop rural cultural capital, promoting capacity building and community empowerment. Ultimately, we believe that this can contribute to **reviving even disadvantaged rural areas** and **broadening public debate** on rural issues and the future of rural areas.

The art works and projects need to be **meaningful and useful in the local context**. For example, by offering

"Art is not only what we make, but what we make happen."



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A two-year collaboration between the internationally renowned Turkish artist Can Altay and the rural community of Carrícola (Valencia) co-designed new stalls that are used at the local farmers' market. The results were also presented and discussed at the prestigious ARCO Art Fair in Madrid.

opportunities to younger generations facing increasingly precarious and competitive forms of urban life or by exploring responses to rural challenges - such as the delivery of rural services or how inclusive communities are to newcomers regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion or sexual preference.

Another key lesson so far is that the artworks and projects have to contain a **quality and relevance** in contemporary art discourses, promoting forms of relational art emphasising process over object. We always aim to connect the interventions with the established art system. This is important for further outreach, tapping into the public debate, changing attitudes to rural areas and generating cultural currency.

One of the key challenges is to keep the diversity of languages and enriching procedures while making it accessible, pertinent, and sensitive to local conditions and demands. We are now working with Art Education Institutions to **train artists** to plan and conduct types of participatory action-research as they would master watercolour techniques.

A FINAL CALL

Bringing the arts into the rural context can deliver a **'return on investment'** not only in the limited terms of the creative economy. It offers a series of benefits - often intangible - in terms of community empowerment and contribution to broader processes of rural regeneration and development.

We want to work and exchange with other groups and actors, including LAGs and rural networks, to develop work in this direction. In this context, we hope the 5th meeting of the National Rural Networks happening together with the Amsterdam Rural Forum in May 2016 will help lead to a specific **European Working Group** that could help with the collection, dissemination and replication of successful arts and culture approaches.

"Sometimes an expensive bronze statue has no cultural currency, while a guided walk, or a banquet, when it is well-conceived and engaging, does."

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