

Special Issue
Enhancement, Management,
and Sustainability of Tourism in Italian
Small Villages

FUORI LUOGO

Journal of Sociology of Territory,
Tourism, Technology

Guest Editors

Ilaria Marotta

Salvatore Monaco

Marina Novelli



Editor in Chief: Fabio Corbisiero
Managing Editor: Carmine Urciuoli

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Village Regeneration and NRRP. Tourism Development Perspectives in the Post COVID Era²

Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly declared 2017 as the “International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development” based on the assumption that planned and well managed tourism can also contribute to job creation and boost the economy of countries. The declaration was designed to raise awareness towards environmental issues, and most importantly, it credits tourism with playing a key role in protecting the ecosystem, people and sustainable development. It is therefore argued that tourism is considered first a social and human phenomenon rather than an economic one, that has undergone profound changes, thus taking on unprecedented trends.

Due to ongoing research into sustainable development models in territories - particularly in fragile areas, and in margins and inner spaces (Lozato-Giotart, 2018)³ - and the emergence of new tourism trends, tourism is no longer regarded solely as a leisure activity. In addition to promoting virtuous approaches to development in weaker contexts by enhancing their natural, cultural, and legacy heritage, tourism can also serve to strengthen these communities.

As part of this scenario, Italy has also seen the renewal of tourism proposals, increasingly focusing on sustainability and adaptability to new trends in demand and quality of hospitality. Within this perspective, the situation of Italian villages, typical products and local food and wine have gained a pivotal role. Thanks to the Strategic Tourism Development Plan (STP 2017-2022), a program was launched, largely based on the promotion of the food and wine heritage and of smaller villages. This project is part of a strategy oriented towards the implementation and development of new models of sustainable tourism and management to foster the integration of the environment and landscape with the agricultural, handcrafted and tourist-cultural activities of the whole country (MiBACT, 2016).

As a result, such a context has been instrumental in the emergence of small towns as increasingly popular destinations for travelers and the establishment of village tourism as a new travel trend. Indeed, this has led to a reappraisal of the rural landscape and lifestyle typical of these settings. Increased awareness towards environmental issues and sustainability «has encouraged new tourism practices where interior spaces and more isolated margins are at the heart of new challenges and limits» (Lozato-Giotart, 2018, *op. cit.*, p. 47). The issue of regeneration of smaller towns has become more relevant thanks to the opportunities they offer, being potential sites for generating alternative models of growth and renaissance for deteriorated or abandoned villages (Villani and Dall'Ara, 2015). Although the policies of recent years - as observed in the case of the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI in Italian) - consider tourism as one of the possible ways for local development, as a tool for the potential enhancement of territorial capital (Ferrari, 2018), «numerous and heterogeneous territories have identified tourism as their sole or prevailing strategic focus» (Evangelista, Di Matteo, Ferrari, 2018, p. 93). It remains the main area in which the most recent practices and lines of intervention are concentrated. In this vein, and in line with the STP 2017-2022, the Italian Ministry of Culture, as part of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), launched the National Villages Plan by allocating more than 1.6 billion euros for the regeneration of the rural landscape and the attractiveness of villages at risk of depopulation (PNRR, 2021).

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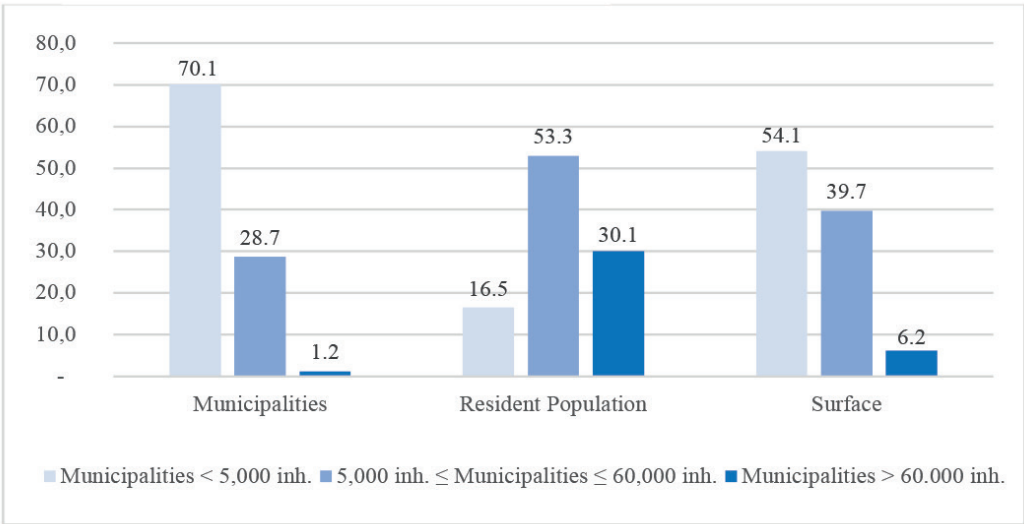
3 For an accurate definition of “inner or interior” spaces, see Lozato-Giotart (2018) who proposes a typological classification of inner tourism spaces in order to define and delimit them, considering physical and geographical criteria, and economic, social and cultural indicators.

1. The spatial organization of the Italian territory

Italy is characterized by small municipalities, or villages as they are more commonly referred to, due to its peculiar spatial organization based on the widespread distribution of small towns and centers.

The Italian National Statistical Institute (ISTAT in Italian) defines Small Municipalities as centers with a population under 5,000. On January 1, 2023, the latest available data show that there are 7,904 municipalities in Italy (see Fig. 1); 5,537 of them have fewer than five thousand inhabitants, thus classified as small municipalities. Over half of the nation's land is occupied by them, accounting for approximately 70% of the total (54.1%), reporting a population density of only 60 inhabitants per sq. km., compared to the 261 for larger centers with over 60,000 residents (ISTAT, 2023).

Fig. 1 - Population and spatial distribution of the Italian Territory, 2023 (% Val.)



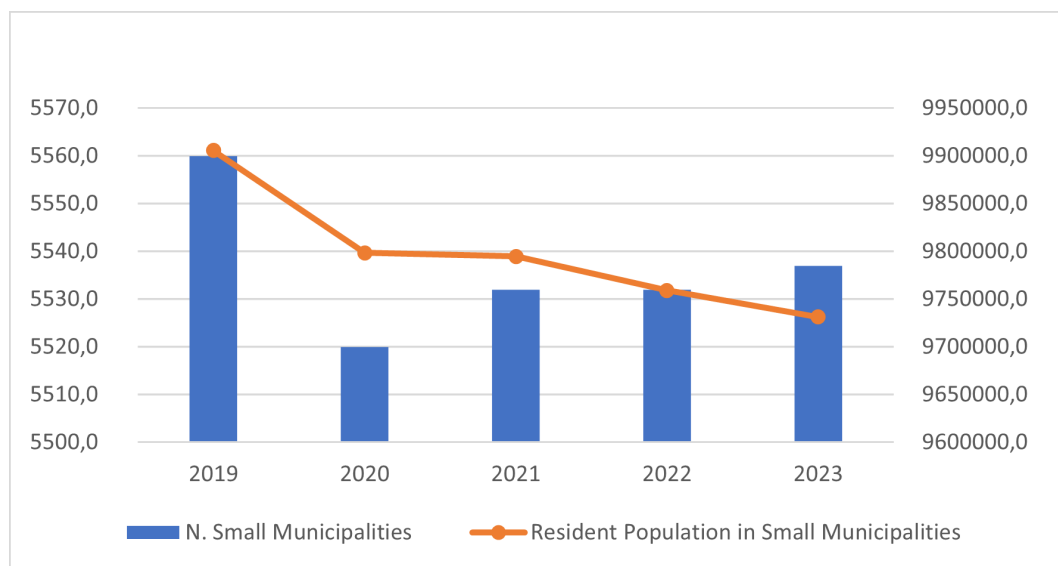
Source: Elaboration of the authors on ISTAT data

The low population density of these territories is the outcome of a depopulation process with remote origins and diverse causes, which affected, and still affects, mainly inland areas and smaller towns.

According to a survey by the National Association of Italian Municipalities (ANCI in Italian), based on ISTAT data, in just over four decades, from 1971 to 2015, the resident population has more than halved in most small Italian municipalities (Calandra, 2019). This negative trend has continued in the following years. In fact, population demographics data (ISTAT, 2023, *op. cit.*) related to the past 5 years (2019-2023) indicate that small municipalities have suffered an additional 2% population decrease and consequently have also increased in number (see Fig. 2). Despite the significant decline in 2020⁴ and a few mergers, the total number of small municipalities has nevertheless grown steadily over the last few years, due precisely to the decrease in population, which caused several centers to fall below the 5,000-population threshold.

4 In 2020, there was a significant decrease compared to the period under review in both the number of small municipalities - decreasing from 5,560 to 5,520 as a result of several mergers that took place in 2019 - and the population, which experienced a loss of 106,972, partly due to an increase in the number of deaths related to the COVID-19 pandemic. During 2019, there were 31 municipal mergers approved, including six by incorporation, for a total of 65 municipalities less (<https://www.tuttitalia.it/variazioni-amministrative/nuovi-comuni-2019/>, last access 18 November 2023). This decline mostly affected small municipalities, which decreased to 40. Instead, from 2020 to 2023, a total of 17 mergers were approved, resulting in the elimination of 13 centers, regarding small municipalities only.

Fig. 2 - Trend in the number of Italian Small Municipalities and Resident Population, years 2019-2023



Source: Elaboration of the authors on ISTAT data

Today, depopulation and the effects related to population aging have led inland areas and small municipalities to significant challenges from a demographic perspective (Comitato Europeo delle Regioni, 2021), and, most importantly, to the loss of memories and traditions rooted in the oldest centers. Moreover, the lack of an efficient infrastructure and facilities network, and the steady growth of the digital divide, complement a critical situation which shapes these areas as fragile contexts.

Within this scenario, a number of reflections on the villages of the future are taking off, also under the drive of various actions both at the national and European level. These are intended to provide growth prospects for rural areas and smaller centers, while unleashing their full economic, environmental and tourism potential, especially in light of the opportunities they may provide from a sustainability standpoint. For instance, as part of its objectives, the SNAI also aims to boost tourism attractiveness by acting on the latent strengths of these territories (Barca *et al.*, 2014). As a matter of fact, tourism can benefit from territorial identities, diversity and richness of natural and cultural resources, and from the self-representation of local communities in inland areas (Cavallo *et al.*, 2018). On the other hand, in the European context, the debate has started from the digital divide between urban and rural areas, and from the need to bridge the gap through digitalization policies for basic services (Bars, 2020). Specifically, the core of the debate focuses the idea of smart villages that encompasses actions aimed at developing rural areas and peripheral contexts primarily using innovative growth models facilitated by digital technologies (European Commission, 2017, 2020).

Therefore, if properly enhanced, such contexts may provide greener solutions based on circular economy models, or offer opportunities to live in more peaceful and qualitatively better settings compared to crowded cities. Last but not least, they are also suitable areas for sustainable tourism development. As is well known, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a heavy impact on the tourism industry. As a matter of fact, during the health emergency, a higher number of people were registered specifically in inland areas - perceived to be safer places - and in some cases for longer stays, supported by remote working opportunities.

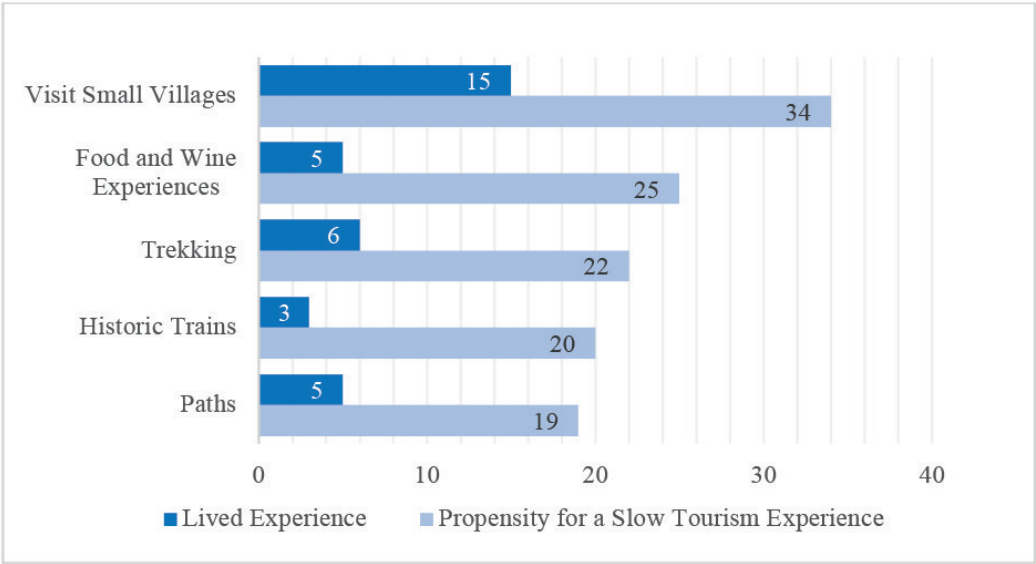
2. Small villages and tourism

Small village tourism, initially defined as “minor tourism” (Dall’Ara, Morandi, 2010), has become a specific tourism product in recent years. This is a kind of tourism driven by visitors’ interest in discovering places characterized primarily by specificity, typical products and local tastes which makes them different from traditional destinations.

In the past few seasons, partly due to the impact of the health emergency, villages have been among the most requested destinations by tourists (ENIT, 2022). They are regarded as places that can offer opportunities and larger spaces where it is possible to combine the need for freedom with greater security, while enjoying excellent typical food and wine products.

In 2022, the Italian National Agency for Tourism (ENIT in Italian) carried out a survey on Italians tourism demand focusing on experiences on slow tourism (Clancy, 2014, 2018). The study, conducted through the administration of a semi-structured questionnaire to a representative sample of the Italian population⁵, revealed a significant growth in this tourism sector. In particular, visits to small towns and places out of the traditional circuits recorded the highest attendance, according to respondents preferences (see Fig. 3). The data collected refer to Italians slow tourism experiences in the first semester of 2022 and to the predictions related to their eagerness for outdoor stays in summer 2022. The survey showed that a quarter of Italian tourists had had at least one slow tourism experience. Specifically, vacations in small villages were the most recurring choice, i.e., 15% of the cases, followed by nature trekking and food and wine tours (ENIT, 2022, *op. cit.*).

Fig. 3 - Italians’ demand for slow tourism, 2022 (% Val)



Source: Elaboration of the authors on Italian Ministry of Tourism data

Moreover, four out of ten Italians are interested in a future slow tourism vacation. In particular, more than a third of respondents (34%) were willing to spend a vacation in small villages or away from traditional destinations, followed by an interest in food and wine tours (25%) and trekking

5 The ENIT survey on domestic tourism was conducted in June 2022. 3,500 interviews were conducted with people aged 18 and over, and the questionnaire was administered using Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) methodology (ENIT, 2022, *op. cit.*). CATI is a telephone surveying technique in which the interviewer follows a script provided by a software application.

tourism (22%). In regard to the key factors for choosing a slow-paced experience, contact with nature was the most appealing aspect for more than 50% of them (*ibidem*).

On the other hand, food and wine experiences were the key factor in 21.8% of cases. Villages and small towns provide the ideal context for such adventures, as they preserve a heritage of ancient agro-food productions handed down from generation to generation. Recent research by the Fondazione Symbola-Coldiretti (2018) clearly highlights this strong bond. Specifically, the study involved the mapping of all Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) branded products in Italy, in relation to municipal territories. The results show that almost all typical products are from the territories of smaller towns. In particular, a total of 297 typical products were mapped in the country, and 268 (90.02%) of them, exclusively or partially, referred to municipalities with less than 5,000 inhabitants (*ibidem*).

3. Attractiveness of small villages and the NRRP

The development of such a framework has contributed to the popularity of villages as tourist destinations as well as to village tourism as a new travel trend.

In addition, the ecological and digital transition process, together with the experience from the pandemic emergency, have triggered great transformations in rural areas which have steadily become the focus for interventions promoted by the central government.

Accordingly, and in continuity with the 2017-2022 strategic planning, within the framework of the NRRP, the Italian Ministry of Culture (MiC) set up a Plan aimed at improving the attractiveness of villages and the enhancement of rural landscapes. Specifically, this intervention was placed within the framework «of strategies [...] that construe culture as a cross-cutting factor in territorial and local development policies» (MiC, 2022, p. 3).

Thus, this investment was consistent with several initiatives launched in recent years, such as the "Save Villages"⁶ Law; the cohesion policies related to the implementation of the SNAI; the 2016 ministerial directives of the then Mibact designating the year 2017 as the "Year of Italian Villages", and 2018 as the "National Year of Italian Food" (*ibidem*).

For instance, within Mission 1 of the NRRP, Component 3 (Tourism and Culture) was aimed to boost the economic sectors of culture and tourism⁷. Therefore, the objective of this component was to increase the country's tourist and cultural attractiveness through the modernization of tangible and intangible infrastructures of the historical and artistic heritage.

The second area of intervention (Measure 2) of Component 3 addressed actions for the regeneration of cultural sites and rural heritage:

«aimed at improving attractiveness, safety and accessibility of places. The interventions are not only directed to "major attractions," but also to the protection and enhancement of minor places (e.g., "villages"), and to the regeneration of urban suburbs, while promoting distinctive places and strengthening the social fabric of the area. These interventions are matched with efforts to upgrade tourist accommodation and tourism services in order to improve supply standards and increase the overall attractiveness». (PNRR, 2021, p. 89).

6 Law No. 158 of October 6, 2017, "Measures for the support and development of small municipalities, and provisions for the redevelopment and recovery of the historic centers of the same municipalities." GU Serie Generale No. 256, 02.11.2017. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2017/11/02/17G00171/sg> (last access 02 January 2024).

7 The Italian NRRP is made up of 6 Missions. Each MISSION (M) is divided into several COMPONENTS (C), which are broken down into one or more Measures (or Areas of Intervention) organized into specific Investments. Each Investment is made through the implementation of the funded interventions and/or projects. The investment related to Attractiveness of Villages is identified with the acronym M1C3.2.1, corresponding to MISSION 1 (DIGITALIZATION, INNOVATION, COMPETITIVENESS, CULTURE AND TOURISM), COMPONENT 3 (TOURISM AND CULTURE), Measure 2 (Regeneration of small cultural sites, religious and rural cultural heritage), Investment 1 (Attractiveness of Villages).

Measure 2 is consisted of four investments. The first two focused on the Attractiveness of Villages (Investment 1), with 1.02 billion euros allocated, and the Protection and Enhancement of Rural Architecture and Landscape (Investment 2), with 600 million euros in funds allotted.

As for the implementation of the interventions related to the first investment, the “National Village Plan”⁸ was set forth, i.e., «a program to support the economic and social development of disadvantaged areas through the cultural regeneration of small towns and tourism revamping» (*ibidem*, p. 112). Firstly, these actions were based on projects aimed at the recovery of spaces and at the establishment of new facilities and services in the cultural, tourist and social areas. Secondly, they were designed to create and promote new routes, such as thematic paths and historical itineraries. Finally, this measure also provided financial support for cultural, creative, tourism, commercial, agribusiness and craft activities to support local economies by showcasing local products, knowledge and know-how.

The “National Villages Plan” was structured into two separate lines of action. LINE A was oriented to the economic and social recovery of uninhabited villages or those characterized by an advanced process of decline and abandonment; LINE B was directed to the implementation of cultural regeneration projects to stimulate employment and contrast depopulation of small municipalities (MiC, 2021)⁹.

The first line covered the funding of 21 pilot projects, one for each Italian Region and Autonomous Provinces, with the allocation of 420 million euros. On the other hand, the second action line was allocated 580 million euros and was aimed at funding cultural regeneration projects in 229 historic villages. In particular, the 580 million euros of LINE B were divided into two shares; 380 million were intended to support proposals submitted by municipalities; and 200 million were addressed to micro, small and medium-sized businesses located or intending to settle in the selected villages, for an amount of approximately 2.53 million euros per village.

The first step of the plan ended with project proposals related to the two lines of action, i. e., pilot and cultural regeneration projects, that were submitted to the MiC by the call deadline, March 15, 2022. With regard to Line A, the proposal submission was then followed by a negotiation process between the municipalities involved and a technical Committee appointed by the MiC. The process, aimed at verifying the consistency of project proposals with the NRRP implementation processes and timelines, resulted in 20 projects being funded.

As for Line B, approximately 1,800 applications were submitted by municipalities within the deadline. Out of these, 1,595 projects were accepted for assessment, and following the proposal evaluation phase, 289 villages were eligible for funding.

In June 2022, with a special Ministerial Decree¹⁰, funds for the attractiveness of villages were allocated for both Line of Action A - to 20 Pilot Projects for the regeneration of abandoned villages or those at risk of abandonment - and Line B - to 289 municipalities for the implementation of 207 Local Cultural and Social Regeneration Projects (PNRR Cultura-MiC, 2023).

8 Investment 2.1 also includes the Project “Tourism of the Roots - an integrated strategy for the recovery of the tourism sector in post-Covid-19 Italy”, with 20 million euros allocated, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI in Italian) as the implementing body.

9 Villages are defined as small historical settlements that have maintained the recognizability of their historical settlement structure [...]; in the case of small and very small municipalities, they may coincide with the urban center of the municipal territory, while all other cases are considered as historical clusters predominantly isolated and/or separated from the urban center (MiC, 2022, p. 4). However, since the investment was addressed to municipalities with a population under 5,000, the term was appropriately used here to refer to all centers with a population below that threshold.

10 By Ministerial Decree No. 453 of June 7, 2022, a total of 761,866,602.09 euros were allocated. As for Line A, 398,421,075.00 euros were allotted in favor of 20 municipalities for the implementation of an equal number of pilot projects for the cultural, social and economic regeneration of 20 villages at risk of abandonment or abandoned, distributed, one for each Region and Autonomous Province, with the exception of Molise Region due to TAR suspension. Line B was allocated 363,445,527.09 euros in favor of 289 municipalities for the implementation of local projects for the cultural and social regeneration of historic villages under 5,000 inhabitants, selected by public announcement (<https://pnrr.cultura.gov.it/misura-2-rigenerazione-di-piccoli-siti-culturali-patrimonio-culturale-religioso-e-rurale/2-1-attrattivita-dei-borghi/>, last access 2nd January 2024).

The rankings thus defined were updated following a renewed assessment by the Commission. As a result, 4 additional projects and 5 municipalities¹¹ proved to be eligible for funding (one project proposal was submitted in aggregate form by two municipalities). Therefore, to date there are 294 villages and 211 projects that have been funded with the amount allocated to Line B.

4. Examples of Line A projects

Line A pilot projects, selected as part of the Village Attractiveness investment, were granted 20 million euros per municipality. In relation to the areas of intervention and purposes (see Tab. 1), these projects mainly focused on the enhancement of local productions, the development of agribusiness, the creation of new cultural, economic and tourism functions (beekeeping study center, cultivation of abandoned lands, typical product itineraries, and promotion of archaeological heritage), the development of tourist destinations (establishment of tourist accommodation activities), and the transformation of the villages into smart communities.

Tab. 1 - Small Villages National Plan (Line A):
some pilot projects for the regeneration of small villages at risk of depopulation

VILLAGES	AREAS OF INTERVENTION	PURPOSES
Campolo (BO)	Restoration of public and private assets; launch of cultural start-ups	Residential housing; new cultural and tourism purposes
Cesi (TR)	Sports and tourism, accommodation and housing, handicraft and agribusiness sectors	Creation of a village-territory
Elva (CN)	Establishment of Beekeeping Study Center, Astronomical Observatory and Traditional Knowledge Center	Refurbishment of areas for cultural, social and economic regeneration
Fontainemore (AO)	Agribusiness hub, creation of historical paths and enhancement of the chestnut and Toma production chains, e-infrastructures	Digitalization and enhancement of services, enhancement of land resources
Livemmo (BS)	Arts and culture, nature and hospitality, local productions, community services	Establishment of new enterprises, collaboration dynamics, renovation of estates
Pietrabbondante (IS)	Enhancement of archaeological heritage	Residential housing, enhancements of visits to the archaeological site, tourism destination development
Recoaro Terme (VI)	Recovery of thermal real estate properties, refurbishment of buildings, implementation of educational center on spas	Activation of thermal facility, Little Dolomites among sustainable mountain tourism destinations, halt of population decrease
Stelvio (BZ)	Ecological renovation of old property assets, cultivation of abandoned lands	Implementation of socio-cultural and socio-economic projects
Ulassai (NU)	Tourist accommodation, enhancement of natural, cultural and artistic heritage, digital innovation	Village transition into smart community

Source: Elaboration on Ministry of Culture data (MiC, 2021)

In accordance with the general objectives of the Plan, the corresponding actions are geared towards fostering the development of new services, also through social participation as a lever of inclusion and regeneration, in order to improve attractiveness and accessibility both physically and digitally, for residents and new inhabitants, in an overall perspective of environmental sustainability.

11 By Decree of the Secretary General No. 381 of April 20, 2023, funds totaling 6,811,971.58 euros were allocated to four additional projects (*ibidem*).

More specifically, some of the selected proposals fully fit into this trend thanks to planning strategies primarily based on recovery and redevelopment projects that mainly leverage the community's full involvement¹² in the development and implementation of actions.

4.1 Sustainable recovery plans and participatory approach: two symbolic proposals

The project proposal for the village of Campolo was selected as a pilot project for the Emilia-Romagna Region¹³. Specifically, the project called *"Da Campolo l'arte si fa Scuola"* corresponds to the proposal submitted by the municipality of Grizzana Morandi, a small village of 3,900 inhabitants in the metropolitan city of Bologna, including the village of Campolo. There are 150 housing units in Campolo, 80% of which are no longer inhabited and in a state of abandonment. The project proposal of the Municipality of Grizzana Morandi was selected as the best strategy to comply with the guidelines of the MiC within the NRRP. In fact, it focused on integrated actions for the protection, recovery and enhancement of the local cultural, architectural and artistic heritage and aimed at the social and economic regeneration, as well as at contrasting its depopulation. Among the reasons provided to support their choice, and in relation to the strengths of the project strategy, Emilia-Romagna Regional Council highlighted, the presence

«of a rich associational and institutional network that joined the project, and the creation of a Community Cooperative able to manage the new forms of residential housing and tourist accommodation. The recovery of high-quality housing in Borgo di Campolo, together with employment benefits generated by the establishment of new cultural and artistic activities, supports the strengthening of eco-sustainable mobility infrastructures (Eurovelo 7 bicycle-pedestrian pathway, the hiking network included in the regional system of itineraries, and the creation of shared mobility systems) » (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2022, pp. 7-8).

Under the adopted governance model, the municipality of Grizzana Morandi, being the proposing party, took on the role of facilitator in the process of integration and collaboration among a number of stakeholders (local associations, stakeholders operating in specific areas, institutional bodies providing guideline and cultural guidance, such as the University, the Conservatory and the Academy of Fine Arts).

From this outline, it is understood that the project strategy was designed to integrate proposing stakeholders with the local community based on a collaborative governance model, then resulting in an inclusive process of resource management and wide participation through the integration of local knowledge and expertise (Tocci, 2020). In a similar vein, the creation of a community cooperative aligned with this perspective, as it was an innovative model based on a bottom-up approach. Here, community members collaborate and become both producers and users of goods and services, thus fostering growth opportunities, cohesion, and synergies in the community (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2022, *op. cit.*).

The Village of Ulassai is another remarkable project proposal entitled *"Dove la natura incontra l'arte"*. It was selected as pilot project by the Region of Sardinia, thus being awarded 20 million euros as part of the NRRP funds for the cultural, social and economic regeneration of villages.

12 In the long term, local community participation is fundamental for projecting a sustainable and successful tourism offer, since citizens' involvement would make the planning process fairer and more effective. However, participatory experiences take on very heterogeneous characteristics, therefore in some cases several issues may be critical. For a clear treatise of the potential and critical issues of community-based tourism planning, see Evangelista (2018).

13 With regard to the selection of the 21 project proposals for Line A of the National Villages Plan, the Guidelines of the Ministry of Culture required each Italian region to identify an exemplary regeneration project for the allocation of 20 million euros. In the case of the Emilia-Romagna Region, the selection was carried out by a special Evaluation Board which determined the ten best applications out of 31 proposals made by municipalities across the Region. These were submitted to the Regional Council, which then appointed the pilot project by a specific resolution (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2022, *op. cit.*).

Ulassai is a small town in the province of Nuoro accounting for only 1,400 inhabitants. Their proposal was based on a sustainable program combining the villages environmental and landscape resources with Maria Lais¹⁴ artistic heritage, considering the artists work as the common factor of social and cultural regeneration.

The rationales that led the Regional Council to choose Ulassai as a pilot project highlight its strategy of transforming the village into a sustainable community based on its artistic environmental heritage and identity, through the promotion of an extensive and concrete participation of the community and local stakeholders in a shared partnership approach.

As stated in the Regional Councils resolution, the project proposal of the Municipality of Ulassai, in addition to fully meeting the objectives of the Guidelines of the Ministry of Culture and being consistent with the cross-cutting priorities of the NRRP, was also chosen due to the unstoppable depopulation of the village. This downward demographic trend has recorded 20% decline in resident population in 20 years.

«According to the Multiple Deprivation Index of Sardinia, the Municipality is classified as a municipality in a state of current and foreseeable demographic distress [...]. Conversely, the Village has a distinctive cultural and environmental background [...] as it is a destination for tourists interested in art and in experiential and nature tourism, owing to its two main attractions: the *Art Station* and the Heels of Ulassai. [...]. The entire project includes a large involvement of the local population [within] a specific action aimed at making [systematic participation] of the population [...] in the definition phases of building and infrastructure interventions and in the participatory co-planning of initiatives» (Regione Sardegna, 2022, pp. 6-7).

The project consists of 38 tangible and intangible actions, ranging from energy efficiency improvements of a tourist facility to the completion of a museum hub, from the refurbishment of a former school building into a multifunctional space for coworking and remote employees, to building recovery and environmental redevelopment, from the organization of events to animated workshops and living labs¹⁵. Specifically, the last initiative entails the active involvement of the community in the creation of «ways to co-create new social, cultural and tourism services, products and facilities» (Comune di Ulassai, 2024).

In this case as well, digital innovation is the cross-cutting direction of the project strategy that aims to convert the village into a smart community striving to offer better services, generate economic growth and reduce its environmental impact.

Similar to community cooperatives, smart community is also an innovative model which entails a bottom-up approach and focuses on the central role of the community in local development processes.

Such models promote continuous innovation within a collaborative system. Indeed, they include a number of stakeholders gathered in a community, i.e., citizens, purchasing groups, cooperatives, and businesses, seeking to combine services, resources, and skills according to a virtuous circle which can ensure the achievement of important community goals, namely sustainability, inclusiveness, collaboration, and territorial enhancement. Consequently, community cooperatives and smart communities are defined as models of social innovation as they are driven by the development of collective actions intended to meet material and immaterial needs and increase people power of action and participation (Vicari Haddock, Moulaert, 2009).

14 She is one of the most important Sardinian artists known especially for her art related to the original use of textiles and poor elements and characterized by the enhancement of the traditions of Sardinia.

15 According to Pallot (2009) «a Living Lab is a user-centred open innovation ecosystem integrating concurrent research and innovation processes within a business-citizens-government partnership». It is a methodology that has already been tested in urban regeneration processes and based on the idea of fostering participation and collaboration between public and private stakeholders in designing solutions and interventions in order to improve their implementation, also including citizens' needs and perceptions.

Final Remarks

In recent years, the debate on small towns and inner areas as a resource has been fuelled by specific strategies to attract new inhabitants, new tourists, and new activities (Fenu, 2020). COVID-19 health emergency has been a further driving factor behind the growing interest in the value of small centres and the opportunities they offer.

The rediscovery of villages and inner spaces (Lozato-Giotart, 2018, *op. cit.*), «linked to the growing awareness of the unsustainable urban-metropolitan model of living, and to the opportunities to recover slower rhythms and ways of living and working» (Bindi, 2021, p. 411), has become the predominant narrative which guides public practices and policies.

In summer 2020 an “invasion” of second-home owners in mountain territories took place (Giacomino, 2020). Also, a boom in proximity tourism in inner areas occurred, which partially coincided with the real reception capacity of these places (Della Valle, Mariani, 2022) - especially in terms of services and infrastructures - which were generally unprepared to face the excessive anthropic overload.

The fact that inner areas have important resources, both tangible and intangible, that can contribute to generating new growth and sustainable development paths is unquestionable. However, as highlighted by De Rossi and Mascino (2020), this implies a radical change in the perspective and policies addressed to these territories so far, which are «almost always focused on local resources capitalisation and their enhancement for tourism» (*ibidem*, p. 51).

Such actions have repeatedly been based on selective and competitive approaches and have encouraged «an elitist use of these territories, where (purely environmental) qualities are “regenerated” to benefit the urban middle class, [reproducing, instead overcoming, precisely those] socio-territorial dynamics that have led to the marginalization of inner areas» (Della Valle, Mariani, 2022, *op. cit.*, p. 39).

In this perspective, the National Villages Plan of the NRRP is an emblematic case. Within the framework of the two lines of intervention envisaged by the Plan related to Attractiveness of Villages, several projects were submitted with the purpose of undertaking actions for regeneration, recovery of heritage, enhancement of typical products (Agribusiness and local food) and tourist reception. In line with the aims of the first Mission of the NRRP, digital innovation is the cross-cutting component of all interventions. Thus, sustainable recovery and the community-driven approach, along with the technological aspects, represent the key features of all the project proposals submitted by the municipalities. Investing in slow and more sustainable forms of tourism, based on the preservation and innovative re-shaping of places, memories, knowledge and craftsmanship, may also turn out to be a boosting strategy for villages and tourism business in general. Indeed, the programs set up by the villages within the MiC Plan apparently fit within this framework. The considerable economic resources provided by the Villages Plan certainly represent important external “inflows” (Piroddi, 2008), which offer fragile contexts the possibility of partly overcoming the deep-rooted difficulties of carrying out recovery processes on their own.

However, it is yet to be explored whether and how effectively the NRRP resources will be implemented for the development of growth models that may fully generating social innovation besides increasing tourism flows. These actions imply the risk that only mere material transformations are made and may lead to a re-shaping of villages and minor centers that will be transformed by the standardizing recovery of tourism. Instead, it would be advisable and necessary to use the available resources in order to provide actual solutions to local communities needs. In its original meaning, social innovation is ultimately about “change” and “social transformation” (Moulaert *et al.*, 2017) and, more specifically, how change can meet emerging collective needs (Moralli *et al.*, 2017). This perspective must necessarily be applied to the technological component as well. The purpose of planning strategies is to develop models that are strongly aligned with the implementation of technology-based solutions. However, the planned interventions

should not lead to mere digital applications. Conversely, to develop models for growth, technology must become an empowering tool and support (Berardi, 2018). In order to be effective, technological components must always be developed and used in a collaborative manner by sponsoring stakeholders, such as institutions, and users, including citizens and the community. As a result, social innovation is not limited to technical issues, but encompasses the collective use of processes, products and models derived from innovative ideas, which are able to meet social needs more effectively than existing alternatives, while simultaneously creating new relationships and collaborations (Murray *et al.*, 2010).

As part of this framework, economic and technological resources must be intertwined with strong cultural action and social innovation in order to achieve a tangible revamping of the villages and create values, relationships, and approaches for (re)building more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable communities, as well as making refurbished spaces more attractive to new residents and tourists.

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