

Social responsibility and underground heritage valorisation in small rural communities: Lessons from two Italian cases

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Abstract - *There is increasing interest in gaining a better understanding of how small communities have (or have not) been involved in placemaking, and how to secure a more sustainable approach to underground heritage. This contribution analyses two cases of underground heritage in the Province of Ancona, Marche Region, Italy. These cases are located in the Apennine area in two neighbouring municipalities, Genga and Sassoferrato. The first case concerns the Frasassi Natural Caves (Municipality of Genga), which are an amazing natural underground site. The Cabernardi Archeo-Mining Park (Municipality of Sassoferrato) is the second case, which represents one of the most interesting mining areas in central Italy. The study aims at investigating how placemaking and co-creation should engage communities and tourism stakeholders in developing a sustainable rural tourism approach. The two cases represent different approaches to rural tourism development, both however aiming at creating added value for their amazing underground heritage sites.*

Keywords - **Underground heritage valorisation, rural tourism, social responsibility, sustainable development, natural resources, co-creation, placemaking**

INTRODUCTION

Why does Europe (including Italy, for its immense natural and cultural heritage) struggle so much to become the first world tourism destination? One of main reasons is that tourism, being a leading industry, needs to maximise the number of visitors and at the same time be able to keep high levels of both appreciation and return rates. However, by now it ought to have become clear that tourism needs to avoid, or at least reduce, its environmental impact, both in urban and rural contexts. Successful tourism destinations should be able to invest in skills rather than infrastructures. Responsible approaches to tourism are more than just business, they are quite innovative cultural approaches leading people towards more responsible behaviours and improved experiences for visitors. In other words, responsible tourism is broader than any other form of tourism: it's rather a novel approach for tourists and local stakeholders.

Both the European Union and the Italian government suggest setting ambitious but achievable goals to improve destinations when it comes to implementing more responsible and accessible tourism actions. In particular, what makes a local development plan successful is the local stakeholders' ability to address feasible actions and goals targeted at cultural and social identity and integration. In this regard, the overall concept of Community-Led Local Development/CLLD (EU, 2015) is based on the assumption that public administration, farmers and entrepreneurs, tourist operators and destination managers, working together, are able to strengthen the (material and immaterial) heritage, develop potential projects according to a responsible local governance scheme, and create successful experiences that boost the local economy on a large scale. Taking into consideration the multifaceted contexts of environmental, agricultural, cultural, economic and social goals is a requirement that allows all of them to be improved, resulting in an upgrade of skills and quality of life for local communities. The LEADER Programme¹, which came into force more than thirty years ago, thanks to the CLLD approach, has now become a key element in fostering local development in rural areas with a more participative approach. The backbone of LEADER has undergone several changes, the current revision being centred on improving the community's strategic strengths. Such change has led it towards new visions of the mechanism that channels European Funds for Agriculture and Rural Development to territories, local administrations and entrepreneurs. Such a vision has had several positive impacts, such as more sustainable local planning, broadening of agriculture businesses, a long-term perspective, and better local governance and policing, to name but a few. In particular, the attention here focuses on bottom-up, multi-objective partnerships and multi-fund approach – objectives pursued by the European Union through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development.

¹ https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld_en

The OECD (2009) pointed out that improved relationships between urban and rural areas could lead to higher growth rates for both, as they connect similar, albeit complementary, potentials in different places. On such a matter, which has also been included in the Memorandum of the European Rural Agenda (EU, 2015), several stakeholders and advisory groups have challenged the European Commission over an array of key issues, stressing the fact that rural territories have a great growth potential which can be better explored by more balanced relationships with urban areas. Looking at the issue from this angle, public investments could be channelled to local authorities, private endeavours, thus giving life to innovative local platforms of private-public partnerships working together towards tourism development.

The present essay aims at exploring two cases of underground heritage in the Italian Marche Region and their co-creative approach: the Frasassi Caves, managed since 1972 by a public consortium, and the Cabernardi Archeo Mine Park, managed by the municipality together with a non-profit association and, recently, by a local cooperative managed by young people.

THE RURAL TOURISM INDUSTRY

Rural tourism is a rapidly growing economy for inland areas, and has become one of the main income generators for many countries in Europe, including Italy, even considering the poor past years' performance, with COVID-19 restrictions in place (Esposito DeVita et al., 2020; Orindaru, 2021). Since rural destinations have ensured strict physical distancing measures and many Italians have chosen to spend holidays in less crowded places, in 2020 and 2021, Marche rural outdoor and heritage sites hosted an even greater number of Italian tourists. Rural tourism in Marche is experiencing steady growth; the number of nights spent in rural areas has increased by 5.3% between 2012 and 2018 (EC, n.d.). Farmhouses are key players, and in Europe there are 10.5 million farms (Eurostat, 2019). The difficulties in generating sufficient income have driven farmers, in many cases, to divert from the agricultural base to different forms of income diversification (Fiume Fagioli et al., 2014). Diversification from the primary agriculture activities has become a necessity, and secondary agricultural activities and services, mainly related to rural tourism development, have represented the major source of income in the past decade. The Marche Region is investing in one of the greatest organic farming districts in Europe: 2,202 farmers, 78,650 ha under organic farming, with an increase of 18,625 ha in the next few years (Regione Marche, 2021; Romano, 2021). These figures highlight how vital the food and wine production sector is, showing the close attention paid by local farmers to the reduction of the environmental impact. Agritourism is becoming the main national (and regional) activity in a multifunctional agriculture, boosting rural hospitality, even though, due to the prices, hotels still remain the favourite form of tourist accommodation.

The sustainability of this income source depends heavily on ensuring that its social, environmental and economic impact is both positive and inclusive. This goal involves

the participation of all tourism stakeholders (Fiume Fagioli et al., 2015), and more deeply the engagement of social responsibility. In this context, it is critical to consider the relationship of self-to-self (Carson & Pennings, 2017), as many tourists seek greater insights into self-knowledge by way of virtual, social media or physical activities, through closer contact with the environment (Garau, 2015).

An important role in tourism development in rural areas is played by the Regional Cohesion Policy, since EU development policies, including the Cohesion Policy, need a place-based approach (Faludi and Peyrony, 2012). This makes territorial cohesion an important element in a co-creative process towards a more sustainable tourism economy. After all, territory is the stage where residents, businesses and public authorities interact. It is a dynamic platform for co-ordinating joint public and private actions with rural-coastal tourism linkages, and to bring together different approaches and goals, even if they are sometimes controversial. This requires incisively fostering a social approach to the economic tourism development of internal and rural areas competing with coastal tourism.

The local pilot area of the *Appennino basso pesarese e anconetano* of the National Inland Areas Strategy (SNAI), according to the Cohesion Policy Strategy, is engaged in supporting 9 Municipalities, including the Municipality of Sassoferrato, in developing projects through co-creative processes to promote the local Inland Strategy. SNAI could have been an excellent opportunity to strengthen the CLLD approach also through multi funds (ERDF, EAFRD, ESF, National Funds, etc.), but this did not happen.

Since 2020, SNAI created the *Alte Marche* pilot area, in order to brand it for tourism, develop and promote local tourism, to be supported by a Destination Management Organization (DMO). The DMO will include other important destinations in the region, such as Urbino (UNESCO Historical Site), Fabriano (UNESCO Creative Cities Network) – with the Frasassi Caves planned for future addition. The *Alte Marche* tourism brand includes five clusters: Outdoor assets, Culture, Spirituality, Food and Wine, and Creativity.

Rural tourism offers multiple opportunities: directly, by raising awareness and providing income support, and indirectly, by promoting local communities' participation, which is a basic factor for successful sustainable development. The new *Alte Marche* tourism brand is also coherent with The Agenda for a Sustainable and Competitive European Tourism (EC, 2007), which underlines tourism as a key factor for the conservation and development of destinations thanks to main features such as natural resources, cultural distinctiveness, social inclusion, security, and the wellbeing of local populations.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The issue of and the debate on social responsibility have been transversal in Europe and Italy in the last decades (Commission of the European Communities, 2001;

Albano et al, 2012; Coppa & Sriramesh, 2013), across the media, government and local institutions, as well as involving different social and economic (private and public) stakeholders, universities and research centres. Conversely, however, businesses have been very little involved, although the social economy employs over 11 million people in the European Union, accounting for 6% of total employment (Monzón Campos et al., 2011). Social economy includes bodies with different legal status, e.g., cooperatives, foundations, associations, mutual societies, many of which are also social enterprises. Social economy, according to the EC (2015), aims at making profit for people rather than for investors and owners, and is particularly suited to enterprises that implement a bottom-up approach to governance and that promote co-participation. In rural tourism, social responsibility could be the mainstream approach to reduce tourism's negative impacts on the environment and local communities. Social enterprises (EC, 2015) contribute to smart growth by responding with social innovation to needs that have not yet been fulfilled; they support sustainable growth by embedding the socio-environmental impact into the business, and by their long-term vision, as they are one of the main key factors in inclusive growth due to the emphasis on people and social cohesion (EC, 2011).

Social responsibility should represent an important issue concerning the rise of committed, sustainable rural tourism development. In the European framework, especially in Italy, social responsibility and fair trade should connect to different local manufacturing industry organisations.

Urban-rural economic, social and environmental gaps (UN Habitat, 2019) might be closed by implementing integrated planning goals. Addressing place-based development plans means reviewing, adapting and using locally relevant regulatory instruments and methods, and should encompass such issues as environmental protection, climate change, land use, and infrastructure and transport. An appropriate legal framework represents a concrete foundation for the creation of social enterprises, and for capturing their specific features and needs. A legal framework at national level brings clarity to the definition of social enterprises, their mission and their activities (OECD, 2013). A broad debate on specific regulation is still missing in the Marche Region (Figure 1-2). Local enterprises and public institutions have been weakly involved with social and environmental responsibility in the tourism sector. A positive input should be given by new regulations on the circular economy that the Marche Region is going to define (approval from the regional council is still pending). Regional regulation may not be enough to support social public and private community responsibility, but it can be an important step forward.

The tenet here is that the local population should be involved by municipalities in all main decisions, and this should take into account the social, economic and environmental local context. Moreover, local policy makers should stimulate and promote co-creation processes, involving both the public and private sectors. A sustainable

community cannot ignore the fundamental role of social responsibility. The two cases under analysis fall into a regional framework of deep economic crisis. The Marche regional manufacturing sector has been in a critical situation since 2008, which became even worse after the devastating earthquakes of 2016. Efforts to recover the region need to integrate such important aspects as social cohesion, alternative socio-economic models, and sustainable development (improving energy efficiency, reducing waste and environmental impacts). In a new responsible tourism in rural areas, the landscape, the natural and historical heritage, as well as local food and wine could play a key role in local development and economic recovery. Social economy, according to Social Economy Europe (2015), provides a short-term “buffer” in a crisis situation. If such benefits are properly enforced, it is possible to argue that social economy is an essential element for a successful way out of the crisis (anticipation and response to unsatisfied needs, to structural changes) and for a new model of economic growth, such as sustainable rural tourism.

Rural tourism experiences play a key role, be it through natural resources and agriculture (wine and food excellence) or through rural built heritage, cultural heritage, historical towns, material and immaterial cultural values of local communities, energy sustainability, rural and coastal linkages. For innovation, the municipalities must find a way to involve multiple synergies and generate employment (incomes) for all stakeholders, but especially for young people, to give them motivation to live in inland areas (Bocci, 2015). Circular economy and social responsibility might be the leitmotifs of overall actions, implicating all sectors of the economy, involving private and public stakeholders for sustainable future development.

THE TWO CASES: FRASASSI AND SASSOFERRATO

A growing body of research points to underground assets as an important local economic resource (Che, 2011; Mata-Perelló, 2018; Kimic et al., 2021; Smaniotto et al. 2021). Also, the COST Action Underground4Value² is devoted to better understanding the conservation, valorisation, and management of an underground built heritage, and these through the lens of a community-led development process. This approach links two relevant issues: underground heritage as a unique cultural resource, and the local community, which greatly benefits from this resource (Pace, 2021).

This essay explores how underground assets could be managed to increase responsible tourism, ensuring environmental and natural protection, putting placemaking and bottom-up planning processes in place towards more sustainable and responsible development.

² <https://www.cost.eu/actions/CA18110>, www.underground4value.eu

Territorial framework

The two cases under analysis, Frassasi Natural Caves and Cabernardi Archeo-Mining Park, and the corresponding municipalities of Genga and Sassoferrato, are located in the Apennine area of the Province of Ancona, Marche Region, Italy. As with most of the cultural and natural heritage in inland areas, the problem is reaching these places. The Genga municipality is crossed by the national route SS76, while Sassoferrato is about 15 km away from that road. Over the last twenty years, a great part of the SS76 has been under construction, as part of the Quadrilatero Project, the large road infrastructure enlargement project to allow faster connections to the Marche and Umbria Regions. While waiting for the SS76 enlargement completion, the population has also had to face the construction works on the Pedemontana, a route project born in the 1970s to provide fast connections to the Apennine inland areas along the Marche Region. The long-awaited completion of the SS76 has also put the environment in danger, as it suffers a process of permanent violation by land take. Maybe it would be better not to invest so much (more than 1 billion Euros) in new infrastructures, but rather to ensure the maintenance of the existing road network. On the other hand, the more sustainable track doubling of the railway line Ancona-Rome has been running for more than thirty years, but today the trains connecting the two destinations are slower than they were some years ago.

While Genga is located inside the Regional Park of the Gola della Rossa e Frasassi (Figure 1), Sassoferrato is adjacent: the protected area is essential to develop rural tourism experiences to preserve the amazing landscapes and local biodiversity, and support co-creative actions to strengthen the collaboration between the two underground sites.



Fig. 1: Regional Natural Park of Gola della Rossa e Frasassi. All photos: Bocci (2021)

The Frasassi Caves

The Frasassi Caves, a karst cave system in the Municipality of Genga, were discovered in 1948 by a group of speleologists. In 1970 other speleologists discovered further wide cavities (about 30 km in length). Stalactites, stalagmites, lime-castings and crystallised small lakes, which represent the most beautiful element of the caves (Figures 2,3), are the result of the prolonged rain water infiltration work on the rocks. In 1972, the municipality of Genga and the province of Ancona established the Frasassi Consortium to manage the Frasassi Natural Caves and facilities (parking area, ticket office, an outdoor market). A tunnel of more than 223 m was built in 1973-1974 to provide access to the caves, connecting the entrance to the Deep Ancona cave. The tunnel is a comfortable walk of approximately 600 m, it is however not accessible to disabled people. Visitors can access the Caves only in guided tours. The caves run for about 30 km, and access to the other walks/journeys is allowed only to speleologists.



Fig. 2: The magnificent Room of Candles (sala delle candeline) is one of the most imposing chambers in the Frasassi Cave

The caves are famous all over the world and they constitute one of the most attractive landmarks in the Marche Region. The caves are open around the year, except for one month during winter (in January-February) due to ordinary maintenance works. In 2019, 278,570 tourists visited the amazing natural caves; in 2020, after the beginning of the pandemic, the number decreased to 155,683 visitors. Due to their astounding underground heritage value, the caves should boost local tourism, and promote the linkage to other interesting regional facilities, e.g., the Regional Natural Gola della Rossa Park, Valadier's Church, San Vittore Abbey; still, is quite

difficult to arrange an integrated tour. For the last 50 years the Frasassi Caves have been managed without any involvement of the local community.



Fig. 3: Stalactites and stalagmites inside the cave

The Cabernardi Archeo-Mine Park

The Cabernardi Archaeological-Mine Park covers the sulphur mine area located mainly in the Municipality of Sassoferrato. The mine was the greatest sulphur mining site in Europe until it was closed down in 1959. In the last 25-30 years a co-creative approach crafted by the local community – ex-miners and their families – gave a remarkable impulse to the development and promotion of the mine and the site. Today it comprises a museum, congress hall, services and facilities, in addition to the mine installations (Figure 4).

The mine employed up to 1,600–1,800 miners. Most of them, and their families, lived in the Cantarino Village, built by the Montecatini Society, the national company. The village was completed in 1919, with the necessary infrastructure and facilities, including a school, playgrounds and recreational areas. It is still today a lively neighbourhood.

Since 1983, a group of ex-miners and their descendants decided to revive the tradition to celebrate in-situ Santa Barbara's day (December 4th), the patron saint of miners. This celebration gave ex-miners and their families the opportunity to start collecting photographs and objects related to working in the mines. In 1992 these memories materialised in a museum, completed today with a collection of minerals and further objects (i.e., guardian hats, workbooks, boots, and lamps) donated by

miners and their families since its inception. In 1999 the museum was installed in the old primary school building, as a result of the partnership between the Sassoferrato Municipality and the cultural association “La Miniera Onlus”. This association, established in 1996, aims to preserve and enhance the history and traditions involving the mine and the neighbourhood. It also managed the museum and the mine archaeological park from 1997 to 2021.



Fig. 4: Entrance to Cabernardi Archeo-Mine Park

In 2019, about 2,600 people visited the park; in 2020, with the COVID restrictions in place, about 1,300, a significantly smaller flow of tourists compared to the Frasassi Caves. Since 2021, the Happennines Cooperative has been the local tour operator, which is also in charge of the park management. For this reason, the cooperative plays a crucial role in the process of the park's valorisation and promotion. Happennines is pushing for a networking approach to link the Archeo Mine Park with further cultural heritage assets in Sassoferrato (Sentinum archeological site, MAM's - a coworking space with a permanent and temporary modern art collection, other art museums and collections, Alborno Fortress, Conti Atti's Abbey, etc). The park is thus becoming one of the most attractive sites in the region. To promote local development, Happennines, in close contact with local small and medium enterprises, is strengthening the social approach of important manufacturing, food and wine producers. Against the backdrop of an amazing landscape, the Cabernardi Archeo-Mining Park offers a unique visit experience, allowing visitors to appreciate a rich culture and a beautiful nature itinerary. Residents are the most important stakeholders to improve and strengthen the history and memory of the Cabernardi mines. However, the decreasing population of this inland area needs to be given further attention to keep these sites alive and attract new residents, not only tourists.

UNDERGROUND HERITAGE VALORISATION IN SMALL RURAL COMMUNITIES: FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

A co-creation process is a win-win approach for adding value and promoting underground heritage resources in rural areas. Italy is extremely rich in cultural and natural heritage –including underground built heritage. The valorisation of such heritage assets has increased in the last decades, and the local communities are often involved in promoting them. Local associations and cooperatives play a central role in this process (Pace & Salvarani, 2021). Such involvement is fundamental to provide support to the small scale economy. The Frasassi Consortium, for example, made the decision to employ local people as much as possible. This is, however, not a collaborative or co-creative bottom-up approach. Cabernardi Archeo Mine Park, initially managed by the Onlus Association, and then by the Happennines, bears witness to the importance of the cooperation and involvement of young local professionals, who are highly motivated to strengthen tourism and engage with local stakeholders. The assets and the tourist flows in the two cases are very different (as demonstrated by the figures), but experience shows that co-creation and bottom-up processes are the best way to manage complex local heritage and community development processes, and are the most effective element to achieve sustainable results in terms of broad cultural and natural heritage valorisation and promotion (Smaniotto et al., 2021).

Heritage valorisation in terms of placemaking means involving local communities in defining the best concrete development aspects to improve, sharing actions to be implemented and goals to be reached. Placemaking is a bottom-up process that requires continuous engagement, and strengthening efforts in co-creation, design and innovation processes. The Italian approach concerning different local experiences seems to be largely different: placemaking and co-creation processes are often claimed, but rarely supported. A smart community needs to integrate social, planning, environmental and economic aspects to boost co-creative approaches.

The collaboration between the two underground sites with the Natural Regional Park of Gola della Rossa e Frasassi could strengthen the tourism of scholars. The two assets have a common ground: scholars are very interested in visiting natural caves, and they are eager to know about life in the mines as well. The Regional Park could play a more active role through its educational services. School visitors (also involving families) should be considered a key element to improve responsible tourism and to play an important role at regional level.

Underground valorisation for the Genga and Sassoferrato communities should involve creating and supporting a process to develop a local tourism economy based on their natural underground sites, strongly connected with local natural and cultural outdoor heritage.

For this reason, local communities should be leading players in this new approach. Rural tourism development is still undefined and ineffective concerning local

communities' engagement. Therefore, regional development needs to create new approaches for small rural communities. There could be different approaches, according to focus, i.e., on local cultural, social and economic resources. The overall aim of the two case studies is to explore their own features, drivers and potentials to support rural areas in current challenges and to improve their sustainable development. Social responsibility by local stakeholders and involving young people should be key in each enhancement effort to foster local culture and tourism economy. The lessons from these two cases suggest, at this early stage, that sustainability should be strongly linked with the conservation and development of natural and cultural (including underground) heritage, and all these topics should be integrated through the same goals. Driving new approaches at local scale in inland areas has to be one of the main issues for the near future and it must aim at integrating environment and landscape valorisation with the purpose of increasing a sustainable rural tourism economy.

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