

FORMS OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN CREATING CULTURAL VITALITY. INSIGHTS FROM DRĂGUŞ, ROMANIA

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Abstract: *This paper highlights a series of forms of community participation in the case of a Romanian rural community that has a well-defined cultural identity and carries out numerous activities aimed at creating cultural vitality. The main purpose of the paper is to highlight a series of data and reflections derived from the field research carried out over the past years using the ethnographic method, as well as to interpret research data on the basis of a theoretical model developed by Mataritta-Cascante and Brennan (2012).*

Key words: *cultural vitality, intangible cultural heritage, community development, community participation.*

1. Introduction

This article explores forms of community participation in the process of preserving and promoting local cultural identity in a rural community located in south-eastern Transylvania, Romania, with a focus on intangible cultural heritage. Safeguarding this type of cultural heritage is a well-defined direction of international policy. Case studies highlighting community participation and forms of local engagement to preserve and promote cultural identity and intangible cultural heritage can be an important resource for both broadening knowledge and strengthening good practice in this field. Based on these premises, I have chosen to present a series of forms of community engagement in the case of a rural community in Romania that has a well-defined cultural identity and develops numerous activities and events that lead to the creation of a special cultural vitality. These forms of community participation are social mechanisms for preserving and promoting the local cultural heritage. They are at the same time community development practices, as they address both external audiences who can bring resources to the community through cultural consumption, and community residents, developing community interaction and local networks.

The paper contains, in the first part, an overview of some concepts relevant to the topic discussed and then a brief description of the community chosen as a case study. In

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the research part, data and reflections derived from fieldwork carried out over the last few years using the ethnographic method are presented. The data collected from the field are also discussed and interpreted on the basis of a theoretical model that proposes a typology of community development forms (Matarrita-Cascante & Brennan, 2012).

2. Cultural Vitality and Intangible Cultural Heritage

Cultural vitality is a characteristic of sustainable communities (Flint, 2013). Culturally active communities that recognize, promote and harness their tangible and intangible cultural values, both intra- and inter-generationally, are taking important steps towards sustainable development. Cultural vitality refers to "existence of cultural values, ability to preserve history and culture for future generations, use of culture and history to advance societal learning" (Flint, 2013, p.59). Beel et al. (2017) highlight the link between cultural vitality and community resilience: "Cultural activity and the construction of distinct localised cultural identities play an essential role in the building of resilience in such rural locations whereby it acts as an enabler for wider community development" (p.467).

Recent literature has highlighted the role of cultural resources in the socio-economic development of urban and rural communities, as investments and efforts dedicated to the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage have numerous positive effects for the local economy, for strengthening personal and collective identities, for enhancing the social and human capital of communities, and for sustainable development (UNESCO, 2015; Cernea, 2001; Shipley & Snyder, 2013; Piñeiro-Naval & Serra, 2019). Jeanotte (2016) argues that cultural resources are a genuine guarantee of sustainable development, and Balfour et al. (2018) show that their role is also to help strengthen feelings of community belonging and well-being.

Over the last few years, my attention has focused on the intangible dimension of cultural heritage, called *intangible cultural heritage* (ICH) in contemporary public policy and defined by UNESCO (in the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*) as follows: "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills - as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith - that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage" (UNESCO, 2018, p.5). In addition, UNESCO provides an operational definition, according to which ICH comprises five main domains: "(a) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage; (b) performing arts; (c) social practices, rituals and festive events; (d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; (e) traditional craftsmanship" (UNESCO, 2018, p.5).

3. Arguments for Choosing Drăguş as a Case Study

Drăguş is a rural community located in south-eastern Transylvania, Romania, with about 1200 inhabitants, belonging to Braşov County. Drăguş has a unique cultural

identity in Romania. Two main characteristics of this identity can be easily identified through direct observation, through conversations with the inhabitants of the commune, but also by studying relevant documents (books, articles, monographs, etc.).

The first of these two characteristics is socio-ethnographic. Local folklore, traditional clothing, and many of the local traditions and cultural practices are unique, different from those of the surrounding communities. All these elements constitute an important determinant of local pride in the public discourse of both local leaders and citizens. In numerous formal and informal discussions, I have had over the years with citizens, as well as in analysing the public discourse of local leaders, I have found that the theme of pride in local cultural heritage comes up frequently, most often formulated as follows: "*we have very old and beautiful traditions*", "*in our village there are the most beautiful customs*" or "*we have the most beautiful traditional dress in Romania*". In an interview I conducted in 2018, a local cultural leader mentioned that "*the people of Drăguș have always been perceived as different from those in the surrounding villages; they have been associated with a certain superiority and pride, but they have also been recognized for their hard work*".

The second identity characteristic is related to the impact of the development of Romanian sociology on this community. In the interwar period, Drăguș was the most researched rural community in Romania. On the initiative of the Bucharest Sociological School, under the coordination of the sociologist Dimitrie Gusti, the most extensive sociological research of the interwar period was carried out in Drăguș, using the sociological monograph method. Drăguș was a kind of "sociological laboratory" (Stahl, 1981) for a team of about 80 researchers and students who collected data and conducted participatory observation, including action-research, during the summer of 1929. On the basis of Gusti's *theory of frameworks and manifestations of social life* (Gusti, 1968), the contexts of life (geographical, biological, historical and psychological) and human activities (economic, spiritual, political-administrative and ethical-legal) of the community were described and analysed, as well as a series of social units and institutions considered relevant to the life of a typical Romanian village at that time: family, various local associations, the groups of carol singing lads, *crâșma* (the pub), the sheepfolds, etc. This extensive field research, followed by others in the 1930s on a smaller scale, had a huge impact on collective life and social memory in Drăguș. The story of this scientific endeavour and its results (numerous books and articles published by members of the research teams) occupy a very important place in the social representations of today's inhabitants about the past, as well as about the identity of the local community. Nowadays, the name of Dimitrie Gusti and the recognition of the importance of sociological research carried out in Drăguș during the interwar period represent a fundamental element of local narratives and a basis for numerous cultural events held in this community. For example, the local Museum of Ethnography is named after Dimitrie Gusti; personally, in 2019 I conducted a two-day session of participatory observation in Drăguș, within a complex cultural event in which one of the most important activities was a religious ritual commemorating Gusti as *son of the village*, although this concept is only used for personalities born in this commune.

Related to the recent studies that I carried out in Drăguş, through a content analysis of online communication about ICH on the websites of the town halls in the geographical and ethnographic area called Făgăraş Land, of which Drăguş is also a part (Csesznek & Sorea, 2021), we have shown that this rural community has a great wealth of cultural heritage resources, which it promotes in the online space especially through social media. In another article in which we explored the culture-centered development potential in the communities belonging to Făgăraş Land (Sorea, Csesznek & Răţulea, 2022) we showed that Drăguş is a type of community that presents itself as a *performance stage* that has many valuable things to show the world, with a focus on promoting identity and tradition to the outside, to audiences outside the locality and the country.

4. Forms of Community Participation. Insights from Both Community Leaders and Citizens

Over the last two decades I have visited the community of Drăguş many times to conduct sociological field research, and I have mainly used the ethnographic method. This method is "a cocktail of methodologies sharing the assumption that personal engagement with the subject is the key to understanding a particular culture or social context" (Hobbs, 2010, p. 194). Thus, I made participatory observation, I conducted semi-structured and non-directive interviews and I collected visual data in the form of photographs and videos. All this work helped me understand that there were several forms of community involvement in the local cultural life of Drăguş. In some actions, the role of local elites and authorities seemed to be predominant. In others, citizens seemed to be the main initiators and responsible for running such cultural events. I wondered how this question of forms of involvement could be clarified, and the answer was suggested to me by a theoretical model of the forms of community development that I will briefly present below. This theoretical model guided my work of systematizing the forms of community participation in the case of Drăguş commune, because community participation/involvement represents the core of community development processes.

Matarrita-Cascante and Brennan (2012) set out a typology of forms of community development taking into account six factors: view of community, benefits of community actions, main stakeholder, level of input, level of involvement and learning outcomes for local citizens (p. 297-298). I will not stress here what each of these factors means, but I will highlight instead the three main *forms of community development*, also called *approaches to community development* by the authors mentions above, as this forms are important to the discussion of my research data: **imposed**, **directed** and **self-help** (p. 297).

Imposed approach of community development refers to actions led or coordinated by government institutions or private economic entities pursuing structural and growth objectives, without involving members of the local community and with a top-down approach. **Directed** approach of community development means that development actions are initiated and coordinated by local governments or local associations, but that local stakeholders are consulted and local community members are involved to some extent in defining development objectives and implementing projects. Finally, **self-help**

approach is closest to the essence of the definition of community development, as it is based precisely on the broad participation of citizens in the creation of initiatives and the implementation of local development actions. It is a bottom-up approach. Unlike the other two approaches that focus on achieving clearly defined outcomes, the focus here is on strengthening community interaction processes, in other words, on developing community life rather than on outcomes.

Each of the three forms has strengths and weaknesses (Matarrita-Cascante & Brennan, 2012). For example, as strengths, **imposed** approach „provides assets that residents otherwise would not have”, **directed** form of community development „can provide a mixture of administrative structure and grassroots organization”, while **self-help** approach „can lead to long-term and sustainable development efforts” (p. 302).

My main purpose in writing this article is to present, starting from the model described above, the forms of community participation that I have identified in Drăguș, highlighting a number of elements that may be useful for a deeper understanding of the forms of participation in the cultural life of the community, such as identity determinants and experiences reported by local stakeholders and citizens. As a general observation, all three forms of community development have been identified in Drăguș. From my observations, there is even an evolution over time, over the last decades, in the dominance of one or another of these forms.

a) The "**imposed**" type of community development was specific to the communist era and, to a certain extent, is still present in the public discourse of local leaders. Under communism, local cultural assets were not totally neglected or ignored. The Communist Party's national policy did not prohibit local cultural events, but they had to be somehow put at the service of the single ideology and integrated into national programs to promote Romanian culture such as *Singing of Romania (Cântarea României)* - a national artistic competition that also had a section dedicated to folklore and rural culture. Within the framework of this national program, a team of teachers from the secondary school was very active in the 1980s, by creating and training a folk dance and folk theatre group that was rewarded with numerous prizes at the above-mentioned festival.

In non-directive interviews that I conducted from 2018 to 2022, the coordinators of this local program of cultural activities in the 1980s, now retired teachers, recalled cultural experiences and talked about their significance, showing that ideological constraints did not affect local identity, but rather supported the effervescence of cultural life within the community. "*In 1934 the first cultural centre was inaugurated in Drăguș. Constantin Brăiloiu, a musicologist on Dimitrie Gusti's team, gave the village teachers the idea of inaugurating it with an artistic programme. A dance group, a choir which is still maintained at the church, and a theatre group were then founded. The teachers at that time continued to work on these artistic events with the classes of pupils and there was even a tacit competition between the classes. Then, during the socialist period, we created a national and international award-winning folk theatre and dance group at school*" (retired teacher and informal leader); "*In the obligation to participate in the Singing of Romania Festival, the scenic valorisation of local folklore was at the same time a way to escape from ideology and to highlight local heritage*" (retired teacher and informal leader).

During my field research I had conversations with seven former students who were part of this folk theatre group. The main idea of their narrative is that although it was an imposed action, supervised by the county representatives of the communist party, it had many social-psychological benefits. Respondents said they felt "*proud and important*" because they were able to promote local folklore and traditions on Romanian stages; they also have had many memories from that time that evoked both a very active cultural life at community level, and a great joy as a result of interacting with colleagues and teachers in cultural activities.

The "*imposed*" type of community development is present nowadays to some extent in the discourse of local leaders by reference to the need to align with international and European policies for the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage. The data I collected and analysed in the period 2018-2022 show that leaders from the local administration and representatives of the educational institutions know these international directions, but they don't use them much in direct or online communication with the local community. When they talk to the community, local leaders have a narrative centred on harnessing local cultural assets because they have a value in themselves and must be preserved and presented to the world for their uniqueness and beauty (Csesznek & Sorea, 2021), rather than because it is necessary to follow the directions recommended by international and European policies.

b) The "*directed*" type of community development is used in many cultural actions that mobilise both local leaders and citizens. Leaders of local public administration and educational institutions have learned to cooperate with representatives of county authorities or NGOs to write cultural projects and attract external resources. A good example is the *Traditional Wedding* which had several editions in the pre-pandemic period. The event took place over one day and its aim was to recreate a wedding as it was in the early 20th century. In 2017 and 2018 I conducted participatory observation and found an engaged community and a lively and colourful celebration. According to one of the organisers, "*the event started as an experiment. We applied for public funds through a funding line dedicated to cultural projects, we won and we got courage. The following year we applied again and so on for several years... But the community also participated with a lot of resources, without which the event would not have been such a success. Many families produced traditional food on a voluntary basis, others got involved with work, and it was a real competition to play the roles of bride and groom*" (local NGO leader).

The *direct* type of community development was predominant in 2004-2008. In the context of the economic crisis during the post-communist transition, the ageing of the population and migration to urban areas or abroad, the community of Drăguş was much less culturally active in the 1990s and early 2000s. Then, a mayor interested in cultural life began to rebuild community interactions and strengthen groups with cultural skills such as the women's choir at the church, the students' dance group, and even created a small ethnography museum within the local school. Subsequently, these initiatives multiplied and were taken up by other stakeholders: teachers, local administrative leaders, the orthodox priest, informal cultural leaders, but also local entrepreneurs who understood the meaning of the idea of culture-led development (Lysgård, 2016) or arts-

based development (Balfour et al, 2018). For example, the family of a famous local furrier has expanded their small-scale craft activity into a rural and cultural tourism business; women from the village who knew how to make traditional dress pieces began to promote them (partly through networks of migrants from their own families) and sell them in the country and abroad. There is a growing interest in creating and buying these traditional costumes also locally, because at cultural events (celebrations, weddings, christenings, etc.) many people, including many children and young people, wear folk dress nowadays.

Directed type of community development is also supported by another social actor, which has appeared more recently in the life of the community, namely the Local Action Group (LAG) *Valea Sâmbetei (Sâmbăta Valley)*. This public-private association attracts European funds and develops both intra- and inter-community cooperation for the preservation and promotion of ICH. This local LAG works together with the mayor's office and other stakeholders to plan and organize local cultural events, gets involved in attracting volunteers from among the locals for these events and, more recently, runs a project to open some "local gastronomic points" - households offering traditional food to tourists.

c) The "*self-help*" type of community development is also very present in the social dynamics of culture-based development in Drăguș. I consider it to be the form of involvement that prevails nowadays, as it is the result of many years of success in terms of cultural expression and strengthening of local identity. In Drăguș there is a collective representation of the authenticity of cultural identity and a community discourse that enhances cultural heritage, especially intangible one. During all the cultural events I have attended in recent years, I have noticed that a ubiquitous narrative is that of the activity of the Bucharest School of Sociology in the interwar period, as a strong confirmation of the uniqueness and importance of the community. A local cultural leader told me in an interview that "*Dimitrie Gusti was attracted by the way of being of the people of the village and described the inhabitants of Drăguș as follows: on working days they don't laugh, they don't have time to waste with discussions and stories, they are not talkative, but on Sundays they are so welcoming that you can't leave them; after going to church, they sit quietly telling stories*".

Around 2010, an interesting bottom-up initiative was the revival of the tradition of the *Șezătoarea* (the term comes from the verb *to sit*), a form of wintertime women's association with a function of socializing, the purpose being twofold: to work together on specific handmade objects, but also to tell stories, sing and have fun. Recently, *Șezătoarea* has become a focus for projects implemented through local action groups (LAGs) at inter-community level, by organising such events in collaboration with other neighbouring communities.

School is the key institution in this way of doing community development. The teachers at the secondary school, named after a local 19th century writer, Ion Codru-Drăgușanu, are very involved, together with the pupils and their parents, in extra-curricular activities to learn about tradition and promote ICH. A folklore ensemble called *Mugurii Drăgușului (Drăguș Bads)* has been created where children learn local traditional dances and other forms of traditional artistic expression. This ensemble also

participates in local and national cultural events. In recent years, an important role in initiating and running local cultural events has been played by a teacher with a doctorate in literature who lives in Drăguş and is the principal of a major college in a neighbouring town. She collaborates with the teachers at the secondary school and with the local authorities, and is a central node in the network dealing with ICH preservation and promotion in Drăguş.

After the pandemic, the community's cultural events were revitalised. An old custom linked to the harvest festival, *Buzduganul (The Mace)*, which has many ethnographic and religious meanings was revived in the 2000s and is now held annually in August. Another festival called *Sufletul satului (The Soul of the Village)*, initiated in 2012, has also been revived and organised with the participation of both local leaders and community members; within that festival, groups from neighbouring communities are invited to Drăguş, which fosters the strengthening of an inter-community network and the transfer of good practices in terms of promoting local ICH resources. New cultural events are being invented in Drăguş as well. In 2022 I was invited to a very interesting event that consisted of book launch events and traditional music performance which was initiated and financially supported by a family of intellectuals born in Drăguş and which had the support of local authorities and school staff.

Discussions I have had in recent years with citizens of the community have shown that they are very proud of their identity, are motivated to participate in cultural events that re-confirm and enhance this identity, especially in front of foreigners or highly validating external audiences, have a sense of duty to preserve and carry on their cultural heritage and, in addition, feel that the cultural vitality of their community contributes to the quality of their personal and collective lives.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Over the past two decades I have regularly carried out fieldwork in Drăguş, during which I have conducted participatory observations and documented, mainly through qualitative and visual data, different aspects of local cultural life, including their dynamics. In this article I have tried to reinterpret the field data from the perspective of a theoretical model recognized as very important in the literature (Mataritta-Cascante et al., 2020), which proposes three forms of community development, named *imposed*, *directed* and *self-help* (Matarrita-Cascante & Brennan, 2012). I have shown that, in Drăguş, all three forms can be identified, and that they were consolidated in different stages of the recent history of this community.

Moreover, I consider that in discussing the results of these longitudinal observations, a useful approach is to include another important theoretical distinction for understanding contemporary local dynamics: that between *need-based* and *asset-based* community development, proposed by Mataritta-Cascante et al. (2020). These authors highlight two ways in which „local resources can be harnessed to address local challenges” (p. 99). Thus, the *need-based* approach focuses on identifying “needs and deficiencies in a community” (p. 99), which is the work of external experts who decide what is not working and how to fix it. This approach is specific to community

development, but involves top-down intervention and is less effective for the purposes of developing the sphere of community interactions and increasing the capacity of citizens to make decisions and solve problems specific to their community. The second approach, *asset-based* community development, is oriented towards the identification of resources, and the way of doing community development is a bottom-up one, in which the main actors of the process are “community residents and representatives or leaders of local associations and institutions” (p. 99). They are able to identify the resources available to their community and work together to use these resources, mobilising and thus building or strengthening local networks.

Based on this conceptual distinction, I suggest that the data I collected support the hypothesis of a prevalence of the *asset-based* approach in Drăguş. This community is aware that it has valuable cultural resources and seems to have learned that the use of these resources in actions based on a common effort brings many benefits, both personally and collectively. From the conversations I've had with both local leaders and citizens it appears that they know what they have to do within the community cultural life, they know that it is worth the effort, they know that involvement has results, so that the cultural vitality of this local community is already a reality, but one that must be constantly maintained. *Cultural resilience* (Beel et al., 2017) could be another name for this *asset-based* community development process encountered in Drăguş. Resilience is an important part of sustainable community development processes, as the best guarantee for maintaining a high level of well-being and social and cultural vitality is the very constant and conscious participation of social actors in the development of their own community.

I would like to conduct more semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in Drăguş in the coming years in order to collect more systematic data on the preservation and promotion of ICH, including the impact of new technologies and strategies for attracting and managing internal and external resources. In addition, I also intend to conduct a series of in-depth interviews to identify local narratives related to ICH and local cultural identity, both from leaders and citizens, focusing not only on successful actions but also on problems and failures in this area.

In conclusion, the community of Drăguş has various ways of expressing its cultural potential. The different forms of community participation combine to permanently re-create an active cultural environment, which responds both to the external challenges of preserving and promoting its heritage, especially its intangible cultural heritage, and to the identity and social needs of community members.

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