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Creative-led strategies for peripheral settlements and the uneasy transition towards sustainability

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Abstract

The creative cities discourse has long-overlooked the impact of the new creative economy regime on rural areas, often legitimising arguable urban-biased policies. This paper illustrates how two small towns, in Asia and in Europe, have attempted to build creative settlements, setting up agendas for sustainability transition. This has implied a strategy to reposition the local economy around notions of culture and creativity, deconstructing mainstream pro-growth discourses. It has been also accompanied by the experimentation of forms of engagement of local community. The aim is to explain the challenges encountered during this process, and to distil, from this experience, the potential factors that might hinder a real process of transition towards sustainability in the long run. It will conclude that employing effective creative-led strategies, to overcome 'smallness' and 'marginality' in a sustainable way, should be based on the strengthening of local planning capacities, and the development of effective network governance arrangements.

Keywords: creative-led strategies; rural areas; governance; place-making; participation, sustainability.

1. Introduction

The assumption that the creative cities discourse has generally overlooked small towns and villages in its analysis, is by no means a polemic *j'accuse*. In regional science, creativity (and availability of knowledge) and its contribution to economic development has been generally associated to accessibility and distance from the core, assuming that peripheral areas are lagging behind (Andersson, 1985). This is because the contemporary economic regime (or new economy) does not only have specific creative attributes, but it features, at the same time, '*a marked propensity to assume geographic expression in the form of specialized locational clusters*' (Scott, 2006, p. 3). As a result, the new economy is primarily tailored to cities, being driven by key emerging sectors where intellectual and creative assets prevailed over '*routinized mental or manual forms of work*' (Scott, 2007, p. 1466). This has determined the raising of interest for a new creative class in the early twenties (Florida, 2002), and has polarised attention on to making cities more attractive and competitive (Landry, 2008), pursuing aggressively neo-liberal urban policies (Sager, 2011). Only with the recent crisis of the deregulated global market system (Harvey, 2011), the contradictions of the creative economy have finally emerged (Pratt & Hutton, 2013). This has helped to reconceptualise the creative cities as part of the so-called cognitive-cultural capitalism, in which the creative field of cities is understood well beyond urban creativity (Scott, 2014). Such form of capitalism, as explained in the next session, has specific social and spatial connotations, requiring a serious reconsideration of the discourses and practices of creative cities. As an example, the new urban question of inequality has favoured advocacy for the 'good city', claiming the need to nurture civic democracy and local cohesion in future creative cities development agendas (O'Connor & Shaw, 2014). Moreover, this has re-oriented attention on to grasping other potentially sustainable dimensions of the creative city, which are inherent in the contemporary economic order and, not being mainstream, generally underestimated.

On the basis of the aforementioned assumptions, this paper addresses a critical spatial issue of the creative economy, focusing on localities at the periphery of development, their specific creative features, and how they attempt to tackle their decline and

marginality. Labelling those areas as rural is deliberately avoided. 'Peripheral' instead allows to refer to rural or peri-urban localities relatively close to urban centers, excluding the very remote and isolated, where such analysis would be largely inapplicable. Two international cases, one located in Italy and one in China, have been the object of inquiry. Here, local authorities have responded to the challenge of making creative settlements setting up participatory processes where to envision how to use local resources in more sustainable way for future growth. In order to unveil this process, this paper illustrates the process of envisioning employed during two action-researches led by the author of this paper, leading to the formation of new local agendas. It will also show how these processes have resulted in new strategies based on culture and creativity. On the basis of what has later been achieved and in light of the uneasy process of transition started, the goal of this paper is to show which issues of sustainability have emerged in both cases and to discuss the potential factors that may hinder a real process of effective transition towards sustainability in the long run. The learning from these experiences will eventually suggest measures to reduce the risk of failure of such promising bottom-up experiences.

The next section will introduce peripheral areas in the cognitive-cultural capitalism, and the actual creative-led practices on the ground, later on prevailing issues of sustainability in rural development studies will be reported. Ultimately, the two aforementioned cases will be analysed and discussed in more detail. The reason for choosing these is mainly due to the relative maturity of the experiences, which can allow for a preliminary evaluation of the results achieved. The reason for comparing cases from very different cultural, social, and institutional contexts is to provide suitable analytical tools for shaping a reasonably general international policy agenda. This demand comes from the increasing attention given by international organisations, such as UNESCO, UNDP, UNCTAT, and other agencies, to the creative economy, and their efforts to provide policy advice to UN member states (UNESCO, 2014; UN/UNDP/UNESCO, 2013). A re-conceptualization of peripheral areas in the creative cities discourse worldwide, could allow for the capture of a much more complex situation than the one that has emerged so far, leading to envision more robust policy advocacy and credible pathways of sustainable actions in different regional contexts. At a time when peripheral regions of the world are lagging behind, this can support the advocacy for a new season of meaningful regional policies (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

2. Peripheral areas in the cognitive-cultural capitalism, and the actual creative-led strategies on the ground

The cognitive-cultural capitalism concept has been introduced as a distinctive feature of cities characterised by some key leading sectors such as technology-intensive manufacturing, services of all varieties (business, financial and personal), fashion-oriented neo-artisanal production and cultural product industries (Scott, 2011). This version of capitalism, at the basis of the creative city discourse, is based on increasing city (or region) 'imperfect' competition, or quasi-monopoly', and even if, '*competition of this sort plays to the advantage of cities with distinctive creative capacities' (...) 'those that are handicapped by relatively small size can often find sustainable niches for themselves on world markets provided they can offer sufficiently distinctive goods and services*' (Scott, 2006, p. 13). Thus, size and location, although possibly limiting the development opportunities of peripheral regions initially, can be turned into niche opportunities for embarking on original local development paths.

Generally speaking, the main focus of creative cities has been on their economic competitiveness and their entrepreneurial attitude, resulting in regressive policy advocacy, narrowly focused on certain specific social groups and certain specific city locations (Pratt, 2011). This has called into question some of the overly optimistic assumptions of creative cities policy and its effectiveness, leading to the conclusion that they have largely promoted new territorial, and social, inequalities across space (Scott, 2014).

Progress in the understanding of positive and negative sides of creative cities is substantially contributing to redefining the focus of scholars and policy makers on this subject. It is determined by the need to reconcile the creative cities discourse with the issue of sustainability. This can be achieved by looking at place specificity and different endogenous conditions of localities in order to construct '*resilient and self-sustaining structures*' and to apply suitable local capacity building strategy (Pratt, 2015). In broader terms, this can be achieved by relating the discourse and practice of creative cities to that of sustainable cities (Ratiu, 2013). Research in this sense is at a preliminary stage, particularly when it is not urban-centred. As Ratiu (2013) argues:

'*the issues of sustainable creative cities and the urban policy agenda and culture led-development of regeneration strategies have a particular taste/sense if relating to small cities rather than to large cities or global metropolis*' and the '*theory of creativity and urban policy focused on the global competition to attract external creative resources in metropolitan centers has completed overlooked small cities*' (p. 129). Similarly, socially disintegrated settlements, such as rural or semi-rural communities with declining industries (Moulaert, 2000), small, remote, locked-in old industrial regions, and internally fragmented metropolitan areas (Tödtling &Tripl, 2005), are excluded from the knowledge economy discourse.

Whether, and how, these communities can achieve sustainable development by fully utilising their cultural assets, or by nurturing creativity, is still open to discussion, given the relative lack of research on the subject. The work on small cities by Bell & Jaine (2006) and a small number of other cases, suggests that the assumption that large cities are the core of creativity, while anything else is lagging behind is partially wrong (Waitt & Gibson, 2009). It would be equally misleading, however, to consider that small settlements, in both developed and emerging countries, can easily embark on a sustainable pattern of development based on their cultural and creative assets, as this paper will argue.

Creative industries are generally narrowly associated to cultural ones in major international reports. Cultural and creative industries refer, broadly speaking, to economic sectors encompassing a wide range of fields, such as music, art, design, etc., both technology-intensive and craft-intensive (UN/UNDP/UNESCO, 2013) They jointly form the 'cultural economy', which is based on a core of creative fields, complementary to the rest of the economy (Throsby, 2008). UNESCO has defined a Framework for Cultural Statistic Domains, highlighting six pillars that form the Cultural Domains (cultural and natural heritage, performances and celebrations, visual arts and crafts, books and press, media, design and creative services), deeply connected with local intangible cultural heritage and to other related economic domains, particularly tourism and recreation (2009).

Although important, the cultural sector is just one component of the cognitive-cultural capitalism, with the risk of shadowing other emerging creative sectors, particularly in rural areas. Overall, these definitions suit cities better that they suit rural areas and peripheral settlements, and, therefore, there is an increasing need to expand their understanding and scope. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the UNESCO

Network of Creative Cities[1], while formed mostly by medium and large cities, has also accepted nominations for medium and smaller settlements belonging to rural regions. For example: the small town of Östersund in Sweden, which is renowned for its regional gastronomy; Pekalongan in Indonesia, with the surrounding batik craft villages; the small town of Fabriano in Italy, for the revitalisation of the centenarian tradition of paper production.

The most evident reasons why the creative cities discourse has quickly evolved to encompass other forms of settlements, including those located in rural areas, is primarily due to two factors. On the one hand, tourism has been a real driver of change for local rural economies and it has stimulated a creative and original reuse of local assets (Richards and Wilson, 2006). Local communities offer today unique combinations of art and cultural events, festivals, local handy crafts, cultural and naturalistic activities, regional cuisine, tapping particularly on their tangible and intangible heritage (Stolarick, Denstedt, Donald and Spencer, 2010). On the other hand, digital innovation and improved digital infrastructure has more recently enhanced opportunities of local development. As a matter of fact, research into the creative economy of rural areas is centred around the potential for digital connectivity to support local business and/or to enable creative people to live in, or relocate to, rural regions, thus diversifying local economies (Roberts, & Townsend, 2015). A well-connected countryside is surely a precondition for the spread of creativity and innovation, and to overcome long-lasting isolation and marginalisation. While this might not be an easy process, it is narrowing traditional urban-rural gaps (Gallardo, 2016).

It is here assumed, therefore, an ample definition of creative-led strategies. With reference to the mature UK experience, creative-led strategies for peripheral areas are defined as strategies for boosting an emerging creative and digital rural economy (HLREC, 2018). This economy is only partially comprised of traditional (urban) creative industry classifications (DCMS, 2001), and is instead complemented by other sectors as diverse as: agri-tech, sustainable food and farming, rural energy, rural-cultural tourism, rural art and craft, etc. (CRIC, 2019). Overall, creative economies in peripheral regions are comprised of '*those firms and individuals that make use of creative practices in the production of their culturally imbued output*', making full

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[1] For an overview of the network, currently formed by 246 members: https://en.unesco.org/creative-cities/ (Accessed 15 April 2020).

use of the uniqueness, remoteness and allure of the rural (Collins and Cunningham, 2017, p. 10). What this means for the sustainability of rural economies, however, is not always clear and will be explored in the next section. As mentioned already, models for rural creativity are often urban-centred, determined by exogenous discourses and generally lacking understanding of the specific interaction with people, rural places, and creativity (Bell & Jaine, 2010). In addition, the fragility of peripheral settlements, due to such persisting issues as ageing populations, migrations, climate change, environmental degradation, and job decline, might impede the flourishing of sustainable creative economies (Verdini, 2016a; Ceccarelli, 2018).

3. Understanding sustainability in peripheral settlements.

In the current professional practice, sustainability transition in rural areas is understood as a context-appropriate search for a state of balance between the natural and built environment, 'to create prosperity, maintain and enhance healthy ecosystems, and provide a high quality of life' (Frank & Hibbard, 2017, p; 302).

In terms of core policy and planning practices to achieve sustainable rural development in peripheral regions, at least three fundamental aspects are generally taken into account in literature (Frank and Reiss 2014): place-making, community building and sustainability; local government, land use, and comprehensive planning; and effective horizontal and vertical governance. While the first point is primarily linked to social innovation in rural areas (Neumeier, 2012), the other two are more dependent on the quality of local institutions (Shucksmith, 2010), and their belonging to complex multi-scalar governance systems (Douglas, 2018).

In economic terms, rural economies are deemed to be more resilient when multifunctional and diverse, as in when they are not purely reliant on agricultural production and on external funding or subsidies (Wilson, 2010). This has led to policy advocacy for enhancing creative economies in the countryside (HLREC, 2018). Tourism has long been seen as a potentially beneficial alternative source of rural income, although there is an increased awareness of its side effects and costs,

especially in relation to seasonality (Czarnecki, 2018) or overcrowding (Peeters et al., 2018).

The performance of a small settlement is ultimately related to a meaningful combination of rural planning and design tools, based on a variety of local assets and ad hoc participatory practices (Daniels et al. 2007). This is applicable to regions normally characterised by a relatively low-density population, predominant agricultural land use, and often close socio-cultural relationships (Frank & Hibbard, 2017).

The abovementioned categories have been used and adapted to define a framework for sustainability suitable to assess the transition process of the two cases, as reported in the methodology session. In particular, attention will be given to whether the below are pursued effectively:

1) The strategic use of local assets to develop creative practices and ultimately to diversify agricultural economies. The main barriers to creativity here lie primarily on scarce attractiveness and connectivity (Roberts and Townsend (2015). However, the discussion is *in primis* anchored to the uneasy relationship between planning and regulations vs the unleashing of economic potentials (Albrechts, 2004).

2) The community engagement and place making process (local governance), to prevent the opaqueness of decision making (Sturzaker & Verdini, 2017);

3) The horizontal and vertical integration in wider networks (supra-level governance), to prevent isolation ensuring a diversity of supports (Douglas, 2018).

Taken together, these aspects (partially overlapping) might mitigate potentially dangerous locked-in effect generating dynamic, although sometimes contested, new *ruralities* (Shucksmith, 2010).

Moreover, by looking at the actual culture-led strategies in place in peripheral areas, the lack of sustainability in their use can be attributed to the urban-biased nature of the process of policy construction locally. Lysgård argues that '*there is no doubt that the reconstruction of cultural policies in rural places (...) are influenced by ideas elaborated in cities*', being, on the other hand, a '*mixture of policy fragments on the move and locally embedded tradition and path-dependency*' (Lysgård, 2016, pp. 4 and 5). One problem in assembling creative local resources in rural areas, is their critical

relationship with tourism. As in cities, place-making has been often instrumental in raising solely tourism attractiveness. At the same time, local traditions have been commodified, promoting profitable cultural events, and housing has been turned in tourism accommodation. The fierce competition to distinguish each locality has often generated counter-productive effects: namely the adoption of '*fast policy*' around creativity, and a 'copy and paste' attitude, resulting in serial reproductions, which might be unattractive to the very tourists the cities seek to attract (Richards, 2014). Creative-led strategies for peripheral areas might generally tend towards simplified forms of branding strategies. As previously stated, this may imply some negative side effects, including rural gentrification, environmental pressures during peak periods, and local labour distortions, especially when (mass) tourism assumes the form of an erosive factor (Fowler, 2003).

4. Case studies

4.1 Background

Between 2015 and 2016 a research report titled 'Creative small settlements. Culture-based solutions for sustainable local development' was produced, gathering information from various research units in Europe, Asia and South America (Verdini, Ceccarelli, 2017). The aim was to investigate potential enabling factors in achieving local sustainable development based on culture and creativity in small settlements across the world. It looked primarily at real case studies, where academia and NGOs have been engaged in providing assistance to assemble creative-led strategies around specific local projects. It ultimately aimed to collect good practices of solutions for sustainable local development, providing, at the same time, a critical perspective on local opportunities and threats.

Thirteen cases were collected, and a common template was circulated providing information ranging from basic demographic and socio-economic data to qualitative description regarding: local identity, local economy, and morphology; cultural activities/creative economies (existing or under discussion); local governance and relationship with local cultures; and urban and rural conservation projects. For each case, researchers have been asked to analyse the local economy in particular, based on

the UNESCO framework for cultural statistics domains (2009), highlighting the creative potential of the selected settlements.

Overall the small settlements chosen (Verdini and Ceccarelli, 2016) have been involved in a process of transition towards sustainability by:

- Redefining the strategic role of local assets in a more coherent way around the notion of culture and creativity, considering sustainable tourism as a complementary aspect of such a strategy;

- Engaging the local community of stakeholders in envisioning future scenarios of development, which are more widely interconnected locally and globally.

- Being engaged in diverse forms of network governance (horizontal and vertical).

The aim of the report was to feed an emerging international agenda aiming to relate culture and creativity to urban-rural linkages (UCLG, 2016; UNESCO, 2016) and to their complementary and synergetic function between rural, peri-urban and urban areas (UN-HABITAT, 2015). It has also served to develop further studies locally and tailored action-research in those local contexts willing to experiments with new participatory approaches to rural planning and design. The author of this paper was involved in two studies, in China and in Italy. The study carried on in China refers to the period 2015-2016, with public participation occurring in July 2015, while the one in Italy to the period 2016-2017, with public participation occurring in July 2017. The unpublished data of both studies have been gathered and will be presented in comparative way in the next session.

4.2 Methodology

The method employed is comparable. In both contexts, the two local authorities have commissioned research to set up local agendas for sustainable transition, facilitating local participation towards this goal. This opened up a concrete possibility to engage in action-research, and consequently in evaluating the results obtained. In practical terms, this has meant developing the research in three phases for both cases:

- The first phase aimed to conduct a preliminary data collection, being comprised of basic demographic and socio-economic statistical data, and existing villages' policies and master plans. Moreover, at least two formal round of interviews with local policy makers were conducted (the party secretary and her assistant in China, and the vice-major and the councillor for

the cultural sector in Italy). Constant communications were maintained with them during the all process;

- The second phase aimed to facilitate participatory workshops with local communities to gather informal knowledge from those involved, and to devise scenarios of sustainability. A team of researchers, with the support of master students[2] worked in a one-week rural design residential charrette to sketch, to brainstorm and to interview citizens during several visits in both villages. The charrette culminated in the organisation of a public participation day, involving an estimated number of thirty people in Shuang Wang, China, and around fifty people in Gagliato, Italy[3];

- The third phase aimed to evaluate how the results obtained by the participatory charrette have been used from the two local authorities to liaise with upper level governments, and have informed local policy making.

In the next session, in order to engage in a critical discussion on which factors might hinder a real process of transition towards sustainability in peripheral settlements in the long run, the observations implemented during the rural design charrette and the process of creating rural scenarios, will be reported (Thorbeck, D., 2012). Later on, the cases of Shuang Wan in China and Gagliato in Italy will be analysed and discussed in comparative way.

4.3 Two settlements: Shuang Wan in China and Gagliato in Italy

Shuang Wan is a rural village, with almost 2,500 inhabitants (2013), located in the Wujiang District of Suzhou (a newly designated urban area of around 1,287,000 inhabitants). The village is 40 km from Suzhou and almost 100 km from Shanghai. The entire area is very fertile, being located in the Yangtze River Delta, and the economy is traditionally based on agricultural activities. Historically, however, textile activities, particularly silk production, have complemented farmers' incomes. Despite the intense urbanisation process and large rural-to-urban migrations, the entire area retains some productive rural areas (Verdini, Huang, 2017); therefore, local informal

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[2] Five researchers from various disciplinary fields (architects, urban planners, local economic experts) led, in both cases, groups of 4 to 5 students from various international and local Universities.

[3] The participation day took place in the last day of the workshop in the case of China, while two events were organized in Gagliato (one at the beginning and one at the end of the week).

economies, primarily textile, still support the local livelihood (Verdini, 2014). Here, home-based workshops have flourished in recent years, specialising in sweaters, and scaling up their production through online sales. On the other hand, rural land is often leased out, with aquaculture being a relatively profitable alternative source of income. In 2015, the local government promoted the study of alternative rural development scenarios (Fig. 1), in response to top-down requests to modify the rural land use structure, with a scaling down of aquaculture, which has the potential to negatively impact farmers' incomes (Verdini et al., 2017).

Fig 1 One of the topics discussed during the scenario exercise was the reorganisation of accessibility, developing new water banks as 'green' infrastructures to allow slow mobility and develop urban greenery.

The initial concern of the local authority was how to allocate the remaining agricultural land to more profitable cultivations. Moreover, remnants of old structures, with potential heritage value, and the variety of aquatic landscapes, were considered useful for boosting local tourism. During the discussion with the local authorities, it was agreed that it would be best to take the opportunity of the rural charrette to entirely redefine a future development strategy based on local cultural and creative assets. On the one hand, they were to protect heritage and the rural landscape for cultural tourism and recreational opportunities, while on the other, they were to

engage with local textile entrepreneurs to discuss ways to upgrade and innovate their production, and to link it in with the new image of the town (Fig. 2).

Fig 2 Local people in Shuang wan approached during the participatory workshop.

Gagliato, is a small town located in Calabria, in the South of Italy. It has just 515 inhabitants (2013), and it is part of the Province of Catanzaro, (1,973,000 inhabitants). It is one of the least developed regions of Europe, and has been heavily depopulated in recent decades. The town is also quite isolated, being almost 40 km south of Catanzato and almost 400 km south of Naples. Its local economy primarily relies on agriculture and seasonal tourism, due to its proximity to the coast. In recent years, Gagliato has hosted an annual gathering of international scholars in the field of nanoscience. In 2009, they established the so-called Academy of Nanoscience, a non-profit organisation with the aim of promoting science among the local youth. In 2016, the local NGO has promoted the study, as in Shuang Wan, of alternative development scenarios. The initiative has assumed a specific bottom-up connotation, in an attempt to envision a potential pro-active role for the Academy, which so far was rather

marginal within the local economy and confined to a single annual event and a few additional educational initiatives with local schools. The initial concern of the local authority was how to make the town more attractive throughout the year, particularly for event-led tourism, using the brand of 'Nano-town' and developing hospitality there. The Academy, on the other hand, wanted to strengthen their educational role in their specific fields, namely STEM learning and English.

During the workshop, local citizens and local entrepreneurs (mainly agricultural) have been engaged in a wider discussion on how to redesign the future of Gagliato, during the so-called 'Gagliato Living Lab' (Verdini et al., forthcoming), and on how to connect the rich, and apparently scattered, existing initiatives (Fig. 3). This has resulted in the production of local development scenarios (Fig. 4)

Fig 3. The 'engagement workshop' in Gagliato with local people in different tables of discussion.

Fig 4 One development scenario was to reconnect the nanotech expertise present in the town with local agriculture, such as the famous local cultivation of oregano.

4.4 What has been achieved and how: a comparative summary.

Although very diverse in nature, the two cases share some common aspects. The two towns, despite being relatively marginal in their respective regions, are developing niche economies with certain creative attributes (Scott, 2006). More than that, they have developed different forms of connections beyond their boundaries: the successful online selling in Shuang Wan, and the organisation of an international scientific event in Gagliato. Besides their real economic impact (quite important in the former case and quite marginal in the latter), this has allowed to retain connections with the outside world. As a result, people have been quite open and motivated to be engaged in the two charrettes and discuss about the future sustainability of their village.

In order to analyse the process of building creative-led strategies in the two contexts, the results of the participatory workshops are systematized below based on the sustainability framework developed in section 3. Both proposals have been approved as strategic documents by the respective local governments.

1) The strategic use of local resources to develop creative practices and to diversify rural economies:

The proposal for Shuang Wan is based on the improvement of the rural landscape, the conservation of local heritage, and the upgrading of the textile manufacturing industry through design and innovation. The creative potential of the local economy is mainly due to the presence of the online selling of garments. While, so far, the textile activities are very standardised, there is the potential to upscale these into neo-artisanal production, thus developing complementary creative industries. Due to the credible proposal submitted to district level, the village has received the title of 'China's Beautiful village' paving the way for town regeneration (Verdini, 2016b). As a result, initial funding obtained was used mainly in physical interventions to improve the public realm and the greenery of the town. However, no further funding was allocated to stimulate the village regeneration and to support creative industries.

The proposal for Gagliato addressed both the need to stimulate event-led tourism across the year, through the restoration of the historic core of the town, and the opportunity to upgrade local agricultural productions, thus improving their marketing potential, while also shortening the supply chain by selling directly to customers (the so-called 'Gagliato box', piloted during the workshop, providing a variety of seasonal and local agricultural products). In addition to this, it has been recommended that local sessions are introduced in the Nanotech conference, to promote the application of scientific knowledge in the field of nanoscience to local food productions. This has been taken on board by the Academy of Gagliato. In this case, the cultural and creative attribute of the proposal was primarily based on the potential to apply high-tech agriculture. Nevertheless, since 2018, small-scale interventions have also been also sponsored by the Academy, such as the re-painting of damaged public staircases.

2) The community engagement (local governance):

The participatory work in Shuang Wan, according to the local party secretary, '*has been useful in getting consensus around potential development scenarios, and in overcoming previous conflicts, particularly between local residents and textile entrepreneurs*' (Interview, July 2015). In a nutshell, for the first time, local villagers could understand the overall rationale of a development project, thus reducing underlying community tensions. The local leadership, therefore, has been legitimated to work with the upper level government on finding a compromise between the top-down impositions to transform rural land, and the bottom-up aspirations to ensure a wealthy future for the village. Given the Chinese contexts, participants were selected and invited to participate directly by the local leader, at the end of the charrette. This has ensured a certain representation of major economic stakeholders, including in particular garment's entrepreneurs, farmers and workers' leaders. People were encouraged to express their opinion at the end of a formal presentation, and feedbacks were systematically collected to refine the rural design scenarios presented.

The participatory work in Gagliato has been a success in terms of participation, gathering almost fifty citizens (10% of the total population) to contribute to the, so-called, 'engagement workshops'. This is due to the effective local mobilisation put in place for the specific event, but also to the responsive 'atmosphere of change' created by the local NGO presence over the past ten years (Verdini et al., forthcoming). In this case, the call for participation was made since the beginning, via the distribution of flyers and posters, and through local newspapers, to ensure a real co-production of work. As a result, a wider range of participants, including young professionals, agricultural entrepreneurs, retired people and so on, joined the charrette both at the beginning and at the end. Focus groups were organised to gather systematically citizen's opinions about desired scenarios for their town. During the final presentation, feedbacks were also collected. As in the Chinese case, this was the first participatory experience for the town.

3) The horizontal and vertical integration in wider networks (supra-level governance):

In the Chinese case, local mobilisation has been instrumental in defining a cultural and creative profile for the town, which has been partially recognised by the upper-

level government, and supported financially. The coherent and well-integrated system of Chinese decision-making has generated a timely response from the upper-level, securing immediate funding already in the summer 2015. Following the initial plan's implementation in late 2015, however, the village leader was promoted moving to a new role, and the ambitious plan was put aside. In the Italian case, local mobilisation has equally supported the cultural profiling of the town, particularly within a newly-formed association of municipalities (Valle dell'Ancinale) promoted by the Region Calabria to ensure a more coordinated territorial development (Rossi, 2017). Gagliato, since then, has become a point of reference for cultural and creative activities within the association. Moreover, the Region Calabria set up an urban regeneration fund and the town of Gagliato submitted a proposal. The overall proposal, however, was not funded, although, only recently, the town has received regional support to restore an historic building to host the Academy of NanoScience.

5. Discussion

The question of how people in marginal rural areas can regenerate their environment, by embarking in sustainable development processes is a longstanding one. Despite the recognition that this could be achieved by nurturing people-centred approaches on development, strategically rethinking local resources, and pursuing local participation (Ray, 2001; Vallerani and Visentin, 2018), models of rural development have often followed narrowly-defined trajectories. The overwhelming literature of the last two decades on tourism is evidence of this (Smith and Richards, 2013), with the tendency being to interpret tourism as a panacea, and less frequently as a potential disruptive force (Fowler, 2013).

What has been reported in this paper sums up the challenges of building creative settlements, and attempting to embark on alternative paths of local development where creativity has been placed at the hearth. Results have been successful from various perspectives. The engagement of local communities has stimulated, in both cases, a discussion on place making and innovative forms of participatory rural design (Thorbeck, 2010). People have gathered to envision alternative scenarios for their respective rural communities and knowledge from various stakeholders has been

integrated during the process. The result has been close to what Patsy Healey has defined as the social process of design together plan-making processes generating new ideas that could be carried forward by local communities (Healey, 1997).

One result achieved was in reorienting local actions, beyond a merely tourism-based agenda. In the Chinese case this has meant deconstructing the idea that Yangtze River Delta water towns can only become weekend destinations for Shanghai's tourists. Similarly, the work in Calabria has attempted to challenge the prevailing perception that Southern Italian towns can only evolve into seasonal tourism destinations, attractive for summer festivals or seaside resorts. In both cases, creative-led solutions to stimulate local endogenous resources (textiles in China, and agriculture in Italy) have assumed a primary importance in local civic debates, despite the obvious and understandable differences of the forms of local participation implemented, more tokenistic the Chinese one and more consultative the Italian one (Arnstein, 1969). Such creative strategies have been based on culturally relevant assets, embedded in social and economical practices and supported through existing or incipient digital economies.

This confirms that, under certain circumstances , the '*flow of neoliberal consumer-based policies of cultural industries', place marketing [and so on], cultural policies of rural places (...) are more guided by and rooted in path-dependency, heritage, tradition, community practices and social capital, based on ideas of participation, mobilization and social coherence'* (Lysgård, 2016, p 10). Consequently, following Lysgård's stream of reasoning, the cases reported have been less inclined to uncritically embrace a catchy notion of '*attractiveness, competitiveness, place marketing, and creative industries that have been in the forefront of the culture-led urban strategies'(p. 10)*.

When looking more holistically at policy and planning practices for sustainable rural development, as defined by Frank and Reiss (2014), the literature shows a convergence towards '*integrated, community-based approaches to meeting rural people's needs, and maintaining local economic, social, and environmental systems'* (p. 390). However, additional factors need to be considered to allow for a more comprehensive discussion on how to achieve long-term sustainability.

Creative economies in peripheral regions heavily depend on both accessibility and connectivity. In this respect, digital connectivity has, in particular, unleashed

potentials of development. The fortune of on-line selling of clothes and agricultural produces, respectively in China and Italy, is revealing of the existence of very promising local market dynamics. However, the nature of two villages, poses a question on whether such initiatives can be easily scaled up. Small settlements often lack even basic planning tools or building codes. In addition, local institutional capacities in dealing with basic physical transformations can be quite limited. The result is that ambitious visionary strategies can often collide with ordinary daily life problems. As an example, in Shuang Wan, the area identified as the heritage core of the village lacks any form of protection, and the buildings are almost all abandoned. Setting a policy for jointly boosting creative industries and regenerating historic areas would need to face the urgency of restoring buildings. Similarly, in Gagliato, the proposal of the regeneration of the historic core of the town, as a hub of innovation, faces, for example, the environmental problem of roofs being covered with asbestos. The structural lack of funding available for clearing asbestos, and the associated risk to health, could undermine local investments and future developments. Even in case of availability of funding, only a set of solid urban planning tools (from building codes to master plans) and related incentives would ensure a smooth transition in land-use conversions, demanded by new functions (Albrechts, 2004).

Moreover, current research on urban transition towards sustainability has recognised the multi-faceted challenges of development transition. This is because '*sustainability transformations are reshaping urban politics more broadly, and are, in turn, revealing new governance questions*' centred around the notion of politics of collaboration (Burch et alii, 2018, p. 305). This confirms the importance of jointly addressing various and complementary dimensions of sustainability in rural planning and design practices. In the absence of one of those, promising paths towards transformation may not bring forth any radical change. Local transformations, therefore, might not bring about any real sustainability, but only temporary variations to 'business as usual'.

In both cases, the risk of not overcoming potential vertical governance issues might degenerate the virtuous processes in place so far, with the ultimate risk of perpetuating the isolation so far intensively fought. This is evidenced by the turn-over of leadership in the Chinese case, which is not surprising. It is, in fact, a typical trait of the Chinese urban governance system, which has used party leaders promotion as a

way to stimulate competitiveness and the Chinese urban growth machine (World Bank, 2014). It is also found in the Italian case, where the local institutional weakness of strategic and territorial governance, and the availability of funding, particularly in the South of Italy, might limit a real possibility of growth and the exploration of effective synergies with other public and private stakeholders (Urso, 2014). Overall, it is a typical problem of governance of rural areas where forces from the bottom should be able to mobilize private interests, but possibly also to collaborate with upper-level governments to stimulate growth (Douglas, 2018). However, the problem in both cases was the scarcity of private funding and the lack of targeted public schemes to support creativity, which could ensure long-term sustainability of such initiatives (Shand, 2016). As a result, both villages have somehow obtained what was available, but not necessarily what should have been really beneficial for them in the long run.

6 Conclusion

This paper has attempted to reposition small settlements and peripheral regions within the creative cities discourse, arguing for the need to reconceptualise their role, and their sustainable future in such discourse. It has illustrated two cases of building creative settlements, assessing what has been achieved but, more importantly, discussing some limitations in ensuring their long-term sustainability. Despite their strong motivation for emancipation, and the efforts deployed to create their niche in the global creative economy regime, their 'creativity' might not be enough. While they can tap into rich local cultural resources, both tangible and intangible, they need to nurture their assets, take care of their environment, and find allies. The urban-centred and neo-liberal approaches, narrowly focused on attractiveness and competitiveness, can be challenged if practices of civic inclusion are experimented, developing alternative agendas that matter to the people. Yet, the risk of dissipating their fragile resources and remaining isolated is quite high. The two cases reported here show two different ways of unlocking local resources, and how this generates a legitimate and promising local demand for development and further integration into more articulated network governance scenarios. Making creative settlements in peripheral regions of the world is possible, once creative-led strategies and visions are

clearly set and inclusive local governance arrangements are in place. Ensuring their long-term sustainability will instead depend on the way that they overcome their smallness and marginality, by raising their capacities and by employing an effective politics of collaboration beyond their boundaries.

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