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Reclaiming the community potential to improve the lives of older citizens

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Reclaiming the community potential to improve the lives of older citizens

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Abstract

This article reports the results of a case study in southern Portugal, in a community where ageing related processes seem to be speeding in the last decades. In this case study we used non-structured interviews to an extensive set of social actors, but also biographical interviews. Our main aim was to understand the contradictions and challenges posed by the ageing processes, and the way those processes affect the daily lives of people of the community, looking closely to the older adults' situation. In Portugal, the mainstream social policy is creating the conditions for an increasing institutionalisation of older citizens. Not denying the fact that in later life such social support is fundamental, we point out the disadvantages that such institutionalisation brings to older adults. We also try show the importance of community, especially for the elderly. We argue that today it is crucial to regain the community potential to improve the quality of life of older adults.

Keywords: community; ageing; older adults; social policy

Recuperar el potencial de la comunidad para mejorar las vidas de los adultos mayores

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Resumen

Este artículo revela los resultados de un estudio de caso en el sur de Portugal, en una comunidad donde los procesos relacionados con el envejecimiento parecen estar acelerando en las últimas décadas. En este estudio de caso utilizamos entrevistas no estructuradas a un extenso conjunto de actores sociales, pero también entrevistas biográficas. Nuestro objetivo principal fue comprender las contradicciones y desafíos planteados por los procesos de envejecimiento y la forma como estos procesos afectan la vida cotidiana de las personas de la comunidad, con un enfoque en la situación de los adultos mayores. En Portugal, la política social dominante está creando las condiciones para una institucionalización cada vez mayor de los ciudadanos mayores. Sin negar el hecho de que este apoyo social es fundamental, señalamos las desventajas que tal institucionalización trae a los adultos mayores. También intentamos mostrar la importancia de la comunidad, especialmente para los mayores. Defendemos que hoy en día es crucial recuperar el potencial de la comunidad para mejorar la calidad de vida de los adultos mayores.

Palabras clave: comunidad; envejecimiento; adultos mayores; política social

Portugal is one of the most aged countries in the world and the demographic projections are far from optimistic. The proportion of people with 65 years or more has doubled in the last 45 years. Today, in a population of about 10 million inhabitants, the population with 65 or more years old is of 2,023 million, representing about 19% of the total population. In the last decade, the number of older citizens has increased about 19%. Among the elderly, the age group that has been increasing more noticeable is the one with more than 80 years old. The majority of the elderly are women. The ageing index has reached in 2010 its maximum value ever (INE, 2011): in 1990 the ageing index was of 68,1%, in 2000 102,2% and in 2010 it reached 120,1%. The estimations made to the future are even more worrying. Considering a moderate scenario (demographers often use three different macro scenarios to frame their projections), in 2050 there will be a loss of almost half a million children up to 14 years old; the active population (15-64 years old) will be decreased by about 2 million people; the number of persons with 65 years old or more will grow 1,1 million, reaching 31,8% of the population; and the ageing index will reach a national average of 243% (Gonçalves & Carrilho, 2006). The magnitude of these numbers and the predictable economic, social, educational and cultural consequences would advise for immediate policy action to tackle the situation.

The national scenario we presented briefly, however, hides the regional and local differences within the country. In Portugal urban areas are mainly located in the coastal areas whilst rural areas are increasingly resembling human deserts. If we look at the northern mountainous region of the Algarve (the context of the investigation reported in this text), for example, ageing indexes frequently range from 300 to 500%. The human problems that structurally affect older citizens in these areas are strongly marked by isolation in all its dimensions (geographical, relational, etc.). Looking again at national statistics, more than 1,2 million older people live alone (400 964) or in the exclusive company of other older adults (804 577) (INE, 2012), reflecting a phenomenon which dimension has increased 28% in the last decade. It is important to stress that the majority of the ones living alone are women. The factors that explain these numbers are the increase of average

life expectation, desertification of rural areas and the changes in family role (Pereirinha & Murteira, 2016).

Institutional care versus community?

This demographic scenario has been resulting in an increase in the numbers of older citizens who need care of some nature. Objectively speaking, this means that a substantial number of citizens are living in collective places in which they are governed by an entity external to the group. These collective places can be residential homes, continued care services, or similar, organised by third sector institutions, religious or health institutions, the majority receiving a subsidy from the State in exchange for their services. According to Gonçalves (2003), there has been a firm increase of this type of support in the last decades: from 2 339 of such places in 1991, moving to 3 876 in 2001 (an increase of 61%) and to 4 832 in 2011 (an increase of 80%). More than half of the elderly living in social support institutions are 80 years old or more and are widows or widowers. Their qualification levels are very low (Gonçalves, 2003): the majority are illiterate (67,1%) and the remaining has only 4 years of schooling (30%). Less than 3% have more than primary school as academic qualifications. The elderly living in such places are clearly working class, with no financial means to find alternatives and in the end of their lives, see themselves in institutions that separate them from the communities they used to live in.

We are not arguing, however, that care institutions for older adults are not necessary. Also there are no doubts that the social services available to older citizens are evolving, and are gradually more capable of providing good quality services (Fonseca, 2004). Nevertheless, there are multiple research evidences that bring forth the fact that older adults suffer from a set of losses when institutionalised. The first loss is autonomy, as older adults do not belong to the governing bodies of the institutions they live in: “they can be “consulted” or “heard” (metaphors sometimes presented as participation), namely regarding the educational activities that are offered; but the main rules that govern their daily lives are not established by themselves nor do they have any participation in it” (Fragoso, 2015, p. 63). Secondly, there are consequences when family support is broken (even if

substituted by institutional support). The older citizens' daily routines, the relational dynamics, come to be experienced in a limited environment constituted by other older citizens or the professionals of the institution. The contribution of family is so relevant that can never be substituted by an institution, psychobiological, socially, culturally or educationally (Salgueiro & Lopes, 2010). Most processes of institutionalisation therefore carry a certain isolation, because of the diminishment of the social networks and family support (Sousa et al, 2004). Breaking the social ties and ending with the possibility of control of our lives is a severe constraint of a person's well-being (Paúl, 2005). Concluding, although institutionalisation is a need brought about by the social changes of our times, it does carry various disadvantages for the older citizens. Can community make a difference?

The claims that community is menaced or somehow disrupted by globalisation have been refuted by different arguments in the last decades. For example, the distension of social relationships across space also implicates the reinvention or rebuilding of the community (Robertson, 1995) according to global fluxes. Also despite the tendencies that time is ever more important than space, place is still fundamental for the community to create norms and principles in its public arenas (Bauman, 1998). Communities are therefore crucial when understood as public spaces, where proximity favours the creation of values such as solidarity, or contribute to a sense of belonging and identity. It is therefore central to view community as a symbolic space that frames people's feelings of belonging (Kurantowicz, 2008), even if we know that different persons build, most of the times, contradictory meanings and belonging senses. Today's community is far away from traditional definitions, which used to exist in community as a homogeneous place where a set of persons bounded by common interests and objectives live. More than a space of consensus, community is a space of conflict (Gualda, Fragoso & Lucio-Villegas, 2013) and a space increasingly faced with diversity and cultural differences (Fragoso & Lucio-Villegas, 2014; Wildemeersch & Kurantowicz, 2011).

Looking from the perspective of older adults, the community is, historically and culturally, the space where they learn the norms and principles that help them in their everyday lives. It represents socialisation opportunities integrated in a collective identity, which goes beyond the

nuclear importance of family. Community is the opportunity for older adults to interact and act upon public spaces, in an environment characterized by, potentially, extended social networks. This also means, first and foremost, the possibility for a rich generational learning – precisely the opposite these older adults are going to find in an institution that limits their socialisation opportunities to “people of their age”. “For older adults – more so than for other social groups – the community level is of importance for their social life, when mobility decreases in later life. When the radius of action becomes more limited also in a geographic sense, the local surrounding gets more and more important and becomes the most important resource of areas of action, learning opportunities, and intergenerational encounters” (Formosa, Jelenc Krašovec & Schmidt-Hertha, 2015, p. 207-208). Communities are therefore strongly compelled by the engagement of their members – as we will see from our results below. Hake (2015) considers they are co-built by various local actions and citizen’s movements, many times making use of the community public spaces. Concluding, the community is a fundamental unit that feeds the older citizens well-being, a crucial and natural anchor to the places and spaces of social cohesion and relationships that hold our sense of belonging. For these and other motives, it seems only natural that in a set of contexts, policies and services are increasingly focused in the community (Bilsen, Hamers, Groot & Spreeuwenberg, 2008; Cox, 2005), especially because of its capacities to improve the quality of life of older adults (Chan, Cheng & Su, 2008).

Methods

The original investigation that this article is based on was carried out between 1998 and 2003. This was a multiple case study (Yin, 1984; 1993) focused in the community of Abbey¹, in a rural area of southern Portugal. The case was designed to understand the social change processes triggered by the community development processes that happened in this community, between 1985 and 2002. Five different cases were studied in the community, which allowed us to understand the primary case as defined above. The main interest of this case was particularistic (Stake, 1998; 2000) and by no means had we wanted to generalise. We wanted to build a research process guided

by a deep understanding of the events and phenomena in an interpretative way (Merriam, 1998).

This research was only temporally suspended and we kept the contact with the research context over the years, in different manners. In 2010, 2011, and 2013, we undertook a series of biographical interviews with key-social actors, which allowed us to update our perspectives on the community. Finally, in 2016, we are conducting a series of non-structured interviews (Ruiz, 1999), with two different purposes: first, to continue to collect data on community development processes; and second, to collect data on the way that local social actors build power relationships. In this article we selected research data which, still keeping the community as a case and therefore as a primary focus, can highlight the dilemmas, contradictions and challenges posed by the ageing processes, and the way those processes affect the daily lives of people. We want to discuss our results, taking for granted the pressures that push older adults to an increasing institutionalisation, and reflecting on the community potential to present alternatives to this mainstream trend.

The use of biographical research was extremely helpful, especially because it opened the possibilities for a deeper understanding of the case. In the last decades, biographical approaches have gained an increasing recognition in social and research contexts. The grounds for such recognition are that social learning is contextually situated and occurs through experience and that reflecting from and on experience is a key-element of the research processes. We should stress that in our case, biographical interviews served not only to bring forth rich, subjective meanings, but mainly to build a collective history with a social meaning, focused in the community. In fact, a life history has always associated a social character, which can explain something personal or specific traits of a certain time and space (Galvão, 2005). The building of a social history is a type of biographical approach we can easily find in the literature (Bertaux, 1997; Vieira, 1999). However, it constitutes a hard working task: it involves the recollection of a very big volume of qualitative data and the ability of building and re-building the elements, almost like a puzzle. We are therefore trying to build this puzzle using multiple data from different sources, but as time passes, life history becomes more and more relevant. To conclude, in

this article we analysed the way subjects organise and give meaning to experience and existence, in a permanent connection with the community s(he) belongs to (Atkinson, 2002).

Our interpretation is marked by subjectivity and is very different from the traditional standards of quantitative research, because “a life story is first and foremost a text, to be read, understood, and interpreted on its own merits and in its own way” (Atkinson, 2002, p. 131). To analyse the interviews, we made a content analysis partially inspired by Krippendorff (1980), in which we did not have pre-conceived categories. Rather, we immersed ourselves in the data and identified emerging categories and subcategories (Kondracki & Wellman, 2002). Within these categories and subcategories, we identified the voices of the community social actors and tried to understand their meaning. It is important to say, however, that after this analysis that somewhat fragmented meanings, we had to get back to peoples’ stories and have a more holistic view on their interpretations, to obtain a final result, more balanced.

The case of the community of Abbey

In the middle 80s of the twentieth century a third sector association begun an intensive work in some communities of southern Portugal, guided by the principles of participatory research (Gabarrón & Hernández, 1994; Hall, 1981) and looking at local development in its endogenous character (Melo, 1981). In Abbey the president of the local administration was a blue-collar worker, who had arrived back from an emigration period in Germany. Wishing to contribute to the development of his community, he convinced the association to include Abbey in their project. The first community open meetings were useful for the population to speak freely on their problems and needs (Reszohazy, 1988) even if most of them were a reflection of the deprived situation of the people, and more a responsibility of public administration. It was defined a main worry to start with – the educational issues of children – and an informal group of persons offered to help with the subsequent action. With the participation of the population, in a record time of six months it was possible to open an infancy animation centre, in a provisional space, which received daily around 80 children, aged from 3 to

14 years old. Educators belonging to the communities were recruited to work in this centre. Although some, like Barbara and Ellen, had previous experience in literacy programmes for adults, none had the necessary qualifications or skills to do the job. As similar centres were being planned in other communities of the region, there were enough adults interested in gaining skills related to infancy education. An action-research in-service programme was structured in collaboration with the University of the area. Mondays the centre was closed and the educators received theoretical training at the University. In the remaining days of the week the work was observed and supervised *in loco* by multidisciplinary teams of professors. This programme lasted for three years and a half (for a deeper analysis, see [Fragoso, 2005](#)) and some years later it was possible to build a brand new centre, with multiple functions. It was primarily used by the younger children, by the kids from primary school, who had lunch and participated in some activities there after school was over, and also by the community members, in different ways.

It made no sense that the centre was managed by the third sector association that triggered this intervention. If the processes were to have an endogenous character, then the population had to be engaged at all levels of the social and educational intervention, including management. So people were stimulated to assume an active role in all processes, envisaging their independence from institutions or partners from outside the community. Soon a community association was created to achieve this goal. Barbara and Ellen both joined actively the association, along with other community members – as, for example, a group of women who had participated in training courses that began the year of 1986.

These training courses were designed for women, in an attempt to fight the low economic activity of women (only about 10% of the women had a declared economic activity and, from those, 26% were unemployed). The training was very intensive (8 hours a day), lasted two years and had a number of advantages – for example, women received a minimum salary during the training and a small amount of capital was conceded to start a business, after the training period, to the ones wishing to start their own micro-enterprises. In exchange, these enterprises had to stand opened for a minimum period of three years. The case of a microenterprise on manual

weaving, which after 1989 started to sell their products, was especially important (for a more detailed analysis, see [Fragoso & Ollagnier, 2016](#)). Not all women who finished the course tried to create a business. The mature women who grabbed this opportunity – Laura, Sara, Angel and Maria – fought very hard to achieve a financial stability for their business. But they also had a crucial role tackling the community resistance against the changes of gender social roles and became central in subsequent events in the community. Little by little, these actions (the third sector institution that triggered the processes, terminated their direct intervention in 1991) were producing a set of local social actors who began, spontaneously, to organise the community life differently.

To these persons we can sum up John and Claudia. They arrived at Abbey in 1991 as a result of a challenge posed by the Bishop of the region, who tried to convince adults to go to the mountainous communities as a life project, aiming to improve the presence of the Church and, simultaneously, to promote a social intervention in those places. Apart from their spiritual projects, Claudia and John were impressed by the desolation of older citizens' situation in the area. A profound isolation partially carried by the territory characteristics, infrastructural problems, deficient communications and transports; a deep loneliness due to the constant emigration of adults in their working age (to national urban cities or to foreign countries); the absence of health structures that conveyed a number of health problems; the non-existence of social support services; or the high level of absolute illiteracy, marked the daily lives of the older adults. Accordingly, their first action was to build a parish association and opened a day centre to support the elderly. Soon they are called to try to solve various problems and situations, some of them very complicated:

"You know, in too many cases the problem is loneliness, because they have nobody and they suffer because their sons and daughters are away, away from the country and that causes an immense pain. It's always this nostalgia, this nostalgia, "I'm going to die and I'll never get to see my daughter". People suffer a lot with this, and see, among the elderly is very rare the one who got their sons here, their sons are all somewhere out-there" (Claudia, personal communication, 2000).

“Once we were asked to go and check a place outside, far away, apparently a couple who was dying. The lady was in such a state that she didn’t talk or eat... she didn’t eat because her husband did not know how to cook. After a time in the hospital she recovered and talked wonderfully, I only wanted you to listen her. But she was half-way dead, totally de-hydrated and no hygiene at all, all her body was black, when we gave her a bath the water was blacker than coal... You know, I do things in my life that I never thought I could do. I have treated holes in peoples’ bodies where you could put a fist (pause). In the beginning, when the centre begun to function, it is true! John and I and my daughter very little, we were just a few working, we had a gentleman with a hole where you could put a fist in and I and John, we left our daughter in the street and the two of us went to treat that thing... we had to turn him rolled in sheets because his flesh was rotten and the smell, that smell...! John had problems controlling himself, one day he had to leave the house running to vomit...” (Claudia, personal communication, 2000).

A relatively large group of community members (most of them participated in earlier activities of some kind) started to organise in 1994 a fair in Abbey. They joined all local producers, organised them and found conditions for them to advertise and sell their products during the fair. Soon this grew to be a feast with singing and dancing, also because of an initiative prompted by Laura, who joined a group of women (some had participated in a different training programme for women) to form a new cultural association. With the support of a considerable number of community members, they organised a folk dancing group and a small singing group. They also organised traditional public festivities and, beginning in 2000, began celebrating the International Day of Women on the 8th of March. Laura was a candidate in the 1997 municipal elections, losing by a margin of only twelve votes. She also ran in the 2001 election and again lost. After these same elections, Sara began to work to local office for the president who had won. Abbey’s population traditionally divides its allegiance between two different political parties, and the fact that Sara and Laura became political ‘enemies’ worsened their relationship and the general climate at the workshop. In fact, personal conflicts had been a problem in the past in all the activities. The militants who worked in Abbey from 1985 to

1991, with the population, often assumed this mediating role between people, which demanded a deep understanding of what went on in a relational level, and a complex capacity to disentangle problems arising from past experiences:

“We did not have, at the beginning, a true awareness of the conflicts that simple actions could cause at the family level, with the husbands, the mothers-in-law, the cousins, and everybody else in the community. There was some divisions and even fear, but the intensity of those conflicts became noticeable only during the training processes. It took me a lot of time to understand the problems between Maria and Laura... Also Angel, she had a bad reputation in the community, there was several accusations also because of her son... and then came a time when Laura stood in one side and all the three in the other, because of political reasons primarily. This was not evident in the beginning because Sara was respected in the group, because she was the only one who had an experience on weaving. But Laura begun to stand-out as a very entrepreneurial person, capable of concretising things. And she begun, herself, to act in the community and have a more relevant role, well then this turned almost into hate, and then it turned into a mortal hate. This hate became even more serious when Sara, a person they respected, turned to the side of the ones who hated Laura (Gabrielle, personal communication, 2001)”.

Claudia and John managed to increase the social support given to older adults. Aside from the day centre they had a piece of land cultivated by the elderly; they organised a home care service for those who still kept an independent life and yet needed some support; joined some volunteers to have a small literacy programme (with a very limited success), and launched the first stone of a new residential home. They also managed to activate other projects directed to children and young adults. In 2002-03, there was a significant number of projects (we cannot describe them all) and a fair level of cooperation between the members of the community, despite the fact that conflicts between people are difficult to solve properly in such a small social milieu. However, the ageing processes, caused by a number of macro-factors difficult to tackle locally, continued to act and menaced the community in various ways. The primary school struggled to keep its doors opened, because of a new policy that demanded a minimum number of pupils per

school (albeit the struggles to consider rural isolated areas as exceptions to the new Law). The infancy animation centre also struggled with the diminishment of children, leading Barbara and Ellen to question themselves and their future:

“I really forget that part of my work, but however when I say I forget that bit it’s because I try to concentrate in those things that give me pleasure... otherwise it’s not worth it! Obviously, that scenario [the possibility to be forced to close the centre] is always present and... What is our future? What are we doing? WHO are WE...? Because, after all, we built this and we are here from the very beginning and all that energy we wasted... And what about all our years of work?”
(Barbara, personal communication, 2003)

The personal conflicts between Laura and Sara led Laura to abandon the enterprise in 2003. Less than a year afterwards, Angel also decided to leave. Sara and Maria, facing increasing difficulties in keeping their commitments, decided to close the business in 2004. For these four women, a new phase begun: they all decided to put their efforts either in education or training. The four registered in a centre recognising prior learning, where they were certified at the 9th grade level. Sara, Angel and Maria participated in two different training programmes. Sara also registered in a public training programme on social and cultural animation, between 2008 and 2010. This programme gave Sara a 12th grade educational level. Until 2013 she had been working for the local administration and was responsible for Abbey’s cultural programmes. Angel and Maria found a job, finally, at the new residential home which John and Claudia opened the year of 2009. Less and less children were born in Abbey. The ageing processes consequences became so severe that the public primary school was closed. Also the centre which Ellen and Barbara have fought for, had to be closed in 2006, twenty years after its creation. Today they are both employed by Claudia’s and John parish association to provide care to the elderly. While Barbara is working in the home in Abbey, Ellen works in a small cultural centre for older citizens, about 15 Km away.

The cultural association formed by Laura and other older women still exists, but with a very limited activity, as the younger adults who belonged to the folk and singing groups left to find jobs and a living in urban cities.

Laura found other interests because she was able to reach other persons at a regional level and is still active in a surprising number of various projects. Also she presented herself as a candidate for local elections in September 2013, for the third time – but this time she won. In 2017 she will run again for the elections, at the age of 67 years old.

Even a spatial analysis of Abbey community today reveals contradictory aspects that have a symbolic meaning when it comes to consider ageing processes and the future of the community. On the one hand, a significant part of the structures, services and projects that were created in the last twenty years came to an end; the abandoned buildings of the former infancy animation centre, the public school or the workshops of the micro-enterprises represent a part of the community past that truly can be the future. On the other hand, the enormous residential home that gives jobs to a significant part of the community whilst providing care to the remaining part of the community, stands-out in its symbolic strength as the counterpart of that same future. Simply put, there are only two institutions in the community that have the ability to act: the parish association led by John and Claudia; and the local administration, led by Laura. The community association that once was formed for the population, soon after the infancy animation centre was opened, revealed itself incapable of expanding their action beyond the socio-educational action for children and was terminated after the closure of the centre. Even if Claudia, John and Laura would do their best, the local intervention is today reduced and concentrated – a certain democratic character visible in the participation of larger sections of the community is obviously disappearing. In a moment where we do not have all the research elements to analyse deeply this issue, it is however evident that there are important conflicts between the persons of these two institutions. These conflicts seem to have, at least partially and superficially, the consequence of paralysing a great deal of the community life, standing opposite to a cooperation in the name of the collective, which used to be more common in the past. Beneath all this events, the bigger challenge of them all is more visible than ever: what future lies ahead of an extremely aged Abbey, victim of contemporary processes that seem unstoppable?

Discussion and conclusion

As an introductory note to this discussion, we have to forward some comments from the field of community education and development. The community intervention process in Abbey was integrated in what was then a mainstream trend in Portugal, based in adult education. Particularly and as argued by Fragoso (2011), these models were based in popular education and participatory models, sharing central characteristics. Very briefly and among other: a strong territorial focus; the intention of promoting local social actors to become the engines of community action and development, in a gradual process of increasing people's autonomy and becoming independent from external action; a holistic vision to work with economic, cultural, social, and educational dimensions of the community simultaneously; building bridges between local tradition and modernisation; the centrality of educational processes and the participation of the population. In other words, community education was a major contributor to social change as defined by Luque (1995), being its relative success measured by the qualitative changes that emerged as a result in the community. Our results show that these processes in Abbey reached interesting results, especially after the beginning of the 90s, when the association that sparked the action ceased its direct intervention. It also becomes clear that community education processes are centrally marked by uncertainty (Fragoso & Lucio-Villegas, 2004): the solutions of today rarely represent the solutions of the future; and these community processes are condemned to permanently reinvent themselves in order to survive. Finally, mediation was and is key in community development processes, as we tried to show in Fragoso and Lucio-Villegas (2014). We tried to show the difficulties of mediation in the beginning of the community education processes. But more important, it was the absence of mediation that allowed, later on, the focus on the collective to disappear. Soon the social relevance of individuals was more important than the community. Despite the importance of these or other points related to community education, our focus of interest in this discussion should be now directed to older citizens. For about two decades the community development processes that went on in Abbey had a noticeable vitality, showing the potentialities of community to improve the quality of life of citizens. This community was capable of

building a milieu where older adults could be active and contributed to the community, and simultaneously received from the community social support, resources, and most especially, the advantages of learning in a non-formal and informal way, a variety of things that are important in different dimensions of their lives. To this, the foundational perspectives and theory of adult education have much to contribute. It is not by accident that the third sector association that triggered these community processes in Abbey had the field of adult education and participatory research as a main guide to action, as we can see in the earlier publications of this institution (Radial, 1987) and in later publications, where a more thorough intervention model was defined (In Loco, 2001). Adult education and learning processes can influence positively the social development and life quality, and this applies also to later life phases (Veloso & Guimarães, 2015). As argued by Ball (1995), the special contributions that community-based organizations make to the socialization and development of participants “are often regarded as peripheral, leisure, or recreational resources” (p. 4). However, these organizations allow opportunities for participants to make critical contributions in the form of experiences and involvements that help them to enter new and challenging contexts for learning. In our specific case, the older adults of the community who participated actively in the set of activities described above made their contribution to social cohesion and the development of structures and services that had a positive impact over people’s lives, through non-formal and informal learning (Fragoso, 2014). But also they used these initiatives as a means to improve their own quality of life, as some individual life courses show very clearly.

The learning that took place in the community also assumes a major importance when we think that is a naturally situated intergenerational learning. The ties of collaboration that were established in the first two decades of the intervention in Abbey crossed over the different age layers, naturally extending the dimension of the older adults social networks. Recently there has been a big number of publications and research accounts focusing intergenerational learning and its positive aspects (Boström, 2015; Hake, 2015; Kump & Jelenc Krašovec, 2015; Žemaitaitytė, 2015). But community intergenerational learning has something different when compared to those forms happening in more formalised or less integral

contexts: it is natural, and its positive effects are incorporated into the ways people feel and live daily. That is, the gains of intergenerational learning are transformed into a *modus vivendi*.

In 1991, when the parish association was formed in Abbey, the situation of older adults was appalling. The extreme situations Claudia and John were faced with are an image of deprivation. On the one hand, it shows the consequences of isolation and abandonment. On the other hand, it requires mobilising resources to provide at least the basic care to allow a more dignifying ageing process. In fact, during the 1990s, dependency was considered a new social risk to be prevented, becoming a focus of social policy. Various national programmes were set up by the Portuguese government, like the Programme of Integrated Support to the Elderly, whose main purposes included maintaining elderly dependent persons in their houses – but there is no direct support to families; rather families are supported by institutions (see Despacho Conjunto de 1 de julho de 1994). The extreme needs of an impoverished generation showed how necessary social support institutions are to alleviate older adults' situation. In this regard, the policies followed by the Portuguese government support the social solidarity organisations acting in the public interest, known as IPSS (Private Institutions of Social Solidarity). But this policy is insufficient to deal with older adults' situation. Channelling to those institutions all the support and resources regarding the multiple and heterogeneous needs of the elderly, will bring a pressure on such institutions that might be unbearable in the future, with negative consequences for the older adults. Therefore, an important decision is left for social policy: research evidence points to the need of supporting the families and community, so that older adults can live as much as possible in their families, and naturally integrated in the community networks and dynamics. For example, Bookman (2008) documented three new models of ageing in place – naturally occurring retirement communities (NORC-SSPs), villages and campus-affiliated communities – and explores how these models seek to provide both services and meaningful connections among members. Furthermore, Gardner (2011) showed that the neighbourhoods can be a network of informal relationships and interactions that enhance well-being and shape the everyday social world of older adults ageing in place. But this is not today's trend. Rather,

we argue that the political action of the Portuguese state, despite a very delicate demographic context, seems to be leading to a misguided direction – supporting only institutions and indirectly pushing older adults towards institutionalisation.

Despite all the gains we have described for the community and its members, as a result of the community development processes, it is frightening to understand so clearly that the dynamics that cause the ageing of the territory are probably unstoppable. The decline of the Portuguese population is being accompanied by the continuation of the present trend of demographic desertification of rural areas caused by the reduction of the facilities and infrastructures and their concentration in less rural areas (Pereirinha & Murteira, 2016). The militant way of fighting these problems as they were fought during the 80s in Portugal, was that migration from rural areas could be stopped by creating jobs and a cultural environment with the required conditions for young adults to stay. Today this seems not so easy. On one hand, the jobs have not been generated at a minimum proportion to compensate national and international policies that produce unemployment. On the other, the scarcity of high skilled labour force as the outcome of such emigration flow represents a serious limitation for promoting local economic growth (Pereirinha & Murteira, 2016). In this broad context, community development projects can make a difference creating better life conditions for the ones who are living in the territory, but it seems useless to fight the ageing dynamics of such territories. Concluding, if the trends that determine the development paths of this region are to be continued, it could easily happen that in a near future half of the Abbey community is indeed living in the residential home; and the other half is working in the same home, providing care to the frailer part of the community, who lost their autonomy.

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Notes

¹All names appearing in this article are fictitious.

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