

3. GRASSROOTS RECOMMENDATIONS: FOCUS GROUP OUTCOMES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

With regard to the actions of the of the Housing Policies Observatory, the socio-economic analysis of the service system and the public city leads to a phase of active participation with the land opinion leaders. Debates with local stakeholders is by now a well-established procedure of the Observatory, and it aims to build a detailed knowledge of both housing trends and issues, as well as to recommend guidelines for action plans to tackle claims clearly and efficiently.

Overall, the active participation stage is done through focus groups, i.e. a group of privileged observers are asked to discuss topics of qualitative nature. With this we obtain recommendations and information that will help to enrich and structure the quantitative approach.

On February 28th, 2013 the Mountain Focus Group was held in Claut, and on that occasion an experimental elaboration was introduced with regard to the system of services, infrastructures and mobility of the Cellina Valley. An lecture by the sociologist Diego Cason stirred up an in-depth discussion.

In the light of results obtained from the surveys submitted to the 18 Mountain Focus Group members, it is possible to monitor trends, approval, and benefits of actions promoted by the Housing Policies Observatory of the Pordenone Province.

Participants are mainly public administrators (11) and employees from local facilities (5), while participation of delegates from associations and professional orders is only 10%. Participants unanimously agree on the need to introduce round table discussions specifically dealing with the issues of living in mountain areas.

A second relevant aspect for most participants (75%) is that this meeting arranged by the Pordenone Province was the first opportunity to be involved in events discussing issues related to the housing system of the Pordenone mountain areas.

The very evidence that only 25% of participants had already partaken in similar events at regional level (Mountain Community, *Comunità Montana*), rather than deep-rooted lending institutions in the land, confirms the originality and benefit of such action. Additionally, this initiative – and more generally the Housing Policies Observatory – is of utmost importance for the stimulation, at municipal level, of synergetic and effective actions regarding land programming and planning.

The participants felt generally satisfied and about half of them thinks that information uploaded on the Pordenone Province site is suitable, whereas the other half believes that the broadcasting of contents and communication through the web is insufficient.

With regard to the usefulness of contents, 90% of participants believes that both the social and the economic aspects represent the main field of investigation, which contents need further study.

Some of the most relevant and recurrent topics emerged from the survey and the Focus Group discussion are the mountain depopulation trends and the ensuing loss of identity and community values.

As for the socio-economic field, another vital topic which surfaced regards the implementation of systemic actions able to stimulate both welfare and employment.

The guidelines mostly appreciated by participants focus on the enhancement of local resources of this land (tourism as well as woodland or natural and mining resources), along with a better exploitation of resources which are normally unused or utilized inefficiently, in view of stimulating employment opportunities.

A further element of discussion regards the huge effort from local agencies to keep levels of services and quality of life of mountain dwellers high. Indeed, this represents a vital ingredient for the success of future action plans regarding the alpine housing system.

Participants sided on two fronts when it came to advanced ideas. The first relates to subsidising social care services (healthcare, educational, and commercial), which for highland areas would mean to modify the standard short-term planning model (costs vs. results scheme), in favor of long-term investment approach.

The second most discussed topic concerns the implementation of actions to support residents' life: from house tax reduction (IMU) to cuts on land utility bills (the cost of fuel for transport and heating). According to participants, such measures would improve residents' quality of life.

The topic of systemic actions is always positively welcomed, as it may encourage the development of alpine areas through the involvement and implementation of the tourist system and landscape resources of the Pordenone mountain areas and synergically integrate with housing and transport policies. Hence, evidence calls for the proposal to establish a public board that may favour enhancement of housing and real estate heritage (la cd. Public Real Estate, *Agenzia immobiliare Pubblica*).

4. VILLAGES ENHANCEMENT IN ITALY AND ACROSS THE PORDENONE MOUNTAIN AREAS

The topic of small municipalities, inland areas, and those of the so-called “dwelling discomfort” (*disagio insediativo*) is of great interest. The future 2014 – 2020 European planning will allocate specific funds to inland areas and the Ministry for Social Cohesion (*Ministero per la Coesione Sociale*) has developed detailed and in-depth studies on this matter. Reasons for this urgency point to the awareness of the role played by agro-sylvan and pastoral activities related to the production of green services of high relevance, ranging from hydrogeological security through to tourist accessibility, land and biodiversity maintenance, to the safeguard of natural and cultural resources. Italy possesses 8,100 municipalities. Of these, over 5,600 have less than 5,000 residents, which accounts for 10 million residents and two-third of the national land area. These figures show the urgent importance of such action plans that need to be implemented in those areas, through improvement of Local Systems, establishment of new subsidiary actions and organized innovation, enhancement of local communities, “village sociability” (*socialità paesana*) and cooperation.

The Italian land area is characterised by this peculiar dwelling asset. In 8,100 municipalities there are 22,000 urban centers and 33,000 housing units, not to mention the countless buildings scattered in the heartland of rural and woodland systems, a heritage the needs to be valued for its tourist potential developed in recent years. However, today we are witnessing the shift from the idea that Italy has an “harmonic distribution” of the population, to that of a country with dwelling discomfort. Since the 1950s, large foothill, alpine and insular areas have been depopulating, and therefore impoverished.

Planned inquiries at national level carried out by the “Trade Confederation” and “Environment Agency” (Confcommercio e Legambiente) have shown that a progressive demographic loss leads to a drop in delivered services, i.e. education, social welfare and healthcare. Furthermore, depopulation affects the productive dynamism boosting economic growth across the land. Over 2,800 municipalities, covering a land area of 100,000 sq. km., over 30% of the country, are today at stake and may become ghost towns. Anyway, inland tourism is one of the major resources for the country. However, this alone is not enough. Such areas need programs for the redevelopment and recovery of local heritage, as well as initiatives to revitalize and regenerate land and commercial services, which are and must be closely connected to local potential, to transform the land from a green, social, economic and cultural viewpoint. Indeed, it goes without saying how Italy stands out in terms of wine and food tradition, as well as creativity (and this can translate into craftsmanship and hence material culture), and, above all, art and historical heritage. The environmental heritage is also crucial to the whole picture, since such asset is broad and diversified, and landscape is considered a maieutic and experiential element.

Such marginal contexts need maintenance of the land area and small local villages, thus creating a widespread network of local operations, like those once autonomously accomplished by farmers. Land care, local support, service maintenance, development of sustainable tourism and accommodation facilities (diffused accommodation, *ricettività diffusa*): these are the aspects which will help to revive villages that today are increasingly appreciated across Italy, and which strongly oppose the productivity-based vision of life belonging to the “infrastructures market” (*mercato delle infrastrutture*).

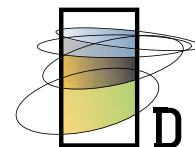
At present, tourism is the first national and international industry. In Italy, tourism accounts for 10% of GNP. Tourism development can operate as a key factor to stimulate economic and local resources. Today’s tourism, made of niches, clearly entails an infrastructural demand based on local districts, widespread services, availability of systems of offer that keep up with new requests. Today tourism do not need large hotels and renowned destinations; rather, it calls for an efficient network of accommodation and land area services, able to promote self-sustainability

of the land, as well as their ability to keep local residents. Moreover, tourism needs salvaged sites, historical landmarks handed back to their old culture, that may find its own identity also thanks to tourism. In a society where information technology has the lion’s share, rural areas represent a key heritage, a “pot of wealth” which, if appropriately enhanced, may boost economic growth, and provide solid answers to the needs of tourist and recreational accessibility, hence improving quality of life.

In particular, the more standardization and homogenization offered by the city grow, the more the residents increase, as they are greedy for “particularisms” and therefore choose alternative, non-conformed, green, rural areas. The mountain, in fact, just like the countryside and its locations, is portray the past, and hence stands as an approved and recognizable element, a reassuring and welcoming one. Increased accessibility to mountain and historical sites in rural areas from increasingly larger shares of the population may stimulate a potential regeneration of most marginal and disadvantaged rural areas, as well as new business opportunities for renovators and administrators of such new offers. Tourism generates local wealth, and certainly rural residents, local communities are becoming more aware that their development cannot be only exogenous, but it must benefit the actual local resources. Tourism, in this context, as an external asset toward economic development, requires the availability of endogenous factors in order to grow.

Accordingly, even the Pordenone mountain areas are beginning to move their first steps. After the data collected during the investigation of the Housing Policies Observatory of the Pordenone Province, included in the Notebook 01 (Quaderno 01), in early 2013, the Alpine Community of Western Friuli region proposed the project “Rent?yes!” (Affitta?si!), supported by regional funds and the collaboration of the Observatory itself. Such project, lasting for the entire year 2013, aimed at stimulating a broader, low-budget accommodation offer, by exploiting the available unused real estate heritage in the Cellina and Tramontina Valley. The project, addressed to Friuli’s residents and in particular, but not exclusively, to young unemployed women, included free participation to training modules focused on research in topics related to the land area, to resources, marketing, tax system and commerce, with the ultimate goal of improving contacts with tourists coming from other areas, as well as strengthening tourist administration and offer.

Thus, which are the aspects that allow small municipalities to compete? Development, and therefore the absence of dwelling discomfort, depends on the ability of each single land area to implement a “self-offer”, in accordance with its own vocations and traditions, as well as the relationship with its own green, housing, economic and cultural “assets”. Finally, this must go hand in hand with what Richard Florida calls the “TTT”: technology,



talent, tolerance. Like in the natural state, where opulence comes from biodiversity, it is possible to claim that dwelling wealth, strongly diversified like the Italian one is, is a quality element and a great potential, and therefore needs safeguarding. Just like biodiversity, we must safeguard “socio-diversity”. To this regard, Richard Florida’s “TTT” statement represents an interesting benchmark, inasmuch as it stimulates toward technology and innovation, intended as output of new products and services. But also talents, that is the inner tangible components, but also the intangible ones, i.e. the knowledge of a given land area. Furthermore, it fosters tolerance, that is the capacity to embrace and build a multi-ethnic community, strongly diversified from a social viewpoint. All elements help to achieve competitiveness.

Clearly, this has nothing to do with an interpretation and an ultimate attempt to sort the problem of dwelling discomfort, according to winning patterns elsewhere. On the contrary, the idea is to point out that, wherever action plans manage to create a network of resources, then the result is more efficient and incisive.

In some ways, this transfers the idea of smart city to land areas, creating the new concept of “smart lands”.

For what concerns the strategic aspects, action plans enhancing land areas are in need of a creative shockwave, based on new ideas with a long-term development perspective. Anyway, the crucial point is to network and cooperate. A “thick fabric”, an elastic and resilient framework must be implemented, catering for both local and global needs. In addition, bottom-up processes must be connected to top-down ones: the positive recovery of few villages, that has taken place recently, along with some other areas, shows that there is a need for positive exogenous factors that must be encouraged and promoted whenever possible, through a strong synergic action between local actors and exogenous aspects. The bottom-up and top-down approaches need integrating, thanks to the productive support of government actions from public stakeholders. Striking examples are the village of Santo Stefano di Sessanio (the Province of L’Aquila), Sermoneta (the Province of Latina) or San Leo (the Province of Rimini), all the way to villages within the Province of Pordenone, i.e. Poffabbro (municipality of Frisanco), Toppo di Travesio, Cordovado and Valvasone. Today, many of these communities are part of a network of some of the most charming Italian villages, since renovating a village with a recovery and revitalization plan is an investment always worth making. History teaches us that our heritage is built through our identity, our traditions, i.e. places not only reminds us who we are, but first and foremost who we used to be, and perhaps who we will be. Santo Stefano di Sessanio, like many other historic villages in Italy, is namely an historical village, a site where we rediscover our roots and culture; but it is also a village that shows us how an abandoned site may be born again, find renewed vitality and opportunities for development.

Santo Stefano di Sessanio is a small center of 120 residents located at 1,250 meters above sea level and about 30 km away from L’Aquila. The village has a very old history, dating back to the age of ancient Romans, when the fortified village was known as Sextantius, and was located near the royal sheep track (*tratturo regio*), the main transhumance trail

between L’Aquila and Foggia. The village grew mainly thanks to its strategic location and the business of shepherds and travelers. It is situated near the Navelli Plain (*Piana di Navelli*), which is famous for saffron production. For two centuries, starting from the mid 1500s, the village was part of the Medici state, its golden age, particularly for its wool production, eventually woven in Tuscany and sold throughout Europe. After the Unification of Italy and the end of the transhumance business, the village witnessed a time of emigration and decay, in particular after the Second World War, when the number of residents fell from 1,000 to 200 in two decades. At that time, most of the houses were abandoned, as people moved to North America (mainly US and Canada). Most strikingly, the families emigrating left their homes just as they were, handing the door keys to neighbors, in the hope of making it back one day, and to make sure their home was kept in good hands. Buildings, villages and landscape were left untouched, crystallized. With the creation of the Gran Sasso National Park and the Mountains of the Laga, Santo Stefano di Sessanio became the privileged access way to the park and to the spectacular highland of Campo Imperatore. Tourism started to rediscover this site, and European funds encouraged and supported the preservation and enhancement of the site. However, for a real rebirth of the village it took the effort of many people: Daniel Elow Kihlgren, a young Swedish-born entrepreneur, Walter Mazzitti, a foresighted park manager and current president of the board for the rebirth of Santo Stefano di Sessanio, together with watchful and capable administrators, such as Antonio D’alio, the current town mayor. The revival process had already started though slowly and with many difficulties. However, the strongest contribution to the rebirth of the village came from the business idea and investments of Daniel Kihlgren, a private citizen who, in 2004, bought many properties across the village, and turned them into an innovative tourist offer, known today as “decentralized hotel” (*albergo diffuso*). Basically, the management of accommodations works like in an ordinary hotel, but rooms are scattered across the village, in old lodges refurbished with great care.

The decentralized hotel is implemented in the Pordenone mountain area too. Today, it counts 26 lodges in Cellina Valley and Vajont Valley, with 17 accommodation units available between the d’Arzino and Tramontina Valley. Certainly, this tourist offer should be improved and integrated through a dynamic system of tourist service offers.

The village of Santo Stefano has acquired status for its laudable and unique system of tourist offer, mainly because Kihlgren’s entrepreneurial idea and his “Sextantius” (www.sextantio.it) inspired other young local entrepreneurs to pool together to recover the village and start new business activities: from food and catering services to bed and breakfast lodges, as well as sale of typical products and new service offers to tourists. The municipal administration authority offered its support by issuing a set of ad hoc regulations in the matter of renovation plans, with the aim of keeping the existent heritage intact, forbidding the construction of new buildings and the use of concrete, and enforcing the use of wooden doors and windows. Another positive aspect is the employment of local construction enterprises, the offer of tourist accommodation created a large number of new jobs and new opportunities to young people. Today the village offers 350 total lodgings, a lot of work for young people engaged in activities connected to tourism and services. In recent years, the municipality has signed a very important twinning agreement with the Uffizi museum in Florence, with the

purpose of promoting important exhibitions linked to the common history of Santo Stefano and the Medici family. Along the last two years, thematic exhibitions have attracted over 25,000 visitors.

Similar to this, the recent collaboration experience started between the Province of Pordenone, the municipalities of Erto e Casso, Cimolais and Claut with “Dolomiti Contemporanee”, an association dealing with contemporary art. This association has been managing former primary schools in Casso, now recovered and used as exhibition rooms also hosting meetings and workshops.

The rebirth of villages originates from the combination of many factors: a watchful administration authority, an enterprising social fabric, the drive of an enlightened entrepreneur such as Daniel Kihlgren, a forgotten site, though preserved in time and with a clear potential for future development, and the care, attention, respect used to rediscover it. An “idem sentire”, or shared idea, that involves every single social actor, from administrators and entrepreneurs to residents. A successful formula that may be replicable in many other places. If, on the one hand this very experience may teach and stimulate active participation, on the other hand there could be also further forms of land development.

One such example is the Vajont apocalypse (with its 50th anniversary commemorated this year), which, in its endless tragedy, has shaken the conscience of politicians and millions of people, stimulating local tourism unexpectedly. With regard to the Pordenone mountain areas, another aspect that is becoming crucial is the recognition of Friuli’s Dolomites (specifically the Cellina Valley and the upper Tramontina Valley), as a UNESCO world heritage site, along with other eight dolomitic sites, in 2009.

This new opportunity is slowly changing the attitude of those who live in these land areas, both administrations and residents. The initiatives that, proposed in these four years to enhance the land areas interested in being recognised by the UNESCO, have boosted tourism in these areas— not without difficulties due to the novelty factor— making the public more aware of their outstanding landscape beauties and their geological uniqueness.

The Week for the Friuli Dolomites as UNESCO world heritage is an example of such initiatives: conceived and launched in 2011 by the Province of Pordenone, in partnership with local administrations and associations. Exhibitions, conferences, sports and hiking events, promotion of arts, traditions and typical local products, all aim at drawing attention to the mountain areas, though at the same time they aim at making people aware that it is possible to enjoy such a unique treasure while safeguarding it.

Therefore, it is clearly understandable how topics related to the Pordenone mountain areas are complex and structured: there is a need to create new opportunities in order to broaden and improve the

quality of dwelling, hence encouraging relationships between alpine communities. This with the aim of preserving the cultural identities, stimulating an alpine “system” that holds potentials that need to be nurtured and valued. This is the task that the Province of Pordenone is taking up through activities linked to its mountains, and with the core mission to revitalize its precious heritage with an action plan mainly focusing on “re-inhabiting”.

5. LIVING IN MOUNTAIN AREAS: TOWARD SMART COMMUNITIES

Mauro Corona wrote that “the mountain has a voice and speaks to us, although we do not have time to listen to its words, as we are too busy in our world.” (*La montagna*, Corona, M., ed. Biblioteca dell’Immagine, 2003). Today, in order to progress, economic, industrial and commercial development need to focus, prime, exploit availability of large markets within contained areas. The city is perfect, and within a few years, 80% of the population will be dwelling in the city. In recent years, many Italian cities have discussed the issue of power consumption and on the need to act toward waste management and promote a more sustainable development. European policies about energy saving, targeted to Europe 2020 objectives, put sustainability as the base of action plans, renewal and development of our land areas, starting from urban and populated sites. On the one hand, topics such energy requalification, building recovery, as well as socio-economic and cultural valorization are closely linked to the capability of local administrations to design and plan policies, targets and actions to attain this scope; while on the other hand, these topics are linked to technological innovation, to find problem-solving patterns and design products and processes able to cater to these needs.

The system of Italian villages is not alien to such observations, as they are able to enhance the land’s most precious components: its history, architecture, culture and crafts. Such system is also capable of stimulating new confidence, new action plans that may be suitable not only to limit power consumption, but also to promote villages in the light of European policies. Europe, for that matter, has designed local policies aiming to turn our cities into “smart” ones. For a non-urban land, such as villages, the implementation of smart policies means the activation of sustainable policies and actions that adopt new technologies in order to boost competitiveness (economic development), organize transport (mobility and accessibility), increase ICT (connectivity, innovation), enhance human capital, improve quality of life (new services to residents, businesses and tourists), preserve and safeguard the environment (natural and non-renewable resources), and finally, improve governance (participation).

A smart land, a “smart” alpine village is not a project but a path, a process that calls for start-ups supported by innovative technologies, with feasible