Unlocking the social impact of built heritage projects: Evaluation as Catalyst of Value?

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Abstract

In order to be sustainable, projects concerning built heritage resources need to take into account multiple dimensions, including the social one. More particularly, the implementation of initiatives combining either restoration or adaptive reuse with the achievement of social goals may be in some cases greatly recommendable: in fact, these types of interventions could be able not only to preserve and transmit the intrinsic and cultural components of built heritage but also to extend the relevance of the resources to larger segments of society and overall generate a multifaceted social impact. However, in order to effectively achieve social objectives, the adoption of evaluative thinking seems recommendable. Given this framework, this paper advances to integrate the regeneration project of a system of historical farmhouses located in Volpiano (Italy) with actions aiming to favor the social inclusion of NEETS (i.e. not in education, employment or training youths). Considering that the redevelopment of the system of the historical farmhouses was previously studied under the lens of corporate social responsibility, the integration of the social impact perspective represents an evolution of the discourse. By a methodological and processual perspective, the paper then proposes to follow the steps of logic models while combining qualitative and quantitative evaluation approaches able to firstly describe and then quantify the multiple values engendered through the interventions. Finally, the contribution highlights that the application of evaluative thinking and evaluation procedures to built heritage projects with social objectives may facilitate both the definition and achievement of shared goals and thus function as a real catalyst of value.

Keywords: social impact; well-being of citizens; evaluation; logic model; built heritage

1 Introduction

The multidimensional sustainability framework is currently acquiring increasing importance, and it is now informing both public and disciplinary debates as well as decision-making processes at the global level. In line with this tendency, the theme of the sustainability of multi-scale interventions (e.g. at the building, urban and territorial scale) has undoubtedly started to be faced, and now the economic, environmental, cultural and social dimensions need to be definitely taken into account (Korkmaz and Balaban 2019; Lucchi et al. 2019; Coscia et al. 2018; Kohon 2018; Fregonara et al. 2016; Curto et al. 2014). This also applies to projects focusing on the *mise en valeur* of built heritage resources (Bottero et al. 2020), and in this context a particularly emerging topic is the achievement of a sustainable and

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positive social impact through designed interventions. These may be represented, for instance, by retrofit actions on the historical built heritage (Lucchi et al. 2019) – which are definitely acquiring a strategic role for the revivification of these resources (Roberti et al. 2015)- but also by the integration of social functions in regeneration processes involving cultural heritage (Bottero et al. 2020; Coscia and Russo 2018). In fact, even if restoration and regeneration initiatives concerning built heritage resources are usually firstly performed for the intrinsic values attributed to them, the scarcity of financial means urges that the engendered value is maximized (Coscia and Rubino in press; Coscia and Curto 2017). This is not only coherent with financial and economic considerations - including the emergence of new investment paradigms that aim at achieving both economic returns and social impacts (Alijani and Karotys 2019)- but it seems essential to: a) make cultural heritage more relevant and meaningful for people; b) conceive cultural heritage in the framework of the circular economy (Kee 2019; Fusco Girard and Gravagnuolo 2018; Foster 2020; https://www.clicproject.eu/); and c) find strategies able to foster the maintenance and/or the existence itself of the buildings (Coscia and Chiaravalloti 2018). However, the design and implementation of projects able to generate in an effective way a positive social impact are far from being well-established procedures: firstly, social impact seems to still have multiple definitions in the field, making the discourse difficult; secondly, the achievement of positive impacts needs to be demonstrated and assessed, but evaluation practices are not always implemented because either considered as not important or deemed as an avoidable cost; thirdly, the singularity of the cases and the novelty of the paradigm make the identification of appropriate methods and metrics challenging. In this framework, the goal of this paper is to shed some light on the relationships occurring between built heritage projects and social impacts, highlighting that the adoption of a social impact-oriented approach, together with the implementation of appropriate evaluation procedures, may function as catalyst of value. More particularly, in section 2 we firstly explore the relationships occurring between built heritage and the social dimension, including the concept of social impact. In section 3 we summarize how social impact has been evaluated so far. In section 4 we then propose to apply a social impact-oriented approach to a project to be implemented in a peri-urban context, namely a system of historical farmhouses existing in Volpiano (Turin, Italy) (Coscia and Russo 2018; Testù and Machiorletti 2016). The selection of a rural/peri-urban context as a case study was performed considering that extra-urban environments may be particularly interesting for the experimentation of projects that aim at achieving both social and economic goals. In fact, whereas urban areas are usually associated to high profits and competing economic interests (which might favor the pursue of economic goals rather than social ones), initiatives with a social impact-oriented perspective might represent a particularly valuable opportunity for the redevelopment of less valued rural and peri-urban areas. Additionally, the redevelopment of the system of historical farmhouses located in Volpiano was previously studied under the lens of a corporate social responsibility approach (Coscia and Russo 2018), and the integration of the social impact perspective represents an evolution of the discourse. Section 5 offers final remarks and conclusions.

2 Built heritage and the social dimension

The interrelations between built heritage resources and the social dimension are multiple, and they may regard: 1) the definition of built heritage itself; 2) the effects that built heritage resources (and valorization practices) may have on specific communities and society at large; 3) the intentional inclusion of social goals into projects aiming to the *mise en valeur* of the resources.

With reference to the first point, it can be stated that built heritage resources are actually defined by the

meanings that communities attribute to buildings and other elements of the built environment (Cerreta et al. 2014), as underlined for instance by the Faro Convention (Council of Europe 2005). Additionally, built heritage can be defined as such also in light of the social significance (e.g. capacity of a place/building to bind together members of the society, interpretation of a place/building as the reflection of the rules and beliefs shared by a given community, etc.) attributed by communities to specific places or buildings (ICOMOS Australia 1999).

With regard to point 2), it must be underlined that the existence of built heritage is not neutral: in fact, it is known that its conservation state -as well as its physical and intellectual accessibility- engenders positive/negative effects (Amin 2018), together with socio-economic consequences and various externalities (Throsby 2012; Al-hagla 2010; Rosato et al. 2008; Manganelli 2007). Moreover, the literature has also emphasized the role of built heritage in enriching the quality of life of people (Yung and Chan 2015), e.g. contributing to the fulfillment of the aesthetic, cultural and leisure needs of a given community, fostering the development of social capital (Murzyn-Kupisz 2013) and social inclusion (Pendlebury et al. 2004) but also stimulating place attachment and sense of place (Jones 2016). Additionally, on a specular perspective, it has also been acknowledged that the recognition of social aspects is also fundamental in engineering assessments, retrofit interventions or technical analyses (e.g. human comfort or energy efficiency) aiming to revitalize historic towns and buildings (Lucchi et al. 2019).

The need to maximize the value stemming from public and private expenditures, together with the will of enabling social inclusion and finding sustainable solutions able to safeguard the preservation of less-known built heritage resources, have then favored the development of projects combining conservation, restoration and re-use of historical buildings with the achievement of social goals (point 3). In this context, the adaptive reuse of buildings (Aigwi et al. 2019; Plevoets and Sowińska-Heim 2018) and the engagement of local communities are strategies that have been implemented so far in order to extend the relevance of built heritage for local targets and enable both the preservation of heritage and the socio-economic sustainability of the interventions.

Overall, the development of awareness about built heritage as a possible agent of change has led to some reflections about the “social impact” engendered by projects concerning built heritage resources. However, it must be noted that multiple definitions of social impact exist, and they may vary according to the discipline and field of application, such as environmental studies (Burdge and Vanclay 1996), program evaluation (W.K. Kellogg Foundation 2017), third sector (Zamagni et al. 2015), etc. In line with the terminology mainly used in the program evaluation field, in this paper we will use the term social impact to indicate the medium/long term effects of given interventions. In fact, even though the use of social impact in the cultural heritage literature may assume different nuances, it is possible to state that the term generally makes reference to the changes engendered by a project on individuals, communities and even society at large. The types of effects explored by scholars are various and they frequently include: residents and/or visitors’ perceptions about projects aiming to enhance the local built heritage (or even perceptions’ linked to its decline, as described in Amin 2018); the wellbeing and quality of life of residents (Mohaddes Korassani et al. 2019; Murzyn-Kupisz 2013); the degree and quality of community life; sense of place and attachment (Amin 2018); local community involvement and local capacity building (Mohaddes Korassani et al. 2019). Then, an alternative (or complementary) approach is the application of indicators and metrics, which are frequently expressed under the form of counts -e.g. number of participants in a given cultural activity, number of volunteers engaged, number of new jobs, etc.-, amounts -e.g. amount of euros collected form visits to a regenerated site- or percentages -

e.g. percentage of increase in the number of visitors- (Nocca 2017). However, in addition to single qualitative and/or quantitative approaches, the evaluation disciplines have then developed more specific - and sometimes hybrid- methods. In fact, with the introduction of social aspects and impacts, traditional approaches and "pure" quantitative assessment methods have entered into crisis.

3 Achieving and evaluating social impacts of built heritage projects: some approaches

Overall, the evaluation frameworks that are usually applied to the evaluation of social impacts are: 1) multicriteria (or dashboard) models, which are especially used when multiple dimensions and criteria need to be weighted and considered; 2) synthetic models, which tend to express into monetary terms the value created; 3) processual models, which are particularly recommended when new value chains and relationships among stakeholders are created (Camoletto et al. 2017).

Among the methods that take into account a variety of criteria, an interesting path is the one experimented by S. Mohaddes Korassani and colleagues (2019). Researchers evaluated the social impact of restoration works addressed to a historic fortress in the context of a life cycle management model: firstly, social themes (e.g. health and safety, wages, experiences, wellbeing, cultural development, access to tangible resources, employment, community involvement) and stakeholders (e.g. workers, local communities, consumers, society and actors involved in the value chain) were identified; secondly, appropriate indicators (i.e. semiquantitative in their case) were selected and thirdly a scoring system (a range from -2 to +2, where -2 indicates a not acceptable performance, 0 a performance aligned with international standards and +2 an ideal performance) was adopted; authors calculated "social topic scores", "stakeholder scores" and then the "total score".

From the point of view of synthetic and financial analysis models, it is useful to recall the experimentation of SROI (Social Return on Investment): this approach is frequently adopted, since it does not only allow to express the value created into monetary terms, but it is also suitable to be incorporated into multicriteria analyses (Camoletto et al. 2017).

As highlighted by the practices of organizations focusing on the conservation and valorization of the historical built heritage - such as The Churches Conservation Trust (https://www.visitchurches.org.uk/) and the Architectural Heritage Fund (http://ahfund.org.uk/) – the adoption of processual models from the very beginning of a project may be very fruitful too. For instance, the Logic Model and Theory of Change frameworks prescribe to follow a "*plan backward, implement forward"* way of operating, recommending to firstly outline the desired impacts and then identify outcomes, outputs and inputs (W.K. Kellogg Foundation 2017; Camoletto et al. 2017; Coryn et al. 2011). In addition, the Theory of Change also describes how and why an intervention or project fosters planned and unplanned changes in a given context, with reference to specific outcomes, targets and stakeholders (Morra-Imas and Rist 2009, p. 152; Funnell and Rogers 2011). In both the frameworks, a clear definition of impacts, outcomes etc. from the very beginning of the project is essential not only to guide operational steps but also to inform evaluation (e.g. methods to be followed, metrics to be monitored…), which is seen as an integral part of the whole process.

Coherently with this background, in the next paragraph we will describe how the application of a processual and evaluative approach to the regeneration of a system of historical farmhouses located in the nearby of Turin (Italy) could not only facilitate the collaborative definition of social objectives but also favor their achievement and the generation of additional value.

4 Enhancing value through an evaluative and social impact-oriented framework: the system of historical farmhouses in Volpiano (Turin, Italy)

In 2015 the Municipality of Volpiano – i.e. a town of about 15 thousand inhabitants located 16 km North-East of Turin (Italy) - encouraged a collaborative agenda with some local stakeholders (such as the Politecnico di Torino university and bank foundations) to promote the cultural values of a system of historical farmhouses while maintaining agricultural production and enabling economic sustainability (Coscia and Russo 2018; Testù and Machiorletti 2016). The analytical and decisional processes were conducted adopting an original and innovative perspective, i.e. integrating principles of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Management guidelines for the conversion of this system of farmhouses into a sustainable and multifunctional production system, in which the feasibility check was tested by a "hybrid" set of qualitative and quantitative evaluation methods, were then provided accordingly. In this paper we want to report an advancement of the initial CSR approach, incorporating a social-impact oriented key.

In order to propose a feasible project consistent with a CSR perspective, preliminary considerations were performed and different evaluation methods were applied. More specifically, the evaluation approaches and methodological phases adopted to identify the most beneficial scenario were the following: 1) SWOT analysis; 2) stakeholder analysis and mapping; 3) community impact analysis (CIA) and 4) costs-revenues analysis carried out under a CSR perspective. SWOT analysis and techniques of stakeholder analysis and mapping were carried out paying particular attention to a set of contextual dimensions (e.g. accessibility, demographics, socio-economic trends and conditions, agricultural and industrial activities…): the interrelation between the two instruments was considered essential not only for its ability to critically analyze the context but also to highlight the initial social pact between the subjects involved. For its suitability to inform the decisional process, SWOT analysis is in fact frequently integrated with other evaluation tools (as recently performed for instance by Bottero et al. 2020, who integrated the SWOT analysis into a structured analytic hierarchy process). The stakeholder analysis took into account not only decision makers and institutions but also private entrepreneurs, the local population and temporary users of the areas under consideration; community impact analysis was performed preliminarily identifying the social groups potentially affected by the interventions; finally, costs and revenues analysis aimed to verify the economic sustainability and profitability of the hypothesized interventions. Overall, evaluations led to a proposal focusing on the renewal of 5 farmhouses characterized by accessibility, the presence of agricultural production activities and expected low costs of planned restoration works (Coscia and Russo 2018). More precisely, the selected project advanced to integrate the cultural and economic dimensions with a social one, i.e. proposing the implementation of a multifunctional agriculture model that combined traditional and new cultivations (i.e. crops and hazelnuts respectively) with social farming activities (i.e. ortho-therapy, ortho-didactics, bare-foot paths, pet therapy). On the one hand, investors took advantage of “green” incentives, but on the other one they renounced to a part of the profits and of the risk premium to favor the fulfillment of social functions that could benefit the community at large, coherently with a CSR perspective (Coscia and Russo 2018). In other words, objectives strictly linked to the enhancement of local agricultural production were combined with the intention of improving the quality of life in rural areas, increasing occupational opportunities and improving the attractive power of the areas through diversification.

If on the one hand this scenario definitely took into account the social dimension (with reference to both the methods followed, the identified objectives and the recommended functions), on the other one it is

possible to suggest that the shift towards a social impact-oriented approach could not only further strengthen the social outcomes of the project but also influence the planning processes and the evaluation strategies adopted. In fact, the adoption of processual methods and of a logic model finalized to the explicit achievement of social goals would entail the more robust and cross-cutting use of qualitative-quantitative assessment tools aimed at: 1) a deeper recognition of the needs to be fulfilled, especially with reference to specific targets: in fact, the recognition of the needs is a fundamental step to inform the definition of goals and strategies; 2) the identification of the desired impacts, followed by a more granular definition of outcomes, outputs and inputs; 3) the collaboration among stakeholders since the very beginning of the project, as to share responsibility in the decision making process and in the definition of objectives and indicators; 4) a clear definition since the initial phases of the evaluation strategies, methods and metrics to be followed. In fact, the adoption of an impact-oriented approach would transform a simple collaborative agenda into a real partnership of different stakeholders (i.e. Municipality, university, owners of farmhouses, local entrepreneurs, associations operating in the third sector…) able not only to generate innovative solutions to pre-identified problems but also create value (e.g. institutional, relational, reputational…) rightly through collaboration. In this sense, the qualitative tools of the SWOT and above all of the stakeholder and network analysis (Coscia and Zanetta 2018) interrelated with the CIA can both strengthen the detailed analysis of the responsibilities and impacts by subject and inform economic-managerial analysis in a "social" sense. In more empirical terms, this would translate into the description of the processes triggered among stakeholders and into the monitoring of the outcomes of the activities, e.g. according to the indicators collaboratively defined in the decisional phases of the project. Overall, the inclusion of a specific social objective in the realm of the proposed interventions could offer the possibility to enhance the overall value of the project itself, especially for identified social targets. In fact, engaging specific segments into the activities organized in the historical farmhouses (and inspired to social agriculture principles) would allow to make local built heritage more relevant for larger portions of the local community, possibly activating virtuous cycles of support.

For instance, the implementation of a specific program aiming to favor the social inclusion of not in education, employment or training youths (also known as NEETS) could be integrated into the multifunctional model already proposed for the system of historical farmhouses of Volpiano. The NEETS phenomenon interests countries across all Europe, and a recent report has illustrated that, among European countries, Italy counts the highest percentage of NEETS (Eurostat 2019). According to the same report, NEETS are distributed in cities as well as suburbs, towns and rural areas, and the cost of their inactivity for the Italian state has been estimated in 36 billion euros in 2016 (Fagnani 2017). For several reasons, the elaboration of strategies and programs able to facilitate the socio-economic inclusion of this particular segment of young people are thus particularly needed and should inform national and local agendas. Recent examples show that social agricultural programs have been implemented in Italy to mitigate NEETS' personal discomfort, enhance their wellbeing and facilitate their integration in the job market (Centro Nazionale di Documentazione e analisi per l'infanzia e l'adolescenza 2018; Finzi and Romero Aranda 2016). Additionally, also the promotion of local cultural heritage has been identified as a promising initiative to engage NEETS, suggesting that the experimentation of social agriculture programs in the context of the *mise en valeur* of historical farmhouses could be particularly fruitful. In this view, the adoption of a collaborative and impact-oriented approach would allow both to help public actions and enrich the CSR approach, which usually largely relies on the attitudes of single entrepreneurs. In this case, the responsibility and achievement of social

goals would be shared among different stakeholders, instead. In the case of Volpiano the social theme of the NEETS could be firstly declined and highlighted in the SWOT and subsequently related to the analysis of the impacts and of the stakeholders, both at the scale of the farm system and at the enlarged one of the peri-urban area. Figure 1 (Fig. 1) graphically shows the suggested process, making reference to the specific intervention concerning NEETS and the historical farmhouse system of Volpiano.

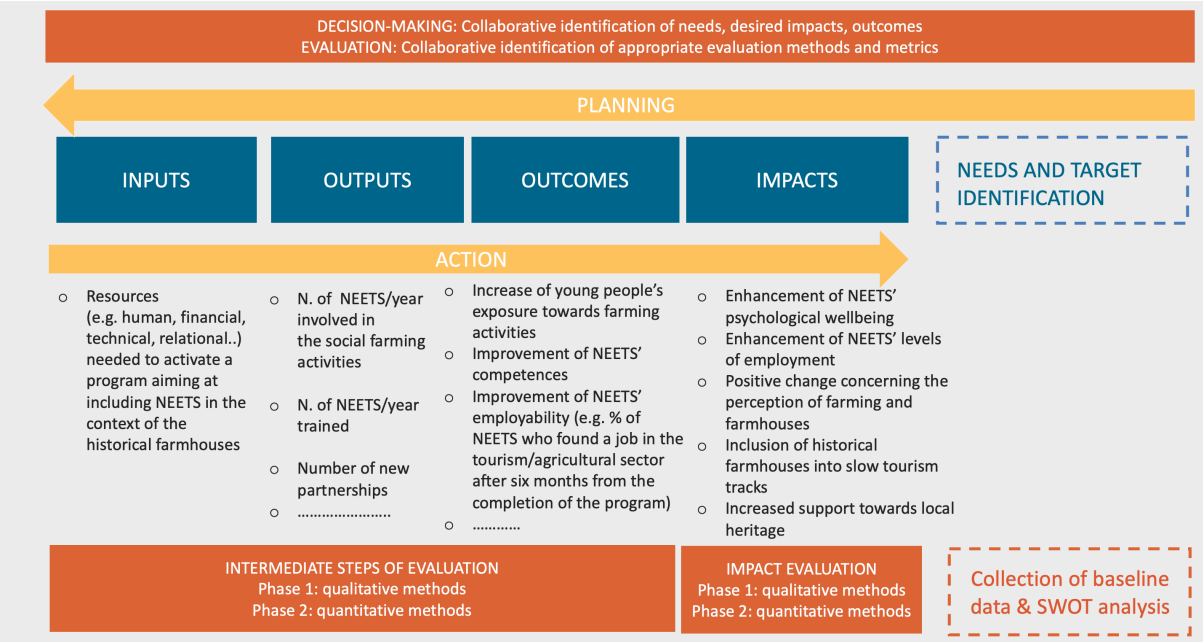

Figure 1. Enhancing the social value of built heritage projects: applying a social impact-oriented approach in the strategical phase (*source*: authors' own elaboration).

If qualitative and processual analyses could be performed to map the value created by the collaborative approach, indicators such as the percentage of participants who found a job after six months from the completion of the program, the number of volunteers adhering to local social agriculture initiatives, the increase of awareness about the historical value of the farmhouses, etc. could be employed to evaluate the social outcomes and impacts engendered by the project. Additionally, an estimation in monetary terms of the value created by the program could be performed too, also considering the costs avoided for public finances thanks to the potential overcoming of the NEET status by some of the participants to the program. Finally, it must be underlined that such estimate will influence the subsequent quantitative phase: in fact, it will provide new factors to be introduced in the items of the financial-management analysis and in the identification of the threshold values of the profitability indicators of the management Discounted Cash Flow Analysis.

5 Conclusions

The inclusion of evaluation procedures from the very beginning of a built heritage project, throughout its development and after its completion represents with no doubt a cost. However, the adoption of evaluative thinking could be overall considered more as a sort of investment rather than a simple cost, since it is useful to: 1) clearly define the goals, impacts, outcomes, outputs and inputs of a project; 2) foster collaboration among stakeholders since the very beginning, encouraging shared responsibility and a cooperative definition of the desired objectives and actions; 3) incorporate monitoring activities

throughout the project, as to timely check whether intermediate and final objectives have been achieved or not and then perform prompt corrections if needed; 4) describe and estimate the change generated by the project, also in light of the accountability framework; 5) possibly express in monetary terms the value engendered by the performed actions; 6) not only build human and institutional capital but also provide useful data for future local planning and development. As shown in the case study of the historical farmhouses of Volpiano (Italy), the adoption of a social impact-oriented approach that explicitly includes the achievement of social goals may not only strengthen the CSR approach but also overall extend the relevance of built heritage projects, thus functioning as a catalyst of value. Additionally, it can be added that the accomplishment of social goals may not only represent a benefit in itself but also enable well-being conditions favoring the activation of positive behaviors and support towards heritage. Given this framework, next steps of future research could be represented by the investigation of these new, more extended value chains, as to better understand and quantify the added value of built heritage projects encompassing social goals.

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