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**Strategic Co-Design for Territorial Innovation: Defining Challenges
within WE**

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1. Purpose

This extended abstract explores the co-design process of defining strategic challenges in the rural municipality of Miranda do Douro, Portugal, within the framework of WE (Working & Envisioning). The objective is to examine how collaborative methodologies involving local stakeholders and academic facilitators contributed to shaping an innovation agenda anchored in territorial identity, cultural heritage, and sustainable development. Rather than focusing on the implementation phase with students, this paper highlights the preparatory phase that enabled a meaningful engagement with the community and fostered the creation of challenges grounded in local aspirations and needs.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on theories of social and territorial innovation, with emphasis on co-design as a participatory method to foster inclusive development. Concepts such as situated co-creation, collaborative governance, and active listening in peripheral contexts support

the methodological foundation. The co-design approach seeks to reframe innovation not only as technological progress, but as a dialogic and context-sensitive process involving diverse actors in the construction of shared futures. Particular attention is given to how challenge formulation influences ownership, engagement, and the sustainability of territorial transformation efforts.

The concept of situated co-creation offers a critical and context-sensitive lens to understand collaborative innovation processes. As argued by Messiha et al. (2023), co-creation is never neutral nor universally applicable, but instead emerges from specific socio-cultural, epistemic, and power-laden contexts that shape both its process and outcomes. In higher education, Omland et al. (2025) emphasize that co-creation is inherently relational and embedded in institutional and pedagogical environments, requiring mutual recognition of diverse knowledge forms. From a public governance perspective, Voorberg et al. (2015) highlight how citizen involvement in co-creation is shaped by administrative traditions, political frameworks, and the perceived legitimacy of participatory practices. Finally, Jones (2018) introduces a systemic design perspective, framing co-creation as a situated dialogic practice responsive to stakeholder dynamics, institutional boundaries, and system complexity. Together, these perspectives underscore that co-creation must be understood not as a fixed methodology but as an adaptive and relational process – always situated within, and co-shaped by, the ecosystem in which it unfolds.

The concept of collaborative governance has evolved into a central paradigm for addressing complex societal challenges, yet its definition and application vary significantly across contexts. Florini and Pauli (2018) emphasize collaborative governance as a strategic necessity for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), stressing the need for sustained engagement among public, private, and civil society actors to mobilize resources, align interests, and co-create locally embedded solutions. Bianchi, Nasi, and Rivenbark (2021) further elaborate on this model by examining its implementation dynamics, identifying distinct pathways (top-down, bottom-up, hybrid) through which collaboration can be institutionalized in public management systems. Their analysis highlights the importance of trust-building, shared accountability, and adaptive leadership in making collaborative governance effective. However, Batory and Svensson (2019) provide a critical counterpoint, portraying collaborative governance as a “fuzzy concept” –

normatively attractive but empirically diffuse. They caution against its uncritical use, underscoring the lack of conceptual precision and the risk of masking unequal power relations behind inclusive rhetoric. Together, these perspectives suggest that while collaborative governance holds promise for innovation and legitimacy, its success depends on a clear understanding of contextual variables, governance structures, and power asymmetries.

The concept of active listening in peripheral contexts has gained prominence across domains such as social design, innovation management, and intercultural education. Active listening in peripheral contexts is a situated and ethically engaged communicative practice that enables inclusive dialogue and shared understanding in environments marked by marginality – whether geographic, socio-economic, or cultural. As emphasized by Sarantou et al. (2024), this form of listening is deeply embedded in social design processes, where attentiveness to local stories and silenced voices fosters relational accountability and context-sensitive interventions. Martínez-Martínez et al. (2023) reinforce its strategic relevance in innovation contexts, highlighting how active listening allows peripheral actors – such as communities or customers – to become co-creators of value and sustainability. Complementing these views, Remmele (2019) positions active listening as a critical intercultural competence that facilitates openness to otherness, mutual respect, and the dismantling of communicative hierarchies in educational settings. Together, these perspectives frame active listening in peripheral contexts as a transformative and dialogical process, essential for promoting equity, co-creation, and social change in territories often excluded from dominant systems of knowledge and decision-making.

3. Methodology

The methodology followed a two-phase process. The first phase involved an internal mapping and diagnosis led by the academic facilitation team, including the identification of key territorial actors across cultural, agricultural, social, and economic domains. In the second phase, focus groups were conducted with these stakeholders to elicit perceptions, urgent needs, and local challenges. Based on the insights gathered, the team synthesized and reformulated the challenges to be open, inspiring, and grounded in local realities. These proposed challenges were then validated in a second round of feedback sessions with

stakeholders. The iterative process ensured that the challenges reflected both strategic relevance and community endorsement, culminating in the drafting of the Miranda do Douro Innovation Charter.

4. Findings

The co-design process identified five strategic challenges: (1) attracting new breeders to preserve Mirandese cattle; (2) valuing local meat production through certified quality systems; (3) promoting traditional Mirandese music as intangible heritage; (4) revitalizing the Mirandese language through contemporary tools; and (5) exploring therapeutic and cultural uses for the Mirandese donkey. These challenges address interconnected social, cultural, environmental, and economic dimensions, enabling the creation of a participatory and locally anchored innovation agenda. The process strengthened institutional cooperation and reinforced stakeholder agency in defining development priorities.

5. Contributions and originality of the research

This study demonstrates how co-design can operate as a strategic tool for territorial innovation, especially in low-density regions. The originality lies in the combination of participatory methods and academic facilitation to co-construct a shared vision for local development. The formulation of challenges as open-ended and community-grounded allowed for a flexible, adaptive response to real needs while creating the basis for subsequent challenge-based learning activities. The approach is replicable and provides insights for building inclusive governance models in peripheral territories.

Keywords

co-design; territorial innovation; collaborative governance; situated co-creation; rural Portugal

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