

Learning cities in inner areas: The FestaSaggia case study

Le learning cities nelle aree interne: il caso di studio FestaSaggia

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Abstract

The FestaSaggia case study emerges from the REACT research project, conducted in the Casentino area, a rural region of Tuscany (Italy). Selected as an experience of cultural landscape regeneration and valorisation, the initiative was analysed through site visits, one semi-structured interview, and documentary analysis. The case can be understood as a pilot study situated within place-based policies for inner areas. In the international debate on learning festivals, FestaSaggia may be considered a cultural initiative that moves beyond the logic of the single local fair, building instead a network of actors engaged in the shared management of heritage as a common good. In addition to testing the applicability of the Learning Cities framework in rural and marginal contexts, the study seeks to make visible the value generated by cultural initiatives such as village fairs and local festivals.

Keywords: Learning city; Learning festivals; Inner Areas; Sustainable development; Place-based policy.

Sintesi

Il caso di studio FestaSaggia emerge all'interno della ricerca REACT, svoltasi nel Casentino, un'area rurale della Toscana (Italia). Selezionata come esperienza di valorizzazione e recupero del paesaggio culturale, l'iniziativa è stata analizzata attraverso sopralluoghi, un'intervista semi-strutturata e analisi documentale. Il caso si configura come uno studio pilota all'interno delle politiche place-based per le aree interne. Nel dibattito internazionale sui learning festival, FestaSaggia si configura come un'iniziativa culturale che, uscendo dalla logica della singola sagra, costruisce una rete di attori impegnati nella gestione condivisa del patrimonio come bene comune. Questo studio, oltre a testare l'applicabilità del framework delle Learning Cities nei contesti rurali e marginali, intende far emergere il valore che le iniziative culturali come sagre e feste di paese producono.

Parole chiave: città che apprendono; festival dell'apprendimento; aree interne; sviluppo sostenibile; politiche place-based.

1. introduction

This contribution draws on the FestaSaggia¹ case study, a cultural and community initiative rooted in the Casentino area in Tuscany. It aims to explore under which conditions a network of local festivals in inner and rural areas can evolve from a set of cultural events into a learning territory, capable of generating wider social, cultural and economic benefits. To answer this question, the study integrates the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) Learning City framework as an analytical lens, to test its interpretative potential in non-urban settings and to highlight convergences and tensions when applied to inland and rural territories.

The case was documented within the interdisciplinary project REACT: “Regenerating cultural landscapes in inner areas from a people-centered perspective. Historic villages and rural territories of the Casentino as a laboratory of creativity and innovation” (2022-2025), involving four departments of the University of Florence² and focusing on people-centered regeneration of cultural landscapes in inner areas (Lauria, 2025; Lauria, Belletti, & Del Gobbo, 2025; Belletti et al., 2025).

Within the context of place-based policies, the Casentino – together with the Valtiberina, in the province of Arezzo (Tuscany) – constitutes an inner area officially recognized by the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI), confirmed both for the 2014-2020 programming cycle and for the subsequent 2021-2027 period (DPCoes, 2025). It therefore represents a privileged context for observing how cultural and community practices can generate local capacities and sustainable development trajectories. Italy’s inner areas account for nearly 60% of the national territory and host over thirteen million people. Historically shaped by agriculture, craftsmanship, and localized forms of production, these territories are often defined as fragile while being progressively excluded from political vision and long-term development strategies. At the same time, inner areas are spaces where a growing number of citizens, particularly young people, move to experiment with new solutions, representing potential laboratories for the future of the national economy; places where innovation, ecological transition, and social regeneration can still be imagined and practiced (De Angelis & Tantillo, 2025; Tantillo, 2023). In these territories, the recognition and valorisation of traditional knowledge play a crucial role in sustainable regeneration processes, as emphasized by SNAI, which identifies cultural heritage and local knowledge as a strategic lever for the socioeconomic development of marginal areas (Barca, Casavola, & Lucatelli, 2014).

2. Cultural heritage as a common good

When a community attributes value to specific aspects of its heritage and conceives it as a common good – understood as a collectively governed resource, tangible or intangible, grounded in shared responsibility – symbolic, historical, and identity-based bonds linking people to places and shared practices are strengthened, fostering forms of active participation and responsible management (Alonso González, 2015; Bogataj, 2017; Iaione

¹ An Italian expression combining the meanings of *festival* and *wisdom*.

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et al., 2022).

Community, institutional, business, and citizen participation in regeneration projects may, however, be hindered by the learning exclusion equilibrium (Federighi, Torlone, & De Maria, 2025), a negative balance characterizing many inner areas, trapped in a spiral of low educational attainment, limited investment in human capital, and weak demand for qualified skills. This systemic imbalance, which concentrates knowledge and opportunities in metropolitan areas, fuels migration flows toward cities, progressively emptying fewer central regions and intensifying polarization and depopulation processes (Iammarino et al., 2019). Territory's capacity to respond effectively to economic, environmental, social, and cultural challenges in macro and micro level regeneration actions, depends both on the degree of cooperation and participation of local actors in decision-making processes and on the adoption of measures that support their development (Federighi, 2025). These interventions leverage the strengthening and circulation of human and social capital through networks of relationships based on trust and reciprocity. In such contexts, informal and situated learning practices operating outside formal channels can reach publics, knowledge, and resources that would otherwise remain excluded from development processes. Cultural heritage, in both its tangible and intangible dimensions, thus represents a dynamic resource to be safeguarded, capable of generating educational and social value (Del Gobbo, 2024; Del Gobbo, Torlone, & Galeotti, 2018).

3. From local festivals to learning environments

Planning lifelong learning festivals that, over time, can build awareness and understanding of the value and benefits of learning throughout life, across multiple contexts and for both individuals and communities, is a challenge with a long-standing tradition. It is widely recognised that learning festivals “have intrinsic value and may also act as a catalyst and framework to build an inclusive and sustainable learning city, combining local and global perspectives in addressing the challenges and opportunities of a dynamic and unpredictable globalised environment” (Kearns, Lane, Neylon, & Osborne, 2013, p. 1).

Studies on learning festivals show how bottom-up initiatives can promote participation by making visible a wide range of learning contexts, latent educational needs and inequalities in access. These initiatives are described as spaces capable of influencing policy agendas, fostering participation and performing a form of bottom-up advocacy, especially for more marginalised target groups, by responding to recognition needs that rarely emerge through institutional channels (Tuckett, 2021). The role of Adult Learners' Weeks in mobilising under-represented groups represented an important strand of the regional processes leading to CONFINTEA VI in Belém in 2009, where a commitment was made to promote and support more equitable access to, and participation in, adult learning and education (UIL, 2010). Each festival is unique in that it activates and makes visible locally rooted networks, while the events organised reflect variations in membership and participation depending on the territory on which they are embedded. Moreover, learning festivals may foster the creation of partnerships that extend beyond municipal boundaries, contributing to the emergence of wider territorial and regional networks (Kearns et al., 2013; Tuckett, 2021). Several well-established examples show how bottom-up practices are subsequently recognised, supported or integrated into learning city, learning region and lifelong learning strategies (Ó Tuama, 2016). While literature highlights the potential of learning festivals to foster participation, inclusion and policy influence, a critical issue remains their recognition and assessment, particularly about their longer-term social and economic contributions.

Within the Unesco Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC), learning festivals are included among the strategic tools aimed at promoting and celebrating learning in all its forms and encouraging participation by people of all ages and backgrounds, especially those who might otherwise feel excluded from learning (UIL, 2015).

If local festivals are to be interpreted not merely as cultural events but as learning environments embedded in specific territorial contexts, this raises the question of how their learning outcomes can be made visible and legible to institutions and policymakers concerned with territorial regeneration and development. Evaluation tools often struggle to capture informal learning processes and indirect economic effects generated through heritage transmission and community engagement.

4. Methodological approach

The evaluation approach developed within the REACT project for Recovery and Valorisation of Cultural Landscapes (RVPC) initiatives in inner areas is designed to support both prospective (ex-ante) and retrospective (ex-post) analysis. The methodology is based on the definition of a set of sustainability indicators articulated across five impact areas – economic, social, environmental, cultural and governance – allowing for a multidimensional assessment of territorial initiatives.

Within the REACT framework, evaluation is conceived as an open and participatory process, aimed at supporting co-designing of context-specific assessment tools and the active involving local actors in defining evaluation objectives and using results to support the continuous improvement of territorial impacts (Belletti et al., 2025). To analyse the effects of RVPC initiatives, two main approaches are generally available: a diachronic approach – based on a comparison of the state of the object of intervention and of the system to which it belongs, as observed before and after the initiative – and a synchronic approach, the latter requiring the identification of a fully comparable context in which the initiative has not been implemented, defined as a ‘counterfactual’. However, given the difficulty of identifying truly comparable contexts – due to the specificity of territories and RVPC initiatives – and of isolating impacts, the REACT evaluation framework primarily adopts a diachronic approach, selectively complemented by synchronic elements for specific aspects where appropriate (Lauria, 2025; Belletti et al., 2025).

To address the challenge of territorial regeneration through cultural landscapes, the REACT research identified four macro research areas *Aree Tematiche* – agri-food and forest heritage and local craftsmanship; traditions and social practices; landscape and territorial networks; settlements, public spaces and buildings – and subsequently articulated into ten focus of research *Tematismi* characterising the Casentino territory which informed the selection of 33 case studies.

The case study FestaSaggia was selected within the thematic area *Traditions and social practices* in connection with the regeneration and valorisation of traditional knowledge and analysed as a community-based RVPC initiative (Lauria, 2025). The case was investigated through documentary analysis, field visits and a semi-structured interview with a key informant at the organizational level of the initiative. Considering the limited empirical material, the study is conceived as an exploratory pilot case study.

5. FestaSaggia

To analyse FestaSaggia beyond its configuration as a cultural RVPC initiative, the case is interpreted through the Unesco Learning City framework (UIL, 2015), adopted here as an interpretative lens to identify convergences, tensions and areas of friction when learning city concepts are extended to inner and rural areas.

FestaSaggia was established in 2008 as a community-based initiative aimed at enhancing local fairs and village festivals in the Casentino area, with the goal of moving beyond the logic of isolated events and mere consumption or entertainment. Instead, it promotes integrated environmental, social and cultural sustainability practices through festivals rooted in local contexts and organised by local communities. The initiative is conceived as a network of *satellite* festivals that share common principles, criteria and values, while maintaining a strong territorial specificity. Distributed across the territory of the Casentinesi Forests National Park, this network configuration has enabled FestaSaggia to operate as a catalyst connecting about 20 local associations, institutions, farmers and small-scale producers, contributing to strengthening local micro-economies around shared sustainability-oriented practices (Biagi, Del Gobbo, & De Maria, 2025).

5.1. Wider benefits

Within the Unesco framework, the wider benefits of learning cities concern dimensions such as individual empowerment, social cohesion, economic development and sustainability. In inner areas, these dimensions take on a specific configuration, as they are embedded in territories marked by depopulation processes and limited access to services and opportunity. When such territories are nevertheless able to create the conditions for its inhabitants to 'remain' and to build life trajectories, they demonstrate a capacity to generate new possible futures.

FestaSaggia contributes to the production of wider benefits by moving beyond the logic of mere consumption and entertainment and by intertwining social and economic effects. The network of satellite festivals strengthens local micro-economies through the valorisation of typical local products, promotes stable community networks among associations, producers and local institutions, and generates both economic and symbolic recognition of the territory at a wider scale.

The capacity of a territory to develop its own form of *intelligence* through the shared management of local heritage emerges clearly in the FestaSaggia case, when communities organise themselves to reclaim and celebrate indigenous knowledge and practices linked to agricultural work, typical products and landscape care. The Ecomuseum of the Casentino supports these processes of knowledge re-appropriation and sustains their transmission. The capitalisation of such knowledge contributes to generating external attractiveness and more conscious forms of tourism.

Living and working in inner areas presents specific characteristics. While depopulation represents one of the main challenges, these territories also attract new inhabitants seeking alternative lifestyles. Village festivals and local fairs play an inclusive role: they facilitate the integration of new residents, maintain ties with those who have moved elsewhere but continue to recognise the territory as an identity reference, and create opportunities for participation that strengthen local social capital.

5.2. Major building blocks

The second level of the Unesco framework identifies six major building blocks of a learning city, which represent the operational pillars through which the benefits of a learning city/region/community can be achieved: inclusive learning in the education system; revitalized learning in families and communities; effective learning for and in the workplace; extended use of modern learning technologies; enhanced quality in learning; and a vibrant culture of learning throughout life. In the case of FestaSaggia, these building blocks do not emerge evenly, some remain more marginal, while others display distinctive features, revealing tensions related to the specific characteristics of inner areas.

Regarding inclusive learning in the education system, the involvement of schools has occurred only recently and on an experimental basis, for example through observation and awareness-raising activities involving students during the festivals, fostering intergenerational exchange. This pillar of the framework confirms that, in FestaSaggia, education is activated primarily within the sphere of informal adult learning.

By contrast, in the second pillar considering the key features *revitalized learning in families and communities*, is strongly present in the initiative, particularly in relation to *recognizing community history and culture, and indigenous ways of knowing and learning as unique and precious resources*. This dimension emerges through the shared use of spaces, which become places of intergenerational exchange, and through the collective organization of festivals, where local knowledge linked to traditions and typical products is transmitted. These initiatives involve actors such as, mill owners and small family-run farms, which embody productive excellence and territorial identity.

With respect to effective learning for and in the workplace, FestaSaggia occupies an intermediate position between volunteering, local micro-economies and hybrid forms of professionalization. A distinctive element of the case is the role played by the Ecomuseo del Casentino, which acts as a promoting and facilitating body. Festival organizers, local producers and artisans acquire organizational and managerial skills through the self-certification and monitoring process established by the regulations. However, this learning largely remains unrecognized as 'job related training' in a formal sense.

The building block related to the extended use of modern learning technologies is less developed in the FestaSaggia case and reveals a tension typical of inner areas. The use of digital technologies is mainly functional to promotion and reporting activities. In this context, technology risks becoming a factor of exclusion within the initiative's network, potentially reinforcing existing inequalities if not adequately supported. At the same time, the weakness of this building block can be interpreted as a potential space for experimentation, aimed at strengthening intergenerational links and adopting accessible digital tools to support the process.

The pillar concerning enhancing quality in learning manifests itself transversally through shared tools and practices such as the Manifesto (or Decalogue), the self-certification system and annual monitoring. The principles of the FestaSaggia project are set out in the Manifesto, which proposes criteria – such as waste reduction, the use of local products and the enhancement of cultural heritage – conceived as shared orientations that foster processes of self-evaluation and gradual improvement by the communities involved. Festivals that join FestaSaggia undertake a specific reflective self-certification pathway that rewards sustainable practices and territorial enhancement. The inclusion of a village festival within the FestaSaggia network is the results of a process consisting of several key elements, including monitoring and self-improvement pathways aimed at achieving quality

and sustainability standards. Through self-assessment tools and moments of collective discussion, organizers of the satellite festivals are encouraged to reflect on the effects of their choices and on possible future development trajectories, activating forms of organizational learning and mutual support. These supporting and monitoring practices rely significantly on the mediating role played by the Ecomuseo del Casentino, which ensures continuity in coordination.

The final pillar, fostering a culture of learning throughout life, aligns particularly well with the nature of FestaSaggia, especially regarding key features such as “organizing and supporting public events that encourage and celebrate learning”, and “developing systems that recognize and reward all forms of learning”. The initiative promotes a vision of lifelong learning across multiple domains of life, as it is deeply rooted in everyday practices and cultural activities, where learning occurs through participating, organizing, cooking, hosting and narrating the territory, reclaiming and capitalizing its specific knowledge rooted in everyday cultural practices.

5.3. Fundamental conditions in inner areas

The third level of the Unesco framework concerns the fundamental conditions for the development of a learning city, identified as strong political will and institutional commitment, participatory governance, and the capacity to mobilize and utilize resources. In inner areas, these conditions take on specific configurations, as they are shaped by growing polarization in relation to urban centres, while also intersecting with practices that strengthen the link between work and territory. Working in places affected by depopulation and ageing differs significantly from working in large cities. Forms of work that support permanence, care for places, and continuity of social relations tend to produce more durable effects in terms of cohesion and resilience than temporary presences or extractive modes of local resource use, such as mass or short-term tourism.

FestaSaggia contributes to restoring to local producers (i.e. farmers and artisans) the role of custodians of common goods, including knowledge, practices, landscapes, and relationships. Their activities support the care of cultural and territorial heritage through the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, the shared management of resources, and the maintenance of proximity-based networks. This form of work is often invisible and weakly recognized in public policies, yet it is central to the social and ecological stability of marginal territories.

In the FestaSaggia case, the fundamental conditions emerge through a multi-level network of actors and tools. The initiative is promoted by the Union of Mountain Municipalities of the Casentino and by the Casentinesi Forests National Park, with the recognition and collaboration of Slow Food Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna, and involves a plurality of actors, including local associations and Pro Loco³. The network, composed of around 20 associations, operates as a “project community” based on exchange and the circulation of practices, helping to overcome the fragmentation that typically characterizes inner areas.

The FestaSaggia Manifesto also calls for the involvement of local administrations and economic stakeholders, encouraging the emergence of entrepreneurial initiatives oriented toward the promotion of local specificities and the mobilization of human and social capital. It promotes inclusive forms of community organization, such as community

³ Pro Loco are Italian volunteer-based associations traditionally involved in the promotion of local cultural heritage, tourism and community life.

cooperatives, understood as collective enterprises aimed at the shared management of local goods and services and the redistribution of generated value. In addition, the definition of a specific *pact* between local producers and associations – for the promotion and protection of typical productions and local knowledge – further contributes to this process. The use of such pact-based arrangements makes visible a form of bottom-up governance grounded in shared responsibility. The role of the Ecomuseo del Casentino, as a promoting and facilitating body, is central in supporting the work of the organizers of the satellite festivals and local producers, as well as in progressively involving schools and students, opening the possibility of a more structured intergenerational dialogue between community practices and formal education systems.

What FestaSaggia makes particularly visible is the emergence of key figures, often informal, who exercise a form of threshold leadership, actors capable of keeping spaces of possibility open, facilitating the interpretation of local heritage, and contributing to the long-term sustainability of the initiatives. In this sense, inhabiting, remaining, working, and caring for places in marginal contexts acquire a political meaning, configuring themselves as everyday practices of resistance and as the construction of an alternative development model.

6. Conclusions

The case study FestaSaggia explores how, and under which conditions, a community-based cultural initiative developed from a bottom-up process, can generate value and produce territorial effects in inner and rural areas. FestaSaggia, identified within the REACT research as an initiative for the revitalisation and valorisation of cultural landscapes, is interpreted through the Unesco GNLC framework to test its applicability in marginal and rural territories. Used as an interpretative lens and put in dialogue with the empirical evidence of the case, the framework enables a reading of wider benefit, operational building blocks, and enabling conditions in relation to specific characteristics of inner areas. The analysis suggests that, in inner areas, these dimensions do not emerge evenly and need to be adapted to the specific characteristic of the territory, particularly in relation to demographic decline and the specific socio-economic conditions. This exploratory study is based on documentary analysis and a limited number of qualitative interviews. It offers an interpretative contribution that opens directions for comparative or longitudinal research on community-based cultural initiatives in inner areas.

One of the most significant outcomes of the case concerns the relational and institutional value generated through the activation of a multi-level network of actors, including small-scale farmers, producers and artisans, associations, local institutions. As FestaSaggia evolves from a single event into a coordinated network, it enables forms of cooperation among actors who would not normally interact, fostering relations of trust and mutual recognition. The adoption of a shared Manifesto, the establishment of a pact with local producers and the promotion of common sustainability-oriented practices contribute to the emergence of inclusive governance arrangements rooted in local contexts. The case also highlights the cultural value of festivals as spaces through which communities reclaim local knowledge and identities and re-signify places as legitimate sites of cultural production, thereby challenging dominant narratives that frame inner areas as marginal or residual. Although not explicitly framed as learning festivals, FestaSaggia confirms the agency of local festivities in generating empowering and transformative effects, widening access to participation, activating circular micro-economies and enabling communities to envision

alternative futures.

Moreover, FestaSaggia makes visible the presence of threshold figures – often informal and rarely recognised – who do not necessarily manage events directly but facilitate connections, support organisational learning and ensure continuity within the network. These situated and relational forms of professional practice emerge as crucial for the long-term sustainability of community-based initiatives in inner areas, while remaining largely invisible within current policy and evaluation frameworks.

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