



BOOK REVIEW:

**VALUTARE L'IMPATTO DEGLI INTERVENTI SUI BENI
CULTURALI ATTRAVERSO IL METODO SOPHIA. IL CASO
TEATRO AKROPOLIS, BY MICHELA MARCHIORI, MAURO
BAIONI, FLAVIA MARUCCI, CHIARA PETRINI,
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Abstract

This volume presents the first Italian application of the SoPHIA method, a holistic framework for evaluating cultural heritage interventions, tested at Teatro Akropolis in Genoa. Developed within a Horizon 2020 project, SoPHIA assesses impacts across three dimensions: domains, people, and time. The case of Teatro Akropolis, a small performing arts centre undergoing strategic transformation, illustrates how the method supports participatory evaluation, internal reflection, and future planning. Findings highlight the method's multidimensionality, stakeholder engagement, and its capacity-building potential. The study underscores the value of flexible evaluation tools tailored to the complex realities of small cultural organizations.

Review

The volume *Evaluating the Impact of Interventions on Cultural Heritage through the SoPHIA Method: The Case of Teatro Akropolis*, edited by Michela Marchiori, Mauro Baioni, Flavia Marucci, and Chiara Petrini, makes a significant contribution to the ongoing discourse on evaluating the effects of culture on sustainable societal development. Published in the Working Paper Series of the Department of Business Studies at Roma Tre University, the text introduces the holistic impact assessment SoPHIA method, developed by a European consortium as part of a Horizon 2020 call. The book presents the outcomes of SoPHIA's first application in Italy, focusing on Teatro Akropolis, in Genoa.

The SoPHIA method (Social Platform for Holistic Heritage Impact Assessment) stems from the recognition of the limitations of traditional evaluation approaches, which are often narrowly focused on quantitative metrics and adopt a unidimensional perspective (Holden, 2006; Radbourne et al., 2009; Chiaravallotti & Piber, 2011). A comprehensive review of existing literature and international policy revealed that commonly used methods (e.g., environmental or heritage impact assessments) inadequately capture the multidimensional nature of cultural interventions (SoPHIA Consortium, 2020a, 2020b). Additionally, they frequently overlook the viewpoints of both direct and indirect beneficiaries, despite the growing emphasis on civic engagement in policy discourse.

SoPHIA proposes an innovative approach to address these gaps, structured around three key dimensions (Marchiori, 2021):

- **Domains:** The transformative impact is assessed through six thematic areas and 28 sub-themes, considering both cross-cutting synergies and possible negative or unintended effects (countereffects).
- **People:** The method explicitly incorporates stakeholder and beneficiary perspectives, engaging them in defining objectives, selecting criteria, and reflecting on outcomes, either directly or through consultation.
- **Time:** It takes into account the temporal evolution of interventions across planning (ex-ante), monitoring (on going), and medium- to long-term evaluation (ex post).

The volume emphasizes that SoPHIA method should be regarded more as a methodological framework than a prescriptive model. Its application must be tailored to the specific case and context, thus highlighting the importance of human engagement and reflective processes.

It was in this context that Teatro Akropolis in Genoa emerged as the first concrete opportunity to carry out such an applied experimentation.

The specific choice of Teatro Akropolis was driven by several compelling factors that made it an ideal testing ground for this experimental approach.

First, the theatre was undergoing a significant strategic and organizational transformation. Founded in 2010 as a centre for experimental performing arts, Teatro Akropolis had recently completed the renovation of its main hall in March 2022. This infrastructural development marked a critical juncture for the organization, making it an opportune moment to engage in reflective evaluation.

Second, the renovation had catalysed new programming possibilities and expanded audience engagement. The leadership recognized the need for more structured and nuanced evaluative tools to understand the effects of this expanded activity portfolio.

Third, the theatre's objectives aligned closely with SoPHIA's extended definition of "intervention," which encompasses both physical changes and intangible initiatives intended to produce measurable change. Teatro Akropolis was not only interested in evaluating the impact of the physical renovation but also the broader set of immaterial cultural activities it enabled. This alignment ensured conceptual consistency between the organization's assessment needs and the methodological principles of SoPHIA.

Fourth, the theatre's resonance with participatory engagement made it a natural fit for SoPHIA's stakeholder-inclusive approach. Teatro Akropolis has historically emphasized collaborative practices that involve artists, audiences, and the local community. The participatory foundation of the SoPHIA method, therefore, resonated with the theatre's own values and operational culture.

Fifth, Teatro Akropolis was open to collaboration with researchers and Academia and demonstrated enthusiasm in becoming the first Italian organization to test the SoPHIA framework in practice. For the research team, this readiness presented a unique opportunity to transition from theoretical design to applied experimentation.

Lastly, the project was configured as a mutual action-research initiative, emphasizing the co-construction of knowledge. The impact assessment project was conceived as an action-research process, blending theoretical insight with practical co-creation. Researchers worked closely with Akropolis staff, offering the organization a reflective and progressive pathway while enabling the research team to test and refine the method in a real-world setting.

This alignment between the evolving needs of Teatro Akropolis—supported by its relationship with the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation—and the research team's goal of operationalizing the SoPHIA method illustrates how this case was not only timely but methodologically strategic. The evaluation, conducted between September 2022 and May 2023 links theory and practice and emphasizes participatory engagement. Specific-

ly, the researchers adopted an analytical approach, whereby academics and practitioners collaboratively applied diverse forms of knowledge (tacit and explicit) to examine decision-making and implementation processes. Key participants included the Teatro Akropolis staff and Artistic Direction, as well as two external stakeholders: the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation (a funding body) and Triangolo Scaleno Teatro (an artistic partner from Rome). The evaluation focused on three of the theatre's core activities: artist residencies, the *Testimonianze ricerca azioni*, festival performances, and PCTO (school-to-work transition) programs for students. Surveys were used to gather perceptions from artists, audiences, and students.

The project produced not only benefits for the theatre—such as increased awareness of evaluation's strategic role and embedded practices of audience feedback—but also critical insights for translating the method into operational procedures. Despite its specificity, this case study validated the method's multidimensional and participatory design and established a foundation for future applications. The evaluation of Teatro Akropolis, as detailed in the volume, yielded several significant findings. Firstly, the evaluation report was broadly perceived by stakeholders as an accurate and faithful representation of the theatre's current state. This perception reflects the methodological rigor and contextual sensitivity with which the evaluation was conducted. Importantly, the purpose of the evaluation extended beyond mere documentation of past activities. It adopted a forward-looking orientation, intended to inform future planning and strategic decision-making. This dynamic use of evaluation—as a generative, not only retrospective, tool—emerged as one of the most valued aspects of the process. A central strength of the SoPHIA method lies in its multidimensional framework, which was recognized by participants as particularly effective in capturing the complex, interrelated effects of cultural interventions. Unlike traditional evaluation models that emphasize singular indicators, SoPHIA's structure facilitated a more holistic and nuanced understanding of Teatro Akropolis's diverse impacts across domains such as social cohesion, innovation, and identity. The evaluation also revealed certain underdeveloped areas, most notably in the thematic domain of "Protection," which encompasses environmental awareness and care. Although this domain aligns with the strategic aspirations of the organization, concrete impacts in this area were limited. This gap prompted the theatre's management to consider targeted actions to better align its practices with environmental goals. Moreover, the process surfaced several latent synergies—such as the potential to open artistic residencies to public audiences—which spurred new strategic reflections about how to amplify positive impacts through more inclusive programming. One of the most profound outcomes, however, was the participatory nature of the evaluation itself. This approach was widely viewed as a valuable opportunity for self-reflection, mutual

learning, and organizational development. The inclusion of diverse stakeholder voices enriched the process and fostered a sense of shared ownership over the results. Perhaps most notably, Teatro Akropolis has since institutionalized evaluation as a recurring and autonomous practice. The organization now routinely collects public perceptions and adapts its impact assessment tools to better integrate them into its operations—demonstrating a significant step forward in internal capacity-building. Finally, the evaluative process has also encouraged the theatre to consider how the dissemination of results might serve purposes beyond internal learning. Sharing findings externally was identified as a strategic lever for enhancing collaboration, benchmarking, and broader organizational legitimacy within the cultural and funding ecosystems.

This volume offers compelling insights. Cultural organizations, while often non-profit in nature, operate under complex managerial dynamics and constitute a vital part of the socio-economic fabric, frequently as small or medium-sized enterprises or third-sector entities. The need to measure and communicate value creation extends beyond financial metrics and is increasingly critical for access to funding and social legitimacy. SoPHIA's emphasis on multidimensionality and participation provides a fitting approach for capturing the inherently complex goals and impacts of cultural organizations, which rarely align with single metrics. The Teatro Akropolis case demonstrates that even small organizations can engage in structured evaluation processes—not only for external accountability but also as a tool for internal analysis, organizational learning, and strategic development. The discussion on the method's "tailored-approach" and the balance between context-specific insights is relevant for small cultural organisations, which often lack the resources for implementing complex, standardized evaluation systems.

The volume does not shy away from open questions, such as how to reconcile case uniqueness with data comparability, or how to refine evaluation procedures and integrate various sources of information (KPIs, perceptions). Nonetheless, the well-documented pilot experience with Teatro Akropolis offers a solid foundation for future applications and methodological development, supporting the creation of accessible, effective impact evaluation tools. It fosters greater awareness of their multiple impacts and informs more grounded decision-making processes. In conclusion, the volume is a valuable resource for scholars and practitioners engaged in the management and evaluation of cultural organizations, as well as for those interested in impact assessment processes in small enterprises and the third sector more broadly. It offers a robust theoretical framework and, through the case study, provides practical and empirical evidence of the benefits and challenges associated with applying a holistic, participatory method. The work is an invitation to see evaluation not as a bureaucratic obligation, but as a strategic lever for growth and socio-economic positioning.

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