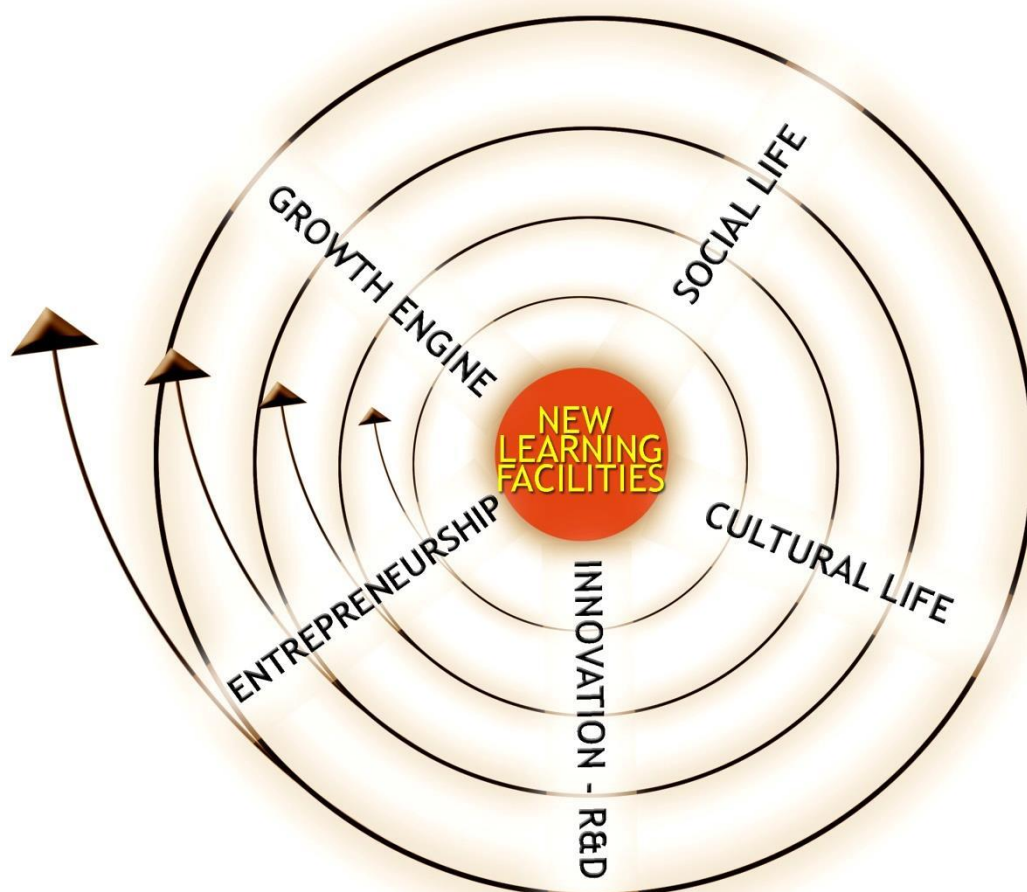




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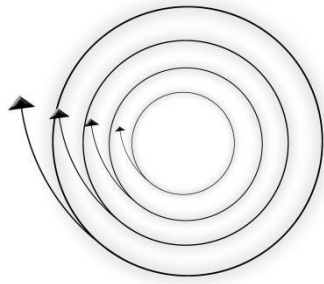


Education-driven **REVIVAL** of small and medium size communities

Young people are increasingly leaving the small- or medium size communities (SMC's) in which they were born and attended basic school.

They go to the big cities for education, jobs or lifestyles.

This is in the long run devastating for the SMC's as well as for the fast growing big cities - but also for the quality of the young people's 21st century learning and capacity building.



WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Very many small and medium size communities (SMC's) across Europe are developing into ghost communities: young people are leaving the communities for education, jobs and many other things in the big cities.

They do not return to these communities later in life.

The big cities are getting bigger and more and more unmanageable through this centralisation, the SMC's are becoming communities of older people and are losing key growth dynamics - and it is becoming increasingly difficult for many educations and wider learning activities to train and practice 21st century learning in the big cities.

21st century learning is very much linked to open schooling and community, but how to engage in community challenges in a city with 4 million or 8 million inhabitants?

In the rapidly growing big cities it is getting increasingly difficult to maintain a sense of community and to interact with the totality and diversity of what we normally understand by the term "community".

It is indeed true that online communities play a still more important role in 21st century learning, but it is also true that good 21st century learning environments combine virtual and physical community interaction.

It is indeed difficult and useless to reduce real-life and real-time community interaction to virtual communities.

Anyway, it is clear Commission policy to counter such centralisation, to disperse and deploy education and R&I and to support the sustainable development of SMC's, including in remote as well as rural areas.

The Horizon Rural Cultural Heritage Calls are good examples.

Across Europe examples are produced of such revival of small and medium size communities - often driven by the establishment of attractive educations, training centers or research and innovation hubs. However, the examples are few and they are certainly blowing against the wind.

21st century communication technology does not seem to be able to help SMC's to hold on to young people, on the contrary. Some things might seem possible, but that does not make them a reality.

All this is not new - however, claiming that centralisation might question the quality of 21st century learning is a little bit new, and before turning towards some ideas for how to counter centralisation, let us briefly indicate why centralisation of education and training might cause such quality problems.

The European Commission strongly recommends innovating and re-thinking education and learning along the following lines:

- open schooling creating practical interaction between any learning activity and the community
- entrepreneurial learning based on initiative-taking and creating real things, in close interaction with the community
- working in real-life and real-time cases based on community needs and interests
- learners of all ages, and in all settings, participating in research and innovation initiatives and circles
- linking learning content and processes to the realities of the surrounding world, including to the community
- investing technology, social networking and creative media in blended learning settings, still linked to the realities of the surrounding world and to the community

So, it seems as “community” is a key parameter in most 21st century learning. This is why big cities can be a problem to 21st century learning.

The sense of “community” is easily lost in the suburb or in the centre of a big city.

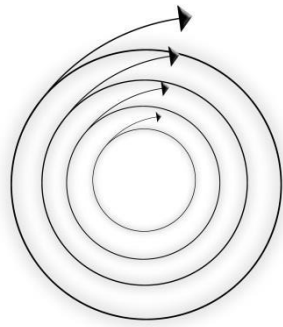
Even if big cities “have everything” it is often very difficult to manage this “everything”, to access this “everything” and to make your way through the chaos of institutions, organisations and stakeholders.

In particular it is often difficult to establish cross-sector partnerships for learners in different forms of open schooling and entrepreneurial learning processes. You lose the sense of the community’s “totality” and therefore the essence of what 21st century learning should be - from primary school via higher education to all sorts of non-formal activities, and for formal school students as well as for unemployed adults and seniors.

In a community with 50.000 or 100.000 inhabitants this is dramatically different.

So, in conclusion the centralisation of learning resources and the fact that young people leave their communities is problematic in very many ways:

- it turns many SMC’s into aging cities with little future perspectives
- it adds to the unmanageability of big cities
- it makes it difficult to implement 21st century learning in authentic environments
- in general it tends to destroy regional and national balances and sustainability



WHAT TO DO?

Any attempt to create attractive learning environments for young people in SMC's will need a long-term strategic approach along with strong cross-sector partnerships.

Having said that, there are very many possible directions for countering centralisation and supporting dynamic futures for SMC's and for young people in SMC's.

However, these strategic initiatives will have to fight the powerful winds of globalisation, clearly adding to centralisation day by day.

Initiatives will need determined action and strong cross-sector support as well as considerable political dedication.

To some extent interested small and medium size communities might find strategic support in recent brandings of innovative cities such as learning cities, smart cities, healthy cities and similar.

However, branding in itself will not do the job.

What are the key criteria for developing SMC's into attractive communities for young people?

No manual is available, of course, but it is possible to mention some of the most important criteria:

- young people must be able to discover very interesting, attractive and even innovate learning opportunities in the community, difficult to find at the same quality level elsewhere
- more traditional educations can be made attractive through innovative learning strategies, international collaboration, advanced use of technology and open community collaboration
- the learning environment must be known to be inviting, dynamic and organised around open campus approaches, offering young people not only a learning opportunity but also a lifewide experience
- the surrounding community should be deeply engaged in attracting young people and offer all sorts of advantages, such as technology, sport, music and a variety of youth cultures
- the community's private sector must be dedicated and offer various forms of support, collaboration and engagement
- the attractiveness of the learning environment should be followed up by dynamic and attractive job or entrepreneurial opportunities in or around the community

→ the community must be strongly branded as a trendy, special and highly interesting place to learn and live, including being branded as a community in which young people can take initiatives and create economy

Easily seen, the success of an SMC revival will depend on the combination of several initiatives and factors, calling for strong cross-sector collaboration and political dedication.

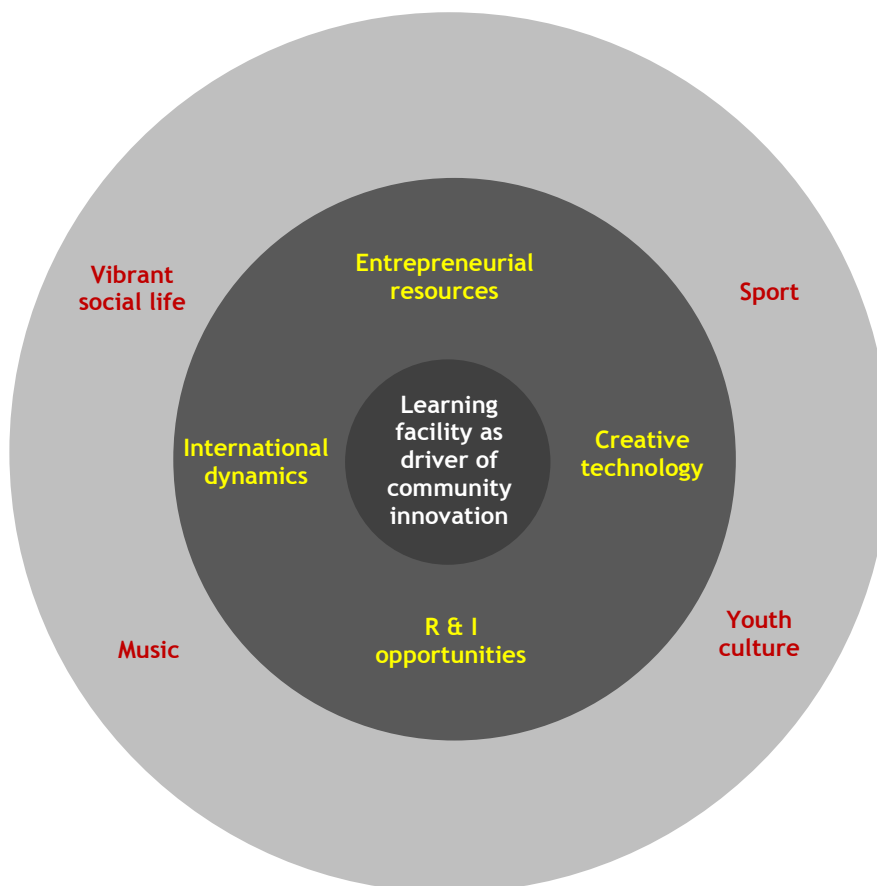
Obviously, revivals include *establishing* such attractive learning environments; and it also includes the community at large *following up* such establishment. It is of great importance that the support initiatives in the community are well synchronised with the establishment and promotion of the new learning opportunities.

The support initiatives should not arrive several years later...

The strategic idea is that the establishment of new learning activities (in the broadest sense of “learning”) should be a driver, engine, lunch pad and dynamic centre of and for further innovation in the community.

This is the key to success. Isolated learning opportunities will not do the job.

Let us illustrate:



What might be the nature of such new learning opportunities serving the revival of small and medium sized communities?

Let us give some examples:

→ a higher education could decide to establish an existing or new department of the institution in an SMC

→ vocational training centers could decide to move from a big city to an SMC

- major companies could establish dynamic R & I units in an SMC
- the community could decide to establish an advanced technology centre in the community, perhaps even covering formal as well as non-formal learning
- the community could invite the private sector in the community to establish dynamic entrepreneurial hubs in the community
- the community could decide to create a powerful open learning centre in the community addressing the population at large and including open initiative-taking opportunities
- the community could plan to create an open science learning centre in the community, perhaps linking to already existing resources and potentials in the community
- the community could plan to engage creative educations in building innovative and frontline learning facilities in the community
- the community could plan to attract or create highly specialised and attractive educations to and in the community
- the community could create a strong and dynamic international learning environment in the community, embracing formal education as well as learning opportunities for the population at large

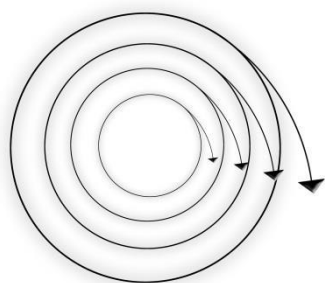
Many more directions might be listed; however, the point is that a dedicated community supported by a strong cross-sector partnership might be able to create such changes in a for example 3-5 year period.

In particular if based on a combination of the directions listed above.

Revival of a small or medium size community is indeed possible, but it will take strong political will and dedicated support and involvement of all key community players and resources.

Developing such revival strategies might very well include linking the new dynamic facilities to already existing resources or potentials in the community and its surroundings.

This would endow the initiatives with a strong and original branding as well as link to the history of the community and its people.



WIDER COMMUNITY BENEFITS

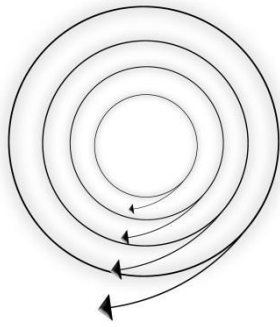
As the key mission of such strategies is to revive SMC's and insert new dynamics in the community, it is of great interest to take a look at the wider benefits for the community of such dynamics.

Of course, such wider benefits depend on the nature of the community as well as of the installed dynamics, and in-depths analysis will be needed in each case; however, it is possible to at least refer to a number of typical benefits resulting from the new dynamics, such as:

- the new dynamics might in the long run counter the loss of economic and social capital
- the new dynamics might serve as a growth engine in various sectors
- the new dynamics might produce a vibrant intergenerational culture
- the new dynamics might encourage the learners to take new and interesting initiatives based on the entrepreneurial learning approaches
- the new dynamics might in the long run give rise to new job or entrepreneurial opportunities in the community
- the new dynamics might inject various forms of innovation energy in the community
- the new dynamics might create a variety of unforeseeable spin-off activities and initiatives
- the new dynamics might in the long run benefit local economy, for example through increasing public tax income
- the new dynamics might help create a more dynamic and interesting social life in the community for all citizens
- the new dynamics might step by step create new mentalities in the community, encouraging more citizens to take initiative
- the new dynamics might serve as role-models for other communities, companies and educations, offering various forms of collaboration and joint ventures
- the new dynamics might attract European attention, offering a range of funding and collaborative opportunities adding to the international atmosphere in the community

Of course, all this can be seen as wild dreaming, but it is not so. The globalized 21st century indeed creates many problems, some of them irreversible and devastating, but at the same time the globalized world is challenging static situations as well as traditional mentality, and it is therefore possible today, unlike 20 or 30 years ago, to create very innovative initiatives resulting in considerable change.

All it takes is strong leadership, political determination and cross-sector dedication.



WHAT KIND OF STRATEGIC INITIATIVES WOULD WE LIKE TO SEE IN EUROPE TO BUILD capaCITY ROLE-MODELS?

The revival of small and medium size communities, including in remote and rural areas, is a European challenge, not a national or local one.

Centralisation and young people leaving their communities happens all over Europe.

The European Commission is offering a variety of support programmes for sustainable development, environment protection, social innovation and similar. Some of these programmes might be useful to SMC revival initiatives.

However, it would be of great interest to see programmes directly addressing the revival and innovation of small and medium size communities.

Such a programme might link to for example the development of learning cities and similar.

The Commission's Horizon programme is offering a wide range of topics for innovation, including topics that to some extent might relate to the revival of SMC's.

The Rural Cultural Heritage Call is a good example, as the mission of the Call is to invite projects creating sustainable economy from such heritage resources, typically in remote areas.

Nevertheless, we would like to be able work with Calls in Horizon directly addressing the revival of SMC's through the strategic use of education and learning facilities as drivers of such revival.

The design of these initiatives might include the interaction between SMC role-models and replicators from different European countries and regions.

The mission of such projects would obviously be to create sustainable and tested models for the revival of small and medium size communities driven by the systematic and strategic injection of educational and learning resources.