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Title

“Daje Marche!” A mixed methods assessment of grassroots responses to the 2016 earthquake in the Italian Apennines.

Extended Abstract

Between August 24th 2016 and January 2017, the central part of the Italian Apennines (Abruzzo, Lazio, Marche and Umbria) has been interested by an impressive earthquake swarm (up to 49.000 quakes of various magnitudes, source: INGV), which has caused important life losses and material damages. The most powerful events have occurred on August 24th (M 6.0 and 5.4), October 26th (M 5.4 and 5.9) and 30th 2016 (M 6.5), and January 18th 2017 (four quakes above M 5 in the range of four hours). The mentioned regions sit on a series of rather active parallel fault lines and are not new to such events, as they suffered from similar occurrences in 1998 (Marche) and in 2009 (Abruzzo), only if considering the last twenty years. The area interested by the earthquake has been denominated “seismic crater”, and it includes 131 municipalities, 59 of which are situated in the Marche, the most affected region.

This contribution will look at grassroots responses to the latest catastrophic earthquake swarm, focusing on the Marche, and in particular on the concerned areas of the Macerata province, which was the epicentre of the October 26th seismic events, with the aim of providing a mixed methods assessment of the current actions undertaken by informal actors to sustain those economic sectors highly impacted by the structural damages caused by the earthquake.

Specifically, the non-profit association “Daje Marche!”¹, created in November 2016 in the city of Tolentino (prov. of Macerata), will present an interesting example of how and why such initiatives can be successful in being a source of a community place-based resilience (Barrios, 2014; Cutter et

¹ “daje” is a dialectal form typical of middle Italy, bearing several meanings. In this case it can be translated as “go!” or “come on!” as a way to encourage moving on and react.

al., 2008; Kolar, 2011; Mayunga, 2007), that not only contribute to the re-establishment of an aura of “normalcy” in post-disaster environments, but also function as activators of latent social (and economic) capital, that can serve as a moving force towards new forms of equilibrium. Considering the fact that this research is basically synchronic to the analysed process, it will aim to reconstruct its history until the time being, the current status (people involved, impact, activities) and prospect initiatives to be undertaken in the longer run.

Therefore, the study will address the above mentioned issues, in an attempt to offer a processual analysis of the current powers at play, as well as of community resilience in the making, that is from its emergence, to the stabilization phase.

First, it will provide an overview of the pre-earthquake situation in the peripheral areas of the Macerata province highlighting the existing issues and vulnerability, taking the cue from a wider research project on the “National Strategy for Inner Areas” (hereafter SNAI), launched in 2012 by the then Italian Ministry for Territorial Cohesion, from which this research has branched out. Inner Areas are defined as ‘areas at some considerable distance from hubs providing essential services’, namely education, health and mobility (Barca, Casavola, & Lucatelli, 2014 (eds.), p. 7), which feature a high degree of social and environmental capital, in addition to a high potential for local entrepreneurship and innovation, hindered by a condition of economic and geographical marginality.

SNAI is aimed at finding an integrated approach that could function as a trailblazer for the creation of a development strategy to be applied to a series of selected areas (65 as of December 2016) during the seven years (2014-2020) of the program. The final goal of this strategy is to generate an inversion of the current negative demographic trend, which has been witnessed since at least the end of the 1950s.

For what concerns the Marche region, after a screening of the Italian territory, 3 areas have been selected to be a part of SNAI, two of which have been interested by the recent earthquakes: the one situated in the province of Macerata, denominated “Nuovo Maceratese”, and another in the province of Ascoli Piceno, denominated “Ascoli Piceno”. The first area includes 21 municipalities, 19 of which have been inscribed within the “seismic crater” in November 2016, the second is constituted by 15 municipalities, 14 of which interested by the earthquake. Therefore, although most of the municipalities selected to be a part of these two Inner Areas in the Marche are in the seismic crater, the latter includes many more municipalities than those interested by SNAI, also in other regions.

Secondly, the contribution will provide a reconstruction of how the association “Daje Marche!” was created and under which premises, highlighting how the use of social media (and Facebook in particular) can concur in the creation of processes of community resilience. It will be shown that “community” can be considered as an extended concept that goes beyond geographical boundaries, and yet its place-based connotation is pivotal to the understanding of how such social-capital activating processes work. The non-profit association was created by a group of young people from Tolentino wishing to do something to overcome the status of emergency caused by the earthquake swarm, as if to demonstrate that social capital and economic capital can cooperate in disaster resilience processes, and “the level of civic-ness is [...] reflected in economic performance” (Nakagawa & Shaw, 2004, p. 8). The “Daje Marche” project was practically implemented through the creation of an e-commerce website where all local shop owners and producers can sell their products, although they have lost their “physical” shops, farms, factories due to the structural damages caused by the tremors, which have made them unusable. The choice to include shops and business owners, and not only producers, in the project arose from the awareness of the need to “protect” the whole retail sector, for two main reasons: first to grant a source of income to people who had literally “lost everything”, and secondly to maintain

linkages between consumers and retailers, particularly strong in small villages and hamlets, which would have contributed to the restoration of a feeling of normalcy. The great success that this enterprise has experienced, particularly during the Christmas season, has brought the initiative to a much bigger scale than the maintenance of personal networks, reaching customers from all over Italy, a fact which of course will require the reconsideration of longer term strategies.

The theoretical framework that serves as a pillar for this research is the study of resilience processes from the perspective of anthropology, which actually has come to challenge the concept of resilience as the ability of a system to absorb a shock with minimum impact on its equilibrium, as adopted by ecology and physics, relying on the processual component of resilience and its capacity to be “an emergent property that results from the socio-political circumstances unique to a disaster rather than a pre-existing ability to return to a pre-catastrophe state of affairs” (Barrios, 2016, p. 30). If this approach allows to understand disasters as long unfolding historical processes, made of people-environment interactions, it is easy to see that dealing with grassroots responses to disasters involves the consideration of specific criteria to assess the modalities through which successful recovery is achieved. The anthropological perspective, and the ethnographic research methods, allow to reconstruct the “discursive power, hegemonic imagination, and the politics of knowledge” (ibidem, p. 33) linked with community resilience in a place-based approach. This reading of the events, combined with a more quantitative analysis aimed at investigating the capacity of the phenomenon (i.e. the percentage of involved people in relation to the total population, sources of investments, revenues and expenses, etc.), will allow to attempt a first evaluation of the relevance of grassroots initiatives in post-disaster community resilience.

Empirically the research is going to be carried out in two consequent phases. The first one will be dedicated to the desk analysis of already available data in regard to the “Nuovo Maceratese” Inner Area in general, and to the municipalities inscribed in the “seismic crater” for what concerns the province of Macerata. The analysis will mainly concentrate on the evaluation of pre-existing social, political and economic vulnerabilities. The second phase will be dedicated more systematically to the ethnography through its characteristic methods: interviews and participant observation. Semi-structured interviews will be carried out with members of the non-profit organizations aimed at investigating how they interpret and signify the contribution of “Daje Marche!” to the contingent post-earthquake moments, how do they see the process in the longer term, and how do they understand fragility and vulnerability, not only in relation to natural forces, but also from an economic and social point of view. Interviews will also be carried out with shop/business owners who are benefitting from the association’s initiatives, investigating similar topics, and particular the degree and forms of their agency. Moreover, participant observation in the headquarters of “Daje Marche!” will serve a twofold purpose, that of effectively witness the degree of community involvement in the initiative, as well as experiencing what it is like for them to be resilient, and simultaneously advocates for normalcy, in a post-disaster territory still subject to tremors, and therefore suffering from a form of “chronic emergency”. The final aim of the research will be that of providing a snap-shot of the running process of emergent resilience in post-earthquake Marche’s Apennines, in an attempt to individuate the impact of the resilience strategies locally implemented.

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