

1. Learning in fragile areas.

Critical sustainable development, local biocultural heritage and restorative education

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1. Learning sustainable development in fragile areas: a context

In this article we intend to develop both a theoretical-methodological reflection on the methods and the didactic and thematic proposals chosen for the different geographical and sociocultural contexts. At the same time, we decided to make a first evaluation of the lessons learned in the course of the different training activities carried out within the framework of the project. The basic idea that also inspired this second part of the reflection is to understand how a training strongly based on ethnographies and case studies for teaching can effectively contribute to outlining a training path enabling a profile as an expert in territorial and sustainable regeneration processes and rural development

The European green strategy (Europe 2020; Agenda 2030; EU Roadmap 2050), especially after the pandemic, pushed communities towards an increasing awareness of the risks associated with the ecological footprint of production: anti-ecological and uneconomic behavior, waste and losses.

In these documents shared at the European and trans-European level, an idea of environmental citizenship and food citizenship is disseminated and embodied (Wilkins, 2005; Gomez Benito and Lozano, 2014; Tittarelli, Saba, Di Pierro and Ciaccia, 2022) and is deeply impacting into the individual and collective subjectivities, publicly engaged in a territory: new agencies of the public sphere which end up reaching, after the cities, also more marginal spaces and rural arenas (Hagberg and Ouattara, 2012).

At the same time in the paper the a. introduces elements of the specific Italian situation as the National and Regional policies which are supporting and crossing the wider continental framework such as the especial Italian interpretation of the LEADER Program, the management of Local Action Groups (LAG) and the more recent and energetic programs based on remote and rural areas regeneration (SNAI – National Strategy for Inner Areas) and the special National Recovery and Resilience Plan (Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza, NRRP) which is part of the Next Generation EU (NGEU) programme, namely the € 750 billion package – of which about half is in the form of grants – that the European Union negotiated in response to the pandemic crisis.

The criticalities linked to the productive growth models of late modernity have led to diversified criticality scenarios such as loss of biodiversity, climate change, the different forms of air and water pollution and consequences more rooted in the local dimension such as territorial fragmentation and habitat loss that previously characterized the ways of life of entire communities (Hobart, 1993; Agrawal, 1999, 2005; Crate and Nuttall, 2016; de Wit and Haines, 2021).

Faced with this global and local transition at the same time and the growing urgency of thinking about development strategies and regeneration of territories characterized by deep contradictions and environmental (Tsing, 2005), economic and, consequently, sociocultural crises, environmental citizenship seems to move between a level of individual commitment towards greater respect for waste and the increase in polluting causes and a more political and community level connected to shared and participatory processes of collaboration in projects to contain and reduce the polluting footprint of production and action on the environment understood as a common good.

According to other approaches, this respect and growing action of commitment to sustainable development must be understood as a tension towards the equalization of fundamental rights between different areas of the world and different components of the same populations (gender, ethnicity, economic, etc.) and as a guarantee of a continuity of the free market system,

guaranteeing more and more ecological products and favoring the sustainable development of responsible consumption as a new crucial element of the value chain.

In recent years, the poetics and policies of inland areas have crossed paths with the territorial programming of European funds through the instruments of the ERDF and the RDP (The European Regional Development Fund and The Rural Development Programmes). These are aimed, at least on paper, at triggering more or less endogenous sustainable rural development processes, social innovation, inclusion and participation of local populations in rural and mountainous areas, insisting on the importance of local involvement and participation, business innovation and creativity, cooperation networks. It is within this framework that the territorial projects developed by the LAGs (Local Action Groups) within the framework of the LEADER Program first developed and then, starting from 2015, the new frameworks launched by the National Strategy for Internal Areas (SNAI) which in turn are intertwining in recent years with the special programming of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) with the size of the funding made available, but also its tight deadlines and the urgency of particularly efficient and high-performance planning. In the background the work of a very dense and varied network of local actors, associations, foundations, programs and sub-programs launched by particular institutions, but also of creative and innovative experiences at a territorial level characterized by greater informality. In this framework of territorial intervention, training formal and informal learning have and continue to increasingly represent an engine of change and transformation, going to redesign, once again, the relationship between "margin" and "center" and the idea itself of sustainable development of rural and peripheral areas (Daas and Pool, 2004; Tarpino, 2016; Carrosio, 2019; De Rossi and Barbera, 2021; Broccolini and Padiglione, 2017).

It is thus necessary to identify in this explanatory framework the actions and projects SNAI and others, carried out by Unions and Mountain Communities or

by some LAGs, aimed at increasing the measures to preserve the school principals spread throughout the territory, especially in the most peripheral and fragile areas, to re-inhabiting rural and mountainous spaces, starting from the opportunities for families to be able to see their children attend local schools and conveying, within those, no longer the criticality, but in a certain way the advantage – against the declination historically centered on the disadvantage – of living in less densely populated territories, provided with a more relaxed pace of life and relationship, the possibility of opening the school to external spaces with little effort, thanks to its closeness to nature and to the places where primary resources are produced (De Rossi, 2018; Cersosimo and Donzelli, 2020; De Rossi and Barbera, 2021; Bindi, 2019; Symbola, 2021).

2. Interventions

The recent intervention programs for the regeneration of internal areas gave rise to various needs. Among the first ones: finding elements capable of identifying contiguity between towns and territories and defining the areas of intervention in a coherent way. The latter is a need imposed by the urgency both to select the beneficiaries of the interventions and to hopefully trigger homogeneous regeneration processes. There are areas, districts, and regional subsets that exceed their institutional perimeter in provinces, municipalities, unions of municipalities, and mountain communities. These are now critically re-interpreted by an anthropological approach developed at the crossroads of studies on heritagization, demological museography, and local ethnographies, which is based on the processes of identity definition or, more recently, on the short-circuit that connects identarian processes and tourism development as well as the protection of biodiversity and the environmental and landscape integrity of the territories.

In this sense, the contemporary geographies of the regenerative actions of territories and communities acquire greater interest:

- museums and local collections dedicated to rural civilization.

- galleries and fairs of both historical and the commercial relevance.
- local markets and short circuits of supply chain distribution that stress on ways of production with local roots, which are also declined in terms of rural idyll – that is, according to representations often characterized by the sweetened and heritagized/stereotyped image of the rural and mountain world of peasantry.

The redefinition of the internal areas and the (at least) inaugural spirit of the projects centered on the internal areas of the country lies now at the crossroads between activism, critical theories of development and growth, fundamental economics, and new communitarianism. However, this critical impetus has only partially morphed into alternative national and local political practices in terms of territorial planning and policy frameworks for the manufacturing and crafts industry. That is, because the latter are still incapable of acting upon the territories in a decisive way. because the overarching reason for this is that the authentic process of grassroots participation, although systematically invoked by the rhetoric of politics and the media (including funding awards and invitations to tender), has struggled to be included in political planning. Instead, grassroots movements elected to focus on neo-endogenous forms of development – or, in the most radical scenarios, even openly exogenous forms, which risk interrupting and failing as soon as the initial frames of some processes change or shut down after the launching stage (Barbera and De Rossi 2021, 2022).

3. Education as a primary point of the fragile areas' agenda

Among the most challenged services in rural/mountainous areas, those related to education are probably the most critical. There are few schools in those regions, often small, poorly equipped in terms of services, hard to reach due to the complex organization of mobility in geographically inaccessible areas and experiencing high teachers' turnover. In the past, this had determined a tendency towards higher school dropouts in the same regions, as well as less brilliant degrees of learning outcomes. Consequently, a devaluation of the school

experience in peripheral areas corroborated a trend where families move towards the urban hubs also as means to facilitate their children's access to more populous schools with better equipment supplies that enable extraordinary training opportunities alongside the already delicate area of curricular learning.

Thus, schooling has become one of the minimum requirements that must be guaranteed to achieve an authentic process of regeneration and community-based development in remote and rural areas. This makes training one of the pillars of full citizenship for the locals who inhabit urban poles, peripheries, mountainous, and rural areas – thus giving young students of all genders the tools and knowledge to decide whether to stay or to leave their birthplaces. Such upbringing might also lead them to correctly think in a less dichotomous and exclusive way about their living space.

Analogously, small schools belonging to rural and fragile regions must be supervised because of their broader social and cultural value. In fact, especially in the innermost and outermost regions, schools represent a more widespread cultural space, that is, a catalyst for associations and events which in many cases constitute the real backbone of the cultural and social affordances of small local communities.

4. Education, sustainable development and new critical approaches towards territorial regeneration

In this context of rapid environmental and socioeconomic changes, the issue of educating and training young generations in models of change and sustainable and innovative development becomes particularly crucial (Sobel, 2004; Shafft and Harmon, 2009; Hadjichambis, 2020). Training must guide citizens' behavior towards regeneration, healthy production, low-impact manufacturing, provide perspectives for transformation and innovative change in the agricultural and pastoral sector aiming at greater sustainability and multifunctionality, integrating them in an increasingly harmonious way with the environment as well as locally rooted forms of usage and treatment of spaces and resources.

First, what is needed in this context is an adequate and dynamic negotiation of meanings: establishing what should be understood by the different social and economic components in terms of local development, and how it is believed this objective could be achieved (Egusquiza, Zubiaga, Gandini, de Luca and Tondelli, 2021; Giliberto and Labadi 2022).

Secondly, the issue bears on the channels and the degree of formalization needed for educational and training frameworks. In other words, one must inquire how knowledge, comparisons, and decisions about the allocation of a given territory should be formulated and developed.

Finally, what is becoming increasingly urgent in the context of the very rapid transition that we are witnessing – be it environmental, digital, or socio-economic – is how it is possible to offer training capable of going with these increasingly rapid and important changes.

Increasing the debate and awareness about sustainable rural and territorial development to prepare the conscious and expert management of critical issues requires the development of a complex and multidisciplinary training offer capable of analyzing transition processes without denying, but if anything, articulating the uncertainties of the current global phase and providing sets of knowledge and skills - specific and generalized - abased on a holistic knowledge of contexts (Robinson-Pant, 2016).

Public engagement and community participation seem to constitute radical elements of this process of local empowerment beyond the inevitable elements of friction and conflict at the local level. In this sense, it is increasingly important to critically reflect upon the so-called "participation technologies" and the ways in which these channels and strategies for the shaping and exercise of political action in the public sphere make it possible to articulate and influence relations of concrete power in collective action networks, to learn to positively manage dissent and counter-hegemonic diversification and innovation paths, for example in terms of crops, production optimization methods, prevention, product distribution.

Therefore, the most suited methodology of research is oriented towards ethnography (O'Reilly, 2005) and the choice of geographic and socio-cultural contexts, as well as precise economic-political contexts. The analysis is based on the observation of the management processes and the relationships of change and transition adopted by the local population, the tools used by the communities to manage these changes and the channels through which innovative ways can be developed and disseminated, expert and refined approaches to sustainable development so far (Licen, 2018; MacClancy, 2015).

Such a kind of educational and research approach has been experienced during the project E.A.R.T.H. (Education Agriculture Resources for Territories and Heritage) – an Erasmus Plus Capacity building project coordinated by the a. on behalf of the BIOCULT Centre of Research of the University of Molise with other eight Universities and three NGOs from Europe (Italy, Spain, France) and Latin America (Argentina, Paraguay, Bolivia). Training and research experiences tested during this project are oriented towards a didactic formula based on case studies for teaching (*casos de estudio para la enseñanza*), analyzed along similar critical lines, working on a solid ethnographic system of data analysis and interpretation, in the interstice between contextual macro-data and local and individual specificities to transform projects, personalize them, make them more or less effective, and positively change the results of actions which in other cases were negative.

On a wider scope, local contexts offer us sets of localized and territorial knowledge, belief systems, values, ways of seeing and interpreting the information that comes from the context, as well as a set of behaviors and technical responses appropriate to the specific socio-territorial context taken in consideration. These three levels – personal, public/political, and practical – represent the channels through which, in a timely manner, we could observe the processes of transformation, and the individual, collective, and political response to critical issues raised by transition processes and changes that were imposed

from the outside (Brosius, Lowenhaupt Tsing and Zerner, 2005; de Sardan, 2016; Lunneblad 2020).

Within the EARTH project, critical observation of sustainable regeneration and local development processes was carried out at the intersection of different disciplinary skill sets: anthropology, geography, rural economics and sociology, pedagogy, agricultural law, agronomy, etc. –, thus repositioning the point of observation in the field through methodologies rooted in the territory, and with an essentially ethnographic approach. Yet, the latter is not exclusively qualitative and enjoys, at the same time, a tension to compare different social, cultural and political orders of reference. That means establishing a comparative dialogue between Europe and Latin America, as well as the most transversal to all the geographical spaces that we could define as the "Global South". The case-study based approach and the protocols adopted to report the cases in the educational interaction with the students and the local agents encouraged the development of critical awareness concerning the different starting conditions and matured bottom-up transformation processes, aimed at the inclusion of field witnesses in the processes of participatory political elaboration as a form of governance of development processes and local regeneration, alternative to hegemonic and hierarchical approaches.

The guiding idea of these training processes was, to a great extent, that of forming a structured but also informal capacity for “responsibility”. Education aims at preparing a “stance” to support local communities in their innovative, endogenous and neo-endogenous processes of development and rural transition. Training was provided in order to prepare students and local stakeholders to negotiate between different models of development and sociocultural and political-economic transformation, to the coexistence of hyper-productivist, extractivist and hegemonic models and more circular, shared, and cooperative forms of transformation and assisted change.

This need for embedded knowledge and awareness is requested by technological innovations, by growing possibilities of networking and co-

production / co-design, by exchange of experiences and knowledge that are rapidly changing rural contexts that were previously very isolated and disconnected from the great flows of knowledge and global products.

5. Case studies for rhizomatic learning: ethnographies of rural mediation processes

The very notion of territorial regeneration relates to the harmonious development between the population, culture, the sustainability of natural resources and the generation of economic alternatives. On the one hand, this could be based on sustainable agricultural practices. On the other one, it could be based on the interests of the local stakeholders and their negotiation with the agents that are external to the territory. A process could be deemed successful when the population decides to remain in a territory, when there is a reduction in the gaps of internal inequality and in relation to other advantaged territories, moving away from a sectoral approach only to compare theoretical approaches and social interaction. The idea of development is therefore separated from the mercantile, neoliberal, of growth alone, refining the understanding of the local dimension of socio-cultural interactions within communities and the continuing and growing relationship between the economic and the ecological. In this sense, critical reflection has more recently come to deal with post-development and the political and cultural "pluriverse" (Kothari et al., 2021). It does so in contexts of transformation and collective and territorial regeneration, resting on a critical and mediated notion of development itself and on socio-cultural variables understood as resources and not as limitations. Rural development is reconceptualized by considering: the centrality of the environment and the expert management of natural resources, the complexity of the urban-rural relationship in the very definition of rural territory, and the fact that the rural is something more extensive and complex than agriculture (Shejtman and Berdegué, 2004).

Through this approach, cultural heritage is also valued, so that it "is recreated in a process of innovation from the meeting of different actors located between the local and the global" (Ranaboldo and Shejtman, 2009). The traditional characterization of the products and their rooting in cultural contexts increasingly becomes an element of recognition of products, as well as of local rural landscapes. In this sense, the notion of territory becomes crucial to generate virtuous processes to safeguard and improve on specific lines of production – such as the recovery of particular cultivars, virtuous and sustainable traditional techniques water management, and other environmental resources in times of famine, economic hardship or environmental disaster. "The challenge is the reconstruction of rural territories, understood as societies that occupy territories and that value them" (Sili, 2008).

The case studies weren't based on an exclusively ethno-anthropological approach and methodology. They had many formats and were aimed at implementing more complex learning processes with the active involvement of students. Observations and comments about data and information were recollected during the Online International Courses developed in the framework of the E.A.R.T.H. Erasmus + Project activities (at the beginning the Courses should be onsite with a 15 days intensive learning program, but during the COVID Pandemic these Courses were moved to the Online version). Online interviews, as well as some study visits on site represented, in fact, the fundamental and very experiential basis for a first critical reflection on sustainable development processes in remote and rural areas. This embedded process was deeply rooted in the territories and at the same time opened to comparison between similar situations and criticalities.

The most relevant notions of this interconnected knowledge process between all aspects and levels of socio-cultural and territorial analysis of cases of local transformation and regeneration in rural areas are different. In the first place, this 'rhizomatic': a very well defined notion referring to learning experiences and processes which are basically non-linear, but complex and reticular knowledge

is based on thematic areas such as leadership, the construction of networks and associativity, ethics, organizational culture, design, and implementation of public policies, among many others.

These regions, in fact, need figures capable of articulating biocultural heritage and social innovation, guaranteeing communities adequate intermediation between levels, transitions and potential criticalities of the processes of change and multicultural and multi-stakeholder confrontation imposed by late modernity and which was more requested and in some matters of the pandemic emergency in an even more urgent and radical way. To carry out a holistic understanding of the contexts of sustainable development and territorial regeneration, an analytical technique is needed, based on the process of "learning by doing" in which students are involved in the application of these techniques in unstructured and complex situations of the real life described in the case study.

The direct dialogue with the local witnesses in carrying out the case studies determines an interactive process of questions and answers with the aim of learning and understanding not so much "the problem", but rather a complex interpretive device capable of combining multiple aspects, transitions and frictions of each context.

The use of case studies puts forward a very strong theme, also, in the form of the narrative, because it tells and describes specific cases, projects, intervention strategies in the territories carried out by individual, collective, and specific institutional actors. The main objective is to develop a learning strategy based on relevant information, expectations, dilemmas of the actors and articulating the discussion of the case addressing the experience, the protagonists of the story, the key problems addressed, the basic diagnosis necessary for the narration. That would underpin a complete and coherent understanding and reticular restitution of the case with its consequent writing. It is important that the story is told with reference to actors (individual or organizational) facing dilemmas and deciding

courses of action. The restitution of each case has to avoid abstract stories without subjects and concrete experiences.

On the contrary, the inclusion and use of direct phrases from the actors can represent a good resource. Writing is an interactive process and may require new information, other contacts and changes. In this sense, it is not a linear but a reticular process of understanding, it builds links between contexts and comparative situations, it broadens the horizon of restitution of the cases themselves as “acentric, non-hierarchical” contexts (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003: 33) and as “space relationship of an individual” (Lévy, 2014: 49), which essentially corresponds to the very notion of “rhizomatic”.

This reticular learning based on ethnography allows us to enter the perspective of the “practitioner”. The case studies, indeed, aim to put the student in the role and position of the manager as an actor involved in a context, dislocating the researcher from a passive position of the analyst who observes his object of study from a distance to a practitioner position. stimulated to articulate complex knowledge and multiple information to develop effective regeneration processes. Likewise, the case studies represented an opportunity for personal development and empowerment for students and teachers, through personal interaction with various situations and local, trans-local and trans-national actors, attention to different perspectives and ways of managing the emotions and conflicts.

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