



Rural-Urban Outlooks: Unlocking Synergies (ROBUST)

ROBUST receives funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020

*research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 727988.**



August 2018

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Rural-Urban Governance Arrangements and Planning Instruments

La Strada and Diagonale – Annual Cultural Events

Metropolitan Area of Styria, Austria

1. Overview

Graz has a long history of culture and organises, in addition to its traditional theatres, an opera house, museums, and many cultural events and festivals, which are well-known beyond the borders of Styria and Austria. “La Strada”, a street artist festival, and the Austrian film festival “Diagonale” are two of these annual events. While “La Strada” has a strategy to actively cooperate with rural municipalities, the “Diagonale” is rather reserved in its attitude towards expanding the festival activities to the countryside. The main reason for limited progress in this regard is linked to the long-term process of establishing a high-level of intrinsic motivation with local stakeholders. As the respective views of festival organisers seem highly supplementary and instructive on the discourse of the potential to extend cultural events to rural areas, aspects from both cultural events will be presented here. The more comprehensive report on “La Strada” will be supplemented with statements from the festival manager of the “Diagonale” event.

“La Strada” is a nine-day international street artist and puppet theatre festival in the city of Graz and in surrounding Styrian municipalities, usually organised in the summer (July/August). The festival was founded in 1997 in Graz with the goal to revive the city during the summer break of the traditional cultural institutions.

The “Diagonale” is an Austrian film festival, established in the city of Graz in 1998 (usually taking place in March). At first it was a symposium for film scene professionals, but has evolved to be a festival for local, regional and trans-regional audiences.

2. Main Challenges

Long-term and sustainable cultural initiatives usually need to be implemented due to endogenous potential and interest. This means, if an urban cultural event hosts productions in rural areas, the most effective approach is to look for local stakeholders and cultural professionals to take over its organisation and integrate the local population. Otherwise, such productions often turn out to be projects initiated by and for an urbanized, culturally-affluent audience, and the envisaged added value for the local, rural population is missing. It is for this

reason that the festival team of the “Diagonale” is rather sceptical about relocating cultural events to the countryside. Hence, productions in rural areas are only an option for the film festival if there is an invitation or an expressed desire to cooperate from the local population, cultural professionals or regional stakeholders. According to the film festival manager of the “Diagonale”, this is the only option how rural-urban cooperation can actually become beneficial for both sides. The festival manager of “La Strada” agrees with this perspective, which is why the festival’s cooperation with rural areas is restricted to specific interactions with rural partners, like mayors, local cultural initiatives, and creative professionals.

From a practical point of view, it should be noted that a film festival is not quite as flexible as other festival formats, as the festival manager of the “Diagonale” emphasises. Due to architectural, technical and infrastructure reasons, it is not possible to screen movies in any location, especially if the “Diagonale” wants to maintain its festival standards, which are decisive for its Unique Selling Proposition. However, there is an awareness of the ongoing disappearance of rural cinemas and the desire to bring the cinema culture back to rural areas.

3. Main Insights

3.1. Insights related to the broad area of “network governance”

Crucial partners of the festival “La Strada” are funding authorities, sponsors, and media channels for promotion. Local authorities are key partners at the operational level. Since “La Strada” is a street artist festival and takes place in the public realm, it needs municipal authorization for public performances, roadblocks or clearing certain public (and private) spaces, like squares and parking areas. To guarantee security at the events, the local police units and the ambulance are further cooperation partners. The organisation of local events is preceded by intensive negotiations with key partners, as well as with tourism and economic partners, like central city business owners, to discuss where and when performances take place. Since a central focus of the festival is “Community Art”, which are artistic activities based on citizen participation, integrating the local population is another crucial aspect. For example, extensive preparations were necessary in order to enable an experimental action where more than 40 musicians of the Graz Philharmonic Orchestra played on private balconies in a residential area of the city.

For many years, “La Strada” has hosted productions in rural towns within about 40 km of Graz, like in Stainz, Weiz and Leibnitz. Basic prerequisites for productions in rural areas require the approval of political representatives on the municipal level, but they also need local stakeholder collaboration and multipliers to support and promote the cultural projects. Thus, the festival’s approach to long-term success in the field of rural-urban cooperation is based on close contact with cooperating municipalities.

The “Diagonale” festival’s strategy is deliberately concentrated on events in the city in order to enhance urban life. Events outside of Graz are limited to activities in close collaboration with local stakeholders. There has been, for example, a cooperation with another Styrian festival (“steirischer herbst”) where the “Diagonale” had a film screening in a rural community, underpinning the significance of that event for the local community.

3.2. Insights related to mechanisms of cross-sectoral coordination and cooperation

The primary intention of “La Strada” is to entertain people and to enhance the exchange between urban, peri-urban and rural citizens, as well as to build bridges and overcome differences between people and different spatial units. Therefore, the necessary prerequisite for a continued successful festival is an insightful cultural contact partner in the cooperating municipalities. Community representatives are usually interested in revitalising the community with the help of cultural events. Simply hosting performances and shows for the amusement of the citizens is not a sustainable approach to create cultural life in a community. Thus, the approach of “La Strada” is to strengthen the rural-urban cooperation by creating cultural events through a participatory process and by implementing a cultural mindset in rural municipalities. Due to the general distribution of the cultural budget in the province of Styria, the bulk of expenses for productions are attributed to “La Strada”, which is financed by the province of Styria and the European Union; municipalities only contribute to a small part of the costs.

“Community Art” is another central focus area of the festival that will be further developed in the future. The term “Community Art” stands for projects that are realised by professionals in cooperation with the local population. The vision of the festival initiators is to expand the concept of “Community Art” to the rural communities of Styria and to cooperate with rural and urban experts to define common goals and to realise new projects based on citizen participation and in cooperation with artists.

3.3. Insights related to the role of (actual, potential) social, organizational, institutional innovations

Several performances of “La Strada” directly deal with rural-urban interrelations. For example, a recent theatre performance critically asked the reasons for rural out-migration and the predominance of pull factors of the cities. The topics and messages of cultural activities often address (and are sometimes critical of) highly relevant societal developments. The festival also aims to sensitise and raise awareness about socially relevant topics through its programme.

4. Effectiveness Indicators

“La Strada” was founded in 1997. Back then the inner city of Graz revealed an impression of a lack of cultural activities and public life, particularly during summer holidays. With the opera and the theatre house on summer break, many restaurants closed during the weekends. Many citizens left for holiday travels, but among those who stayed, the demand for cultural life during the summer was constantly growing. “La Strada” played a vital role in the process of reviving the city during the summer break. It was primarily founded for the local population and more than three quarters of the events are free of charge. The elaboration of the festivals “La Strada” and “Diagonale” coincide with the preparation of Graz as Cultural Capital of Europe (in 2003), which significantly raised cultural awareness of authorities, citizens and

visitors. Since the festival expanded its programme to the countryside, several municipalities also became cultural hot spots during the summer season and their attractiveness and quality of life increased. The rural-urban cooperation is however dependent on two components: First, the capacities of “La Strada” itself and secondly, the cultural initiatives of the communities. This means, that “La Strada” only cooperates with rural municipalities if local stakeholders are interested and willing to develop the endogenous potential. “La Strada” then develops new and innovative concepts together with local groups, like a theatre group, a choir, a group of musicians, or the local brass band. The local link is thus crucial to implement cultural events in the countryside. In 2018, the festival hosted 123 events: 111 took place in Graz and 12 in the rural parts of the region, i.e. in the municipalities of Weiz, Leibnitz and Stainz. To enable all groups of society to take part, all of the events were free.

5. Illustration and further information

The report is based on an interview with the festival manager of “La Strada” and written statements of the film festival manager of “Diagonale”. These discussions on the relevance of the two festivals on rural-urban interaction highlight the specific approaches and perspectives of cultural managers. The scattered examples of activities in rural areas are reflected in the cultural understanding and programme presentation of the two festivals that can be found on the respective websites (“[La Strada](http://www.lastrada.at/en/)” and “[Diagonale](http://www.diagonale.at/en/)”). While the process of festivalisation, which has been observed in recent decades in many countries, is largely concentrated in urban public spaces (Smith 2016), we can acknowledge the increasing interest in linking rural areas to this trend. The examples of the study area underpin the significance of festivals and events to many communities. The crucial aspect is that these events have to be linked to place-based settings and often include “historic, religious, cultural and traditional significance, and also important parts of community building” (Duffy and Mair 2018). Integrating cultural events in the countryside for the local population and in the touristic promotion of Graz and its surrounding area is an indicator of the increasing awareness of this trend.

References

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