

Communities-based rural regeneration: The experience of “Borgofuturo +” project in Marche Region

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Abstract

Rural areas are rich in cultural and natural heritage, local traditions and productions, but at the same time they face demographic and socio-economic challenges that bring to depopulation, ageing, disengagement, reduced service provision and inhibited accessibility. To counter this process, several initiatives have been raised, and the debate around this issue has intensified following the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper presents the experience of “Borgofuturo +”, an initiative launched in Summer 2020 to bring an itinerant art and music festival in 5 small towns of the Fiastra valley, in Marche Region. Building on the work of the Association BorgoFuturo and embedded in the methodological framework of the H2020 RURITAGE project, Borgofuturo + aims at setting up a participatory process to build a coherent and shared vision for the future of the Valley. This study reports some outcomes of this process, framing priorities and recommendations for the regeneration of the involved territory.

Introduction

Inner and rural territories and communities encompass exceptional landscapes, natural and cultural heritage and excellent gastronomy, and are rich in ancient traditions and exceptional human, natural and social capital. Nevertheless, inner and rural areas are facing continuous demographic and socio-economic challenges that bring to depopulation, ageing, disengagement, reduced service provision and inhibited accessibility (EPSON 2017, Delgado Vinas 2019). The current COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this dichotomy. On the one hand, rural areas have been threatened even more than urban areas, because of less available resources and greater isolation issues. But, on the other hand, the need of social distancing, the lack of adequate open public green areas in bigger cities and the possibility of remote and teleworking have started to be claimed as drivers for people living in densely populated settlements to move towards inner and rural areas. Possibility of regeneration through enhanced rural tourism or direct repopulation of rural areas through smart and remote working and

the so-called ‘staycations’, have been explored already during summer 2020 and they look as a stable trend for the following months. (Airbnb, 2020). As such, the COVID-19 emergency brought rural and inner areas at the centre of the current planning debate, with some experts advocating that this COVID-19 crisis could actually repopulate rural areas. Rural areas have much to gain into this process, but should be ready to properly manage it to avoid unplanned gentrification issues and to ‘protect’ current human, natural and social capitals. For this reason, the establishment of sustainable, inclusive and community-based local plans and strategies is needed to respond to current challenges in a just and sustainable way.

Inclusivity and participation are key to ensure that decisions that will give shape to the territory of tomorrow are shared, designed and agreed by local stakeholders and citizens. While participatory planning processes are quite common in urban areas, and despite the high-quality work performed in some rural areas within the LEADER approach, inclusive and community-based planning and management process are still quite rare in rural areas. In this context, the RURITAGE project (H2020, GA No. 776465) aims at developing a paradigm for heritage-based rural regeneration building on six identified drivers for development, the so-called Systemic Innovation Areas (SIAs), which recognize Cultural and Natural Heritage (CNH) as a powerful driver of sustainable and inclusive local development. Among its main objectives RURITAGE aims at fostering participatory management, responsibility and ownership of CNH in the RURITAGE communities through the development of a Methodology for Community-based Heritage Management and Planning (Perello et al., 2019).

In the context of RURITAGE project, a call for additional Replicators, i.e. rural communities willing to test and implement RURITAGE methodologies and tools to regenerate their territory, has been launched. More than 80 applications have been received, showing a great interest and activity in rural areas around the topic of promoting a sustainable growth. BORGOFUTURO, an experience of rural regeneration through art and festival based in Ripe San Ginesio, Marche Region, is one of the selected additional replicators. The project rises from a collaboration between the Municipality of Ripe San Ginesio, a small village of Marche Region, and the association Borgo Futuro, formed by a group of young people committed to the local territory and involved in cultural productions and envi-

ronmental studies. Born in 2010 as a “Festival of Sustainability on a hamlet scale”, over time BORGOFUTURO has become a project for the regeneration of Ripe San Ginesio, which reactivated its historical center – defined as Borgo – through the assignment of municipal spaces to artisans and local boutiques.

As in the rest of the globe, COVID19 severely hit the cultural initiatives of rural areas, often based on traditional organization structures, not able to adapt to the safety regulations required by the sanitary emergency (De Luca et al, 2020). At the same time, the need of open spaces, social distances and safety measures, brought the festival that traditionally takes place just in Ripe S. Ginesio, to reinvent itself, and to travel among 5 different municipalities. In this way, ten years after its birth, BORGOFUTURO widens its scope to other four neighboring municipalities, which decide to embrace its project and host a month of shared cultural activities in the summer 2020 under the name of “Borgofuturo+, il buon contagio” (in eng. “the good contagion”). Within this paper, we present the participatory process organized in the frame of the festival, analysing its results and investigating it as a model of involvement in rural areas.

Building trust and shared visions are among the main objectives of such a process, aiming at contributing to set the bases for a shared implementation of actions that will contribute to regenerate the area according to the RURITAGE methodology. Starting from the challenges and the possibilities raised from the COVID-19 crisis, the main objective of this work is to show how participatory processes are necessary in rural areas to discuss, get opinions, create innovation and take decisions on topics such as culture services and infrastructure, ecological network, local resources management and tourism. Potentialities, criticalities and concrete proposals will be discussed in the results section, framing priorities and developing recommendations for future planning and reflecting on the opportunity for small towns in inner areas to cluster, network and coordinate planning efforts in order to reach shared objectives.

Methods

The administrations of Ripe San Ginesio, Colmurano, Urbisaglia, Loro Piceno and Sant’Angelo in Pontano, all located within the Fiastra valley, decided to start an inter-municipal project, which may act as a driving force for the development of the territory. The area is also at the centre of other territorial strategies, under both the regional and national management. Through the European Structu-

ral Funds and the Cohesion Fund, following the LEADER approach, Marche Region finances “Integrated Local Projects” (PIL), which brought several municipalities together in a project aiming at strengthening the touristic attractiveness of the territory, under the name of “Fiastra valley, a place of experiences”. Bordering the PIL, a further strategy is carried out by the Italian National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI), which is promoting the place-based improvement of basic local services and infrastructure in the pilot area “Alto Maceratese”. In this territorial context, representatives of the five municipalities adhering to Borgofuturo + have met, for laying the foundations of shared planning lines, working on the macro-topics of sustainability and quality of life.

The collaborative methods that the five municipalities tested in forms of four round table discussion have set the base for shared actions that will contribute to regenerate the area according to the RURITAGE methodology. Indeed, in the next months further activities, i.e the participatory workshop that will make use of RURITAGE good practices and lessons learned collected within the project, will pave the way towards a shared regeneration plan for the territory. Four different events have been organized consisting of one round table session followed by a public event. These four events, scheduled within the festival program, hosted together local stakeholders and external experts on the topic. During the round table, the discussion was facilitated by moderators, constituted by members of the association Borgo Futuro and municipal employees. At least two moderators were assigned to each round table, made of a maximum 18 participants. In the event

that the participants exceeded this number, two parallel tables were organised. The overall structure of the discussion has been agreed within the moderation group prior to the workshop.

The four round table discussion took place between July and August 2020 and focused on the following key topics:

- *1st round table: Small towns, infrastructures and services for the regeneration of rural territories.* The aim here was to define an inter-municipal strategy for the regeneration of the territory through the mapping and re-activation of underutilised spaces and by sharing infrastructures and services.
- *2nd round table: Innovative projects for environmental education and for improving the knowledge of the territory.* The goal was to

conceive innovative projects for the schools of the Fiastra valley for promoting education on environmental sustainability and for enhancing territorial knowledge among children.

- *3rd round table: Shared programming of cultural events.* The aim was the definition of a protocol for the production and programming of cultural initiatives through common guidelines and tools.
- *4th round table: Eno-gastronomy and quality local products.* The aim was to set up a network on an inter-municipal scale for supporting local production and distribution.

At each event, the discussion around the predefined topic followed the same structure through i) a first moment of presentation and re-definition of the topic by each participant, ii) the analysis of the strengths of the territory and good practices, iii) the identification of criticalities and iv) the suggestion of possible proposals.

In accordance with the nature of BORGOFUTURO and RURITAGE, constantly oriented toward engagement and local commitment, a participatory process, involving local actors through workshops and public meetings, has been set. Stakeholders’ identification followed the guidelines provided by the RURITAGE project, identifying relevant stakeholders per type (policy, research, industry and services and public users) and per area of interest according to the identified topics (services&infrastructure, education, art&festival and cultural and natural

heritage, food and gastronomy).

The selection of stakeholders has been made through the support of the five local administrations, ensuring that stakeholders from all the five territories were participating. Municipalities have been specifically asked to involve at least five people per workshop per municipality. In addition to the direct engagement of the administrations, the workshops have been disseminated through the social networks of the municipalities and the communication channels of the Borgofuturo+ festival, happening in parallel. In addition, the events of the festival were organized in order to offer a further occasion to address the topics approached at the roundtables.

Results

Overall, the roundtables involved the participation of more than a hundred local actors and addressed different aspects of rural regeneration. The attendance was broad and diversified as the participants came from different sectors of society. The workshops have represented a meeting point between local administrators and decision-makers, with cultural and social operators, representatives of the education sector as well as farmers and local producers.

To analyze the results, we didn’t refer to the four topics discussed during the events, but we rather focused on the main cross-thematic outcomes that resulted from this exercise, as below described:

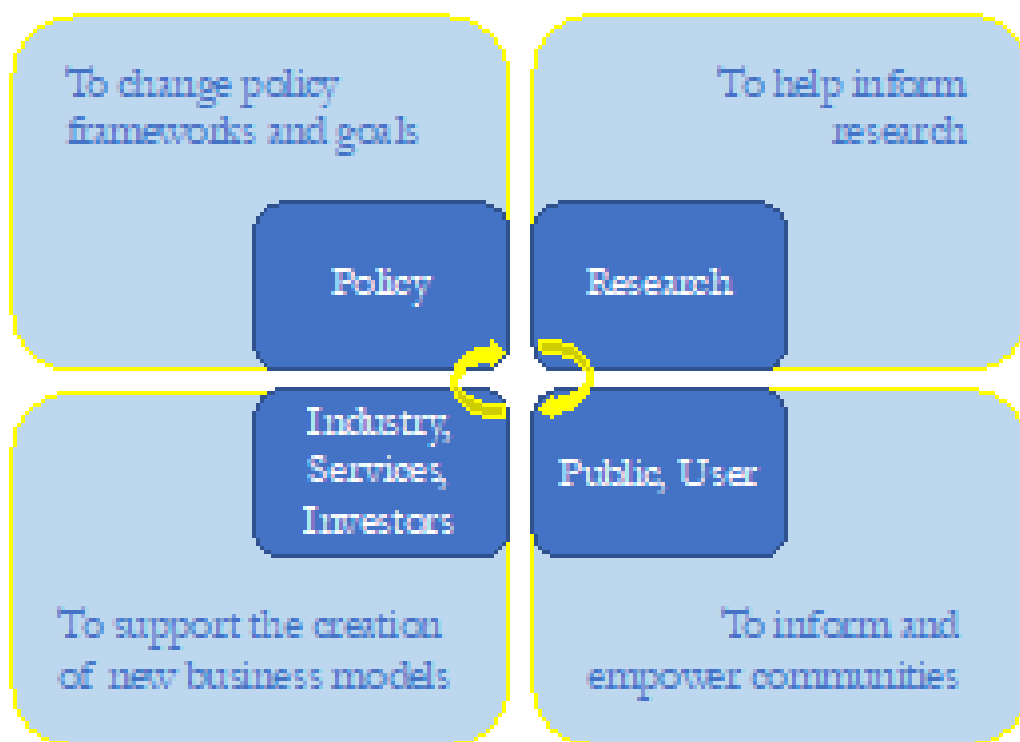


Figure 1 – Core areas for dissemination and stakeholder engagement. Source: RURITAGE.

Small towns sustainable planning and regeneration

Many of the participants agreed on the need of developing a shared plan and programme for the conservation and regeneration of small towns in rural and inner areas, especially after the earthquake that hit the area in 2016. The earthquake generated a state of emergency causing abandonment and isolation on one hand, and opportunities (namely available empty spaces redeemed from the ruins and lent to locals at subsidized rental rate, recovery funds, etc.) on the other, that need to be properly and jointly managed among neighbouring municipalities.

Participants to the roundtables have pointed out the need for a new territorial approach, where small towns are considered as structural elements to be connected among themselves and to the territory through a bioregional and integrated planning. The goal of these approaches is to valorize both cultural and natural local resources and to connect existing places of interest, local producers, services and infrastructure in order to secure mutual and continuous support among and from municipalities to civil society, beyond political divisions and the timescale of a legislature. Therefore, existing planning tools such as the General Regulatory Plan (PRG) need to be renovated and adapted in order to mirror local needs, account for contextual settings, allow for public participation and for a shared approach.

The joint drawing and approval of the municipal plan by the 5 municipalities would allow to better integrate other place-based initiatives, i.e. the SNAI and the PIL, and to find synergies with the Local Action Groups (GAL) that have a supramunicipal approach. However, the lack of an integrated vision and of support from the Province and the Region, both in terms of coordination of the different initiatives and in terms of fundings, has been highlighted.

In this sense, the link with the RURITAGE project - that highlighted the importance of participative governance models - could be really valuable, to better frame the idea of community resilience and to replicate collected practices and lessons learned. In addition, overcoming rural small towns' historical resistance to communicating and collaborating was raised as a necessity for allowing fruitful connections between them and with the outside. Indeed, collaboration has been a buzzword in many of the roundtables.

Stakeholders and citizen's participation and enhanced collaboration

As highlighted both in the LEADER approach and in the RURITAGE methodology, the

active participation of local stakeholders is the key to bridging the gaps between public administrations and civil society, including both individuals and associations, and to rebuilding the bound society-territory that is essential to its sustainable growth. Therefore, implementing a continuous education by developing a knowledge management service infrastructure, to foster active citizenship and attitudes of care and attachment, is critical to the successful planning and regeneration of rural areas. The involvement of different sectors of the society, such as associations, music or crafting schools, yoga teachers, local food producers or landowners allowing access to their property, was seen as essential in creating holistic educational programs. Regarding the cultural and agri food sectors, all participants agreed in seeing an added value in the collaboration between the several theater companies, musicians, artistic producers and events organizers towards a shared program, as well as between local food producers for a mutually supportive and coordinated supply chain, introducing an innovative system of quality certification which could be participated and come from the citizens themselves (following the example of the solidarity economy district and the food markets already present in many municipalities).

As a further tool for promoting those collaborations, participants called for the need of mapping the local initiatives and the good practices, ranging from the agri food to the handicraft sector, from education to sport.

Enhancing inhabitants' quality of life through local cultural and natural heritage and resources

The main objective of the whole exercise was to discuss opportunities and practices for enhancing the quality of life of people living and working in the territory while preserving its rich cultural and natural resources. Participants asked for services suitable to the different age groups which would allow them to live in rural towns differently, connected to urban areas (e.g. internet connection) while preserving their identity, and to halt the current depopulation trends.

One of the sectors that were most frequently mentioned as critical to the economic recovery of rural inner areas is tourism. However, the risk of gentrification and of neglecting the territory and local people's needs and will has also been raised, calling for the need of prioritizing inhabitants over tourists. Some of the local initiatives respond to those needs by trying to respect the towns' design (e.g. "albergo diffuso" or scattered hotels), to connect the tourist offer to the place (e.g. small and scatte-

red ecomuseums) and to involve inhabitants of different ages in its creation and final delivery to tourists. However, to date, there is a scarce recognition of the skills needed to better manage the cultural touristic offer, and the sector lacks adequate funding schemes. Many cultural centers, such as museums, theaters, archaeological sites and public libraries, are still damaged after the earthquake and do not offer a safe space to personal initiatives. Among the possible solutions to reconnect inhabitants to their territory and to its cultural and natural resources, participants included the creation of a magazine to promote the local culture, also based on the rich public and private archives available; the promotion of local artists and their involvement in local festivals, which they said to particularly appreciate for their familiar and hospitable small dimension; the implementation of a soft and slow mobility infrastructure (e.g. for bikes, skates, etc.) that connects different amenities in the area and that is accessible throughout the year; the installation of proper signages and the need to train touristic guides and teachers with a specific focus on local culture and natural resources.

Conclusion

The preliminary results of the workshop, that will be further discussed in the future events that BORGOFUTURO will organize also in the framework of the RURITAGE project, already demonstrated the interest of the local community in co-developing a rural regeneration plan, recognizing their challenges and opportunities for defining a shared vision for the future. The four events that took place during Summer 2020 contributed to building trust and shared visions among stakeholders, but also highlighted the need for a more structured dialogue among the different municipalities' players. Among the others, the Borgofuturo+ participatory process showed the importance of a player acting as facilitator, supporting the process and connecting different municipalities and stakeholders. In this case, facilitation was carried out by the volunteers of the association Borgo Futuro, which organized and structured the workshops and took care of internal communication and external dissemination of the events. This aspect represented both a weakness and opportunity: on one side, the participation was facilitated by the neutrality and unbiased position of the association, on the other, the process was dependent on their voluntary work. This option would not be sustainable in the long run and could hamper the collaboration process. For this reason, it is essential that the

local administrations understand the importance of facilitating the process and dedicate specific resources to it. Also, to build a successful network of cooperation, another important issue concerned the possible synergies and collaboration to be established with other relevant players of the area. Indeed, the idea to set up the Borgofuturo+ participatory process was born during the discussion the 5 municipalities had for the development of the PIL. In this sense, the possibility raised by RURITAGE, in terms of capacity buildings and knowledge sharing and the recent approval of the PIL that foresees the collaboration of the 5 municipalities in the following years, are opportunities that cannot be missed if the strengthening of the collaboration and cooperation among the municipalities has to be reached. It is indeed crucial for the development of the territory that the different projects, carried out with different approaches, are able to communicate, setting the basis for an integrated vision of the territory.

Notes

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L'analisi della struttura settoriale e la misura della vocazione economica e produttiva delle aree interne: una proposta metodologica

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Abstract

L'obiettivo del presente lavoro è quello di sottoporre una proposta metodologica di analisi della struttura settoriale e delle vocazioni economiche e produttive dei comuni ricadenti nelle c.d. Aree Interne del Paese. Lo studio, sviluppato nell'ambito dell'Accordo tra IRISS¹ e CNR IGAG² stipulato per il supporto al Progetto PON GOVERNANCE E CAPACITA' ISTITUZIONALE 2014-2020³, mediante un approccio statistico-economico, mira a fornire ai *players* economici, ai decisori pubblici ed ai pianificatori strumenti d'analisi degli aspetti organizzativi e dei motori delle agglomerazioni produttive dei comuni ricadenti nelle aree interne.

L'abbattimento delle barriere alla mobilità spaziale di beni e servizi ha comportato il progressivo annullamento delle distanze ed un avvicinamento delle aree territoriali; di conseguenza, sia gli individui sia le imprese si sono spostate, nel corso degli ultimi anni, da un'area all'altra per produrre beni e servizi, cercando di portare avanti gli investimenti a costi sempre più vantaggiosi. Mediante l'utilizzo di strumenti statistici spaziali, il presente lavoro vuole contribuire all'interpretazione delle identità e delle vocazioni economiche e produttive dei comuni ricadenti nelle c.d. aree interne, offrendo anche una chiave per l'identificazione di nuove forme di aggregazione diverse da quelle configurate nell'ambito SNAI. L'obiettivo specifico del presente lavoro è, pertanto, riconducibile all'opportunità di evidenziare le nuove e possibili relazioni inter-istituzionali nell'ambito di un modello di governance basato sulle risorse endogene del territorio.

Sulla base, quindi, dello studio, del computo e dell'analisi di alcuni indici territoriali ed economici, il presente lavoro intende selezionare un "cruscotto" di indicatori con lo scopo di implementare un Data Base in grado di superare i limiti dei metodi correnti per misurare la specializzazione dei territori. Tali metodi, infatti, contengono un numero sempre maggiore di duplicazioni e non consentono una rapida ed immediata consultazione se non previo articolate e spesso complesse *query* di calcolo.

L'obiettivo specifico della proposta metodologica che il presente lavoro intende portare avanti è quello di contribuire all'ampia letteratura dedicata ai modelli di localizzazione, specializzazione e concentrazione delle attività economiche e produttive fornendo nuovi elementi di analisi, basati su l'utilizzo di statistiche in valore aggiunto. Dopo una prima analisi degli indicatori relativi ad una

area SNAI opportunamente selezionata, il lavoro intende mettere a confronto i risultati conseguiti raffrontando dapprima le singole realtà comunali per poi procedere attraverso successive aggregazioni territoriali a raffrontare gli indicatori in relazione al tessuto economico produttivo delle Aree Interne del Paese.

Introduzione

Il presente lavoro, in un'ottica di utilizzo di strumenti statistico spaziali, mira all'individuazione ed al computo di indicatori in grado di localizzare e rappresentare le agglomerazioni economiche e produttive nei territori oggetto della Strategia Nazionale delle Aree Interne (SNAI). Il lavoro prevede un *case study* e porrà, pertanto, l'accento sulle identità e sulle vocazioni economiche e produttive dei Comuni ricadenti nell'Area Interna - Alta Irpinia.

L'obiettivo generale del presente lavoro è riconducibile all'opportunità di evidenziare le nuove e possibili relazioni inter-istituzionali dei comuni, contribuendo ad una *vision* sistemica che possa consentire di "andare oltre la SNAI". Sulla base del computo e dell'analisi di alcuni indicatori territoriali ed economici, nel presente lavoro si è inteso selezionare un "cruscotto" di indici ed indicatori con lo scopo di implementare un Data Base al fine di superare i limiti conseguenti alla ampia disponibilità di informazioni già fruibili. E', di fatti, ampiamente riconosciuto, che le tradizionali statistiche siano diventate sempre meno adeguate al fine di misurare la specializzazione dei territori. Queste contengono un numero sempre maggiore di duplicazioni e non consentono una rapida ed immediata consultazione se non previa articolate e spesso complesse *query* di calcolo.

L'obiettivo specifico del *paper* è quello di implementare la già ampia letteratura dedicata ai modelli di localizzazione, specializzazione e concentrazione delle attività economiche e produttive (Bonaccorsi & Nesci, 2006) fornendo nuovi elementi di analisi, basati sull'utilizzo di statistiche in valore aggiunto, grazie alla disponibilità di database e nuove metodologie d'analisi.

Dopo una prima analisi degli indicatori il lavoro metterà a confronto i risultati ottenuti raffrontando dapprima le singole realtà comunali per poi procedere, attraverso successive aggregazioni, a raffrontare gli indicatori con particolare riferimento all'Area Interna Alta Irpinia. L'analisi condotta fornisce - ci si augura - indicazioni utili circa l'effettiva composizione degli operatori produttivi (imprese Imprese pubbliche e no Profit) del territorio dell'Alta Irpinia, almeno in relazione agli aspetti connessi alle attività economiche e produttive.