Active citizens as driver for sustainable tourism, social innovation, and employee development in rural areas. The Sicilian case study Badia Lost and Found

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This abstract presents an example of community-led project which started from a neighbourhood regeneration activity and led to the creation of a peri-urban street art park that enhanced sustainable and cultural tourism in a rural area of Sicily. The contribution is structured in three parts. In the first part, an introduction describes the theoretical framework of rural and inner areas. The second part presents the topic of participation as a tool for the empowerment of rural and inner areas. Finally, the third part gives a practical example of community-led territorial regeneration project: Badia Lost and Found. The objectives, methodologies and strategies of this approach are briefly described, as part of a larger funded research project, the WELLTS project (Work Employment Labor Logic Talent Scope), which aims to analyse the main changes that technology is creating in terms of workplace and socio-cultural innovation.

Features of inner areas, employee development programs, and the sustainable vision of tourism

Inner areas, with more than 341 million hectares, are 83% of the total area of the EU. Yet, especially in Italy, they have been experiencing a progressive depopulation since the Second World War (European Commission, 2020). In Italy, 52% of the municipalities and 22% of the population are located in areas classified as 'inland' areas by the Strategia Nazionale Aree Interne (SNAI), which aims at enhancing their potential, natural resources, cultural identity (Epifani et al, 2021). Nevertheless, inner areas remain unattractive for most of the population, and especially for young people, due to the lack of primary services for citizenship, such as schools, health service, and mobility (European Commission, 2021), as well as a slower technological progress.

However, despite the structural and infrastructural difficulties, inner areas are interesting places of experimentation for new regeneration and employee development practices. This is because there is minimal human contamination on the natural territory and a huge cultural and natural heritage, which is hard to be found in urban areas (Salustri, 2021). The 'Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society' considers landscapes as fully belonging to the cultural heritage, and as such must be passed on to future generations. In particular, the landscape summarises the result of the historical process based on the complex and incessant encounter between man and nature, where both elements need to be considered active subjects and not one dominating the other (De Rossi, 2018). This perspective therefore requires coordinated policies of knowledge, protection, and promotion of the cultural heritage. In turns, this implies a major rethinking and reorganisation of the tourist offer, but, clearly, it also requires a profound understanding of the tourist demand (Palazzo et al., 2022).

According to the latest data from the CREA-CNR report, the financial resources allocated to the 20 sub-measures of direct or indirect interest for the development of tourism activities in rural areas

amount to approximately 4,500 million euro (41% of the total endowment of the 8 reference measures). Of these, 831 million euro relates to the sub-measures attributable to the 'Tourism' macro-area. In sustainable tourism, the resources are first and foremost drawn by the natural and cultural heritage (Trovato et al., 2023). Heritage and monuments, traditional landscapes, ecosystems, events, and lifestyles, all make inner areas unique territories with many tangible and intangible positive elements. Hence, inland areas are not just a geographical expression, but the perfect scenario for sustainable tourism, based on a mutual respect between economy-society and ecology (Barbera ed al., 2022). The natural territory can be considered as an ideal and privileged planning site for researching on the cultural identity of a society with a diversification of history, religion, art, job, food, and wine, etc (Sica, 2021). Contemporary, it is necessary to keep up with the technological challenge, which is becoming more and more central in Italian and European political and economic decisions (De Luca et al., 2022). It is therefore necessary to promote knowledge and awareness on this heritage and its importance as an exclusive and non-reproducible resource for tourism and employment, but not only. The value and potential of cultural heritage, indeed, can be considered as an asset for sustainable development and improvement in the quality of life for these areas.

At the same time, the idea of tourism is changing in this post COVID19 phase, we are experiencing a tendency to shift from "mas tourism" to an "authentic" and "experience tourism" (Akhtar et al., 2021). The visitors are more attentive to the quality of life, behaviour, traditions, environmental and cultural diversity, and specific identities in which to immerse themselves for a few days or a few weeks. From a more strictly touristic point of view, it is necessary to look at the sustainability of flows, rather than their quantitative trend (Widawski et al., 2023). In conclusion, in order to develop a local identity in rural areas, must be strengthened a diffuse, slow, experiential type of tourism, which is respectful of local peculiarities and relations between community and landscape, and based on a coherent integration of the plurality of the existing resources, including the technological ones. Therefore, there is the need to answer to the following question: How can this set of resources be enhanced in a context with such characteristics? The answer to this question involves the involvement of communities and the strengthening of territorial governance (Liasidou et al., 2021)

Participation and empowerment. A tool for re-generation and employee development

Involving communities in participatory empowerment processes is crucial to undertake inclusive and sustainable inner-rural regeneration (Nunes et al., 2021). This is the only way to generate concrete benefits and results, not only for the social, economic, and territorial capital, but especially for the human capital of the territory. The re-generation of inner areas, can consider two tracks, spaces, and ideas, i.e. concerning both "physical" (territorial) and "mental" (human) aspects. It is only through the combination of these elements, in proportional quantity and defined quality, that the metamorphosis of the territory into a cultural re-product, also valuable for sustainable tourism, can take place. Indeed, the development of tourism cannot be separated from the promotion of the quality of life of the settled communities (Jukic et al., 2019). The themes of identity, attractiveness, accessibility, technology, and communication thus become essential to define a touristic strategy for the territory and the community living in it.

The meaning of empowerment becomes clear: to empower communities and transform their area into a territory where they want to live and build their future lives. The more deprived and difficult the living conditions are, the more the community has an interest in intervening and can and must play an active role in influencing decision-making (Rocca et al., 2021).

As stated in the previous section, the definition of the strategic bases for territorial development must start from a knowledge of the territorial and cultural heritage. It must then be transformed into good practices for the creation of an integrated touristic offer with the active participation of the local population (Berman, 2017). Co-creation is way to get the local populations more involved and to create an endogenous type of destination management that considers the community's needs as priority. This co-creation process can form a dense network of nodes and lines, creating the so-called 'archipelago-communities', communities connected by the origins of people and enhanced by the network of local artisans, farmers, educators, entrepreneurs (Carta et al., 2020). Such network is based on multiple complex relationships, which cannot be traced back to a univocal client-server relationship, but more closely resemble cloud computing. In this perspective, then, these urban-rural settlements where the 'archipelago-communities' develop their complex network, can be defined as innovation hubs, i.e., 'smart villages' (European Commission, 2020), where technology, creativity, knowledge exchanges between inner areas and cities, can give rise to various experiments in creativity-oriented regeneration.

Moreover, if aiming at making these 'smart villages' appealing for people to stay and live, it is crucial to improve the job market and the working conditions for the inhabitants. The best way to achieve this is to emphasise and accumulate human capital, enhancing self-management abilities and knowledge transfer in workers of the 'archipelago-communities'. The improvement does not have to come from the outside but must be achieved internally from the community itself (Zhou, 2021). Crucial in this context is a study of the necessities and a complete rethinking of decision-making strategies and tools. Indeed, the study carried out in the WELLTS project, highlights how the development of employees and professional positions is closely linked to the evolution of technologies and at the same time to the diversification of demand needs in different territories (Dacher et al., 2021). Workers in these 'archipelago-communities' need to learn new skills and how to use new technologies. They need to acquire a general knowledge that will then allow the acquisition of more specific functional skills that will depend on and evolve together with the evolving touristic market (Liu et al., 2023).

This is exactly what is happening in southern Italy. A series of projects are developing carried out by resilient communities (Lino et al., 2022), starting from a non-dichotomous vision of urban and inland areas. The same communities that are generating new collaborative spaces and circular economies and that are the protagonists of what often named "Sud Innovation" (Consiglio e Ritano, 2015).

Badia Lost and Found. From place branding to construction of peri-urban art park

Badia Lost and Found is an organisation that operates in Lentini, a town in the Sicilian inner areas in province of Syracuse[1]. It was born in 2014, when an informal and heterogeneous group of students and professionals came together, bound by the desire to dedicate themselves to the activation of a symbolic place in their territory, Palazzo Beneventano. Subsequently, they expanded to the entire Badia district. The site is a historical residence that belonged to the Beneventano family, dating back to the post-earthquake reconstruction of 1693. It is one of the most famous tangible examples of the well-known eclectic architect Carlo Sada. The organization has initiated a new way of rethinking spaces, creating a new form of cultural co-creation with and for the citizens of the area. They set important milestones along the way, becoming a place for social experimentation through

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[1] More information on the project is available at this link: https://badialostandfound.com/.

contemporary art. Indeed, today, Badia Lost & Found has become a well-know, successful organisation that uses artistic practices to regenerate the urban and social pattern through community participation. In doing so, it enhances a tourism which is strongly oriented towards sustainability and experience and that combines identity, culture, experimentation, and wellbeing.

The most obvious sign of the Badia Lost and Found action, is the Art Park they realized in Lentini, with the aim of facilitating a series of urban and tourist itineraries, i.e. guided walks through the streets of the town. To date, the Park contains more than 40 works, which can be admired by walking along the streets of the area and through the urban itineraries created by the cooperative. The works were created by individual artists or by collectives and, in some cases, they are the result of artistic workshops involving the co-creation of resident citizens. However, these artistic pieces of art are not just 'decorations' but are closely connected with the territory and the stories, traditions, myths, and legends that characterise the identity of this small Sicilian village. Hence, through the instrument of artistic storytelling, the traditions, and stories of Lentini, its myths, characters and legends are narrated. These actions have given new light to the neighbourhood and to an area that has become an attractive destination for many visitors and tourists seeking for a fully immersive touristic experience. Walks, activities, new employee development, and cultural exchanges have also helped to recover a sense of belonging among the citizens.

The Park is an important part of an urban regeneration experience that has emerged from the bottom up, implementing significant actions in an area where public strategies for the recovery of cultural assets and abandoned spaces were lacking.

In numbers: (i)31,512 visits (data taken from the admission register; of which 1512 visitors from November 2019 to February 2020); (ii)811 educational workshops with schools of all levels; (iii) 202 multidisciplinary exhibitions;(iv) over 100 events per year, including music, theatre, performances, and film festivals; (v)28 street art interventions.

The work has not only been about places and their promotion. Starting from the mission to bring the community closer to the palace and to create 'new audiences' for the city of Lentini, a "Lentini-brand" was born, thanks to Palazzo Beneventano and the contemporary art park fostered by the activities of Badia Lost & Found. The co-creation of the Urban Art Park has, in fact, triggered new activities and projects in the entire area of south-eastern Sicily. The cooperative has received many requests for advice on urban regeneration from neighbouring municipalities but also for support from associations and cooperatives that intend to revitalise their territories through street art, urban itineraries, and the realisation of accessible cultural events.

In conclusion, the role of citizen activists needs to be increasingly considered if aiming at developing and enhancing the sustainable tourism. Through the tools of co-creation, cooperation, movement and activism, resilient communities can lead to the construction of new sustainable cultural and tourism paradigms. When this happens, a new alliance between inhabitants and territory is established and hence a local natural and cultural heritage is created. This fosters economy, ecology, and society, the three main pillars of sustainable tourism (Baloch et al., 2022).

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