

Community-based rural development The potential of a shrinking village with agriculture vocation

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Abstract

Aging population and migration trends raise diverse issues for most of rural villages, from social exclusion to dismissed buildings and decline of public facilities. In particular, those areas that are more dependent on agriculture are facing stronger challenges, as rural exodus has gradually left behind elder residents who rarely have the necessary mobility and motivation for intensive land work are at particular risk for isolation.

The lack of job opportunities and the shortage of agriculture workforce are therefore closely connected: the first one is generally the main push factor of migration; the second one represents the effective consequence of youth massive migration from rural context. The paper investigates the possibility for rural community to be an active player in inverting the trend of shrinking villages. It tries to identify a set of possible actions at neighbourhood scale that, starting with the initiative of local people, can lead to effective rural revitalisation and new social and economic value.

This work takes the form of an exploratory study: the Albanian village of Jorgucat is presented as an emblematic case study that epitomizes the issues of most low dense, depopulated settlements with a land-related nature and agriculture vocation. The proposed strategies have a special focus on community engagement, the introduction of innovative public facilities, the promotion of unconventional uses of the land and new working methods.

Diverse tangible actions are presented: for each of them, the applicability to Jorgucat context is explained and the reference to a similar up-and-running project is described. Finally, the text argues that some valuable initiatives of rural development might start from local people themselves rather than as a response to government policy, and suggests possible opportunities for transformations and innovations at neighbourhood level.

Jorgucat: a model of shrinking village with productive vocation

The problems that many inner territories across Europe are facing due to rural exodus and aging population are well known. From the German forests to the hilltop near Portugal borders, from the inner areas of Italian Apennines to the steep valleys of wild nature in Albania, Europe is affected by a constant haemorrhage of citizens, especially the youngest generation, moving from the countryside to bigger cities looking for a higher standard of life, better infrastructure and varied job offer. Rural exodus is combined with demographic ageing, an important issue in the rural regions of some Member

States, notably Spain, Greece, Portugal and France, where the rural populations are consisted of a higher proportion of people over 65 (Charalambos K., 2010:71). Contemporarily, rural villages face centralisation of basic services like education, healthcare, commerce and public transport, a consequence of aggressive cutbacks that public administrations are often forced to plan because of cost-saving policies.

The European Network for Rural Development Thematic Group on smart villages, set up in October 2017 as a part of the EU Action for Smart Villages, highlighted that many rural areas are locked into a "circle of decline" by two

mutually reinforcing trends: firstly, a shortage of jobs and sustainable business activity; secondly, inadequate and declining services.

For those villages that mainly rely on land production, migration to bigger centres not only leaves behind a greying society with specific needs, but causes a severe agriculture labour shortage, too. The Albanian village of Jorgucat in the Gjirokastër County features common issues of many depopulated rural settlements with an agriculture vocation: aging population, declining traditional crop production, lack of public facilities and public transport connectivity, influence each other negatively and accelerate the emigration of young residents and the vulnerability of those who stay. The population in the municipality of Dropull, created in 2015 by merging the former municipalities Dropull i Poshtëm, Dropull i Sipërm and Pogon, is 3 503 (2011 census), in a total area of 448.25 km²: an impressive sign of the dimension of rural exodus if compared with the 17 728 persons registered in 2001. Depopulation is much more pronounced in the area of Dropull i Sipërm. In this former municipal unit, including Jorgucat village, the population according to the 2001 census was 8 830, and it falls by 971 persons in 2011 census. Another remarkable fact from the Census is the relatively high number of buildings, 2 448 units for a declining resident population. On the other hand, many vacant places (schools, factories, houses) are clearly visible walking around the street of Jorgucat.

Among the villages of Dropull Municipality, Jorgucat has great potential for dynamism: first, because of its strategic location for movements to Delvine and Sarande, at a cross-road which joins Ioannina and Gjirokaster, and second, for its strong agriculture vocation, as the cultivation crops occupy more than 40% of the total area of the village, with a variety of landscapes, including arable land, orchard, vineyards, pastures and unproductive land. (Sinani A., 2016: 24). Finally, the set of customs and traditions, and the cohabitation over the Albanian population and Greek create an original model of rural community that can be the starting point for rural development.

Adopted Methodology for the case study of Jorgucat

Based on official sources, field visits and on-site surveys conducted in February 2019 in Albania, the study highlights the correlations between the fabric of Jorgucat built environment, land use and citizens' needs. The residential and public areas are situated at one side of the national road, connected in two points through an internal ring. Residential agglomeration is mainly nestled along the slopes of the valley, while private cultivated lands, on a flatter territory on the opposite direction, and it has been cut away from the built core after the construction of the municipal road. The pronounced emigration and migration trend of younger generations has been causing a gradual lack of agriculture workforce: the remaining inhabitants, mainly elderly living in the upper part of the village, are less and less able to reach

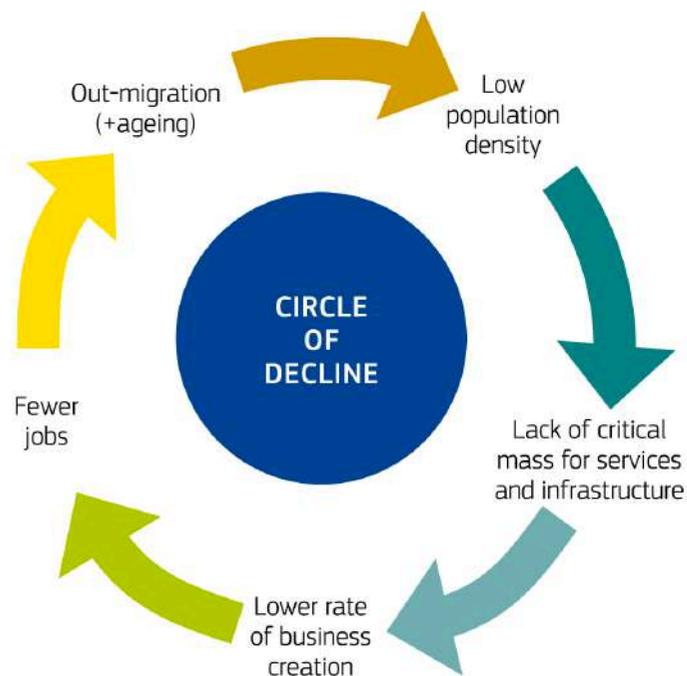


Fig.1 / The circle of decline affecting many rural areas.
Source / European Network for Rural Development - EU Rural Review n. 26

their crop fields, not at walking distance from home, therefore finding it difficult to provide for its maintenance.

The physical distance of the residential area from the private, underused lands, and the general isolation of most of the citizens, have gradually triggered an uptick of small individual economies, a sort of "backyard agriculture" targeted toward a single family's basic consumption. Residents have developed their own tiny space for chicken coops and self-subsistence production at household level, one next to the others, with no community-based interest.

In addition, inadequate public transport system aggravates the marginalisation of those who do not have private cars, and the uneasiness to reach a food market and their potentially productive lands. The interviewed dwellers have expressed discontent with the lack of public venues (meeting points, food market, sport facilities) and the desire for removing the sense of exclusion from the outside world, whilst endorsing their own traditional values.

Some forms of mutual help among Jorgucat neighbours are already established as long-standing, as found by on-site surveys, but have a lukewarm application:

- Sharing farming tools;
- Truck owners giving their fellows a lift to the crop fields;
- Swapping the surplus of private vegetable garden.

Sharing economy is seldom embraced because of different obstacles: the

physical distance between people, mostly elderly, low density and no infrastructure, and no strong meeting points creating the occasion for peer-to-peer networks. In this way, digital technologies offer a potential instrument of life improvement as they can actually enable connections for a common purpose, better access to services and a creation of innovative jobs, with direct impact on everyday use of public space and life quality.

Not all citizens have the skills and the willingness to manage digital opportunities, regardless of the improvements that could be derived from them, especially for seniors; very few initiatives have been made though to include elderly people in the use of digital tools.

Still, digital technology is not an end in itself, just a useful enabler of connections. A set of actions aiming at enhancing citizens' life quality and creating an attractive environment in such small village could be put forward from the initiative of local people themselves. Effective examples of innovative forms of cooperation and rural development first start from local energy and community engagement, and second, they demand a supportive policy environment.

Integrated rural mobility to fight social exclusion

Relevance and applicability in Jorgucat village

The Population and Housing Census taken in 2011 in Gjirokastër County registered that over a number of 971 persons in the southern area of Dropull, only 73 private households have a car. Given the lack of public mobility options in this rural area,

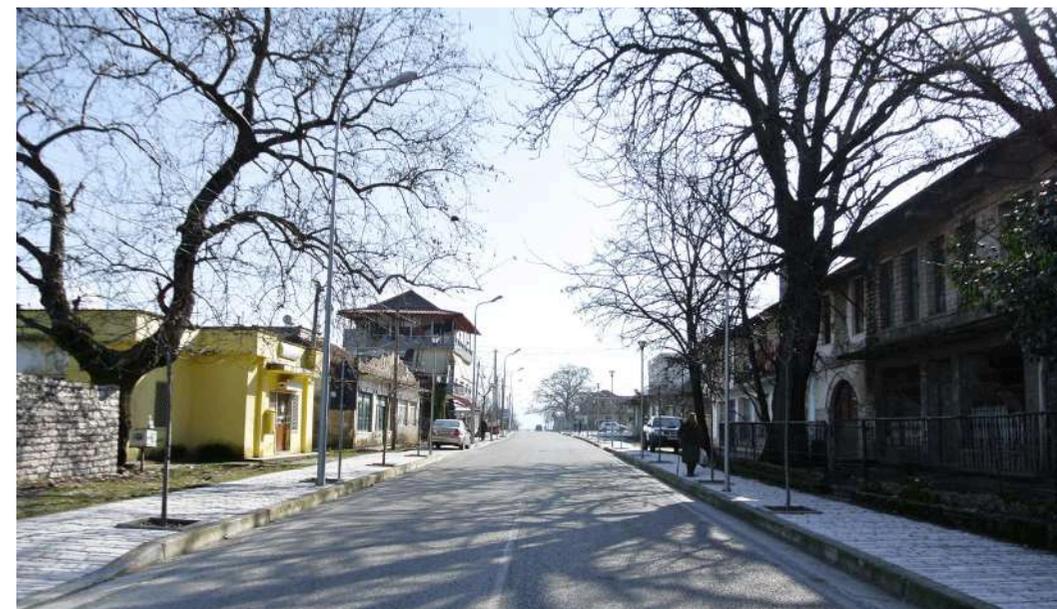


Fig.2 / Jorgucat central road, on which many dismissed buildings overlook. Source / the author



Fig.3 / A citizen involved in the interview in Jorgucat. Source / the author

the residents' quality of life, as confirmed by the interviews, is badly affected by the mobility and service accessibility. In particular, senior citizens, whose children have migrated because of pressing economic needs, are at risk for social isolation and vulnerability, because of the additional physical limitations they may face moving by foot from the residential upper area to the flatter land.

The social institutions are often inadequate and unprepared to meet the demand for assistance by the increasing number of who are not supported by emigrated children. As a result, many elderly people in rural Albania are forced to live in solitude (La Cava G., Nanetti R. 2000:17).

The target group of this first strategy is mainly people with no car ownership or unable to drive. Most of the transport needs are connected to healthcare, shopping, and socialisation. Reaching private crops and collecting products are extra necessities shared by elderly landowners living in the upper part of Jorgucat. The voluntary sector, which in rural areas tends to be very active, might play a strategic role in replacing or integrating lost public and private services. Through a participatory process involving citizens, local businesses and public services, an integrated model of rural mobility should take into consideration two aspects of rural mobility:

- PEOPLE TO SERVICE: an on-demand rural car sharing service, enabling older and carless people to move around Jorgucat area more freely, therefore fighting social exclusion.

A cooperative-based car-sharing and "pick-up-sharing" service should be created to increase access from the residential downstream to the lands and to the central area.

Furthermore, the physical areas dedicated to shared vehicles might develop as small "sharing depots" where the community can gather and borrow tools and other equipment.

- SERVICE TO PEOPLE, a fleet of electric cargo bikes delivering fresh vegetable and fruits from the private lands where they are cultivated to the residential area on the hilltop.

With the development of a user-friendly mobile application, citizens would easily get an overview of available mobility services and order transport-on-demand rides.

Successful case studies

Sopotniki (meaning cotravellers) is a private non-profit body providing free transport for elders in rural area in 9

municipalities of Slovenia. The service is available 6 days/ week and it is easy to activate: the elderly communicates and specifies the needs for transport by phone; a volunteer will pick him or her up at fixed time and location, wait for the passenger to complete the commitments and drives back home. There are three main financing sources: donations from users, grants from municipalities, and sponsorships. Combining mutual help and technology support is an innovative approach towards the mobility of disadvantaged communities in rural areas where public transport options are often lacking.

Sensing journeys through local communities

Relevance and applicability in Jorgucat village. Dropull Municipality has a strong culture and distinct tradition, where two different cultures and identities coexists: Albanian and Greek ones. The range of niche products, closely linked to the agriculture vocation of the area, are likely to be better promoted. Tea mountain herbs and saffron cultivation, for instance, if valorised, may contribute to a new attracting image of Jorgucat. Taking advantage of its favourable geographic position, a central market selling local products would offer an occasion for a greater engagement of passers-by with local culture. The reuse of vacant spaces for shopping and tasting products would probably match the unsatisfied visitors' desire for on-site experience, authenticity and search for "icon" products, capturing distinctive characteristics of the place. In addition, the physical proximity of the cultivation crops may help exploring new forms of rural tourism, including the involvement of travellers in the production dynamic, which would permit a more authentic and tangible experience. Local producers and farmers, handcraft makers and service providers are encouraged to cooperate since many economic advantages may come from it. Motivating elderly residents seems to be an essential point too, as they can play an important role in promoting traditions and culture, and the conditions should be created for them to actively carry out such role.

Successful case studies:

I Briganti del Cerreto is a successful community-based initiative, recently inserted by the UE among the 20 innovative practices, the only one from Italy, in the tourism sector. Cerreto Alpi is an enchanting village made of chestnut and stone in the Apennine at the border between Emilia Romagna and Tuscany,



Fig.4 / Cotravelling against elder isolation in rural areas. Source / Sopotniki Archive



Fig.5 / Community-based tourism is about direct initiative of rural people. Source / <https://www.ibrigantidicerreto.com/>

suffering from depopulation since the second half of 1900; in 2003 a small group of young residents, instead of moving away, decided to play an active role in stopping the trend and tried to revitalize the social and economic life of the area with the involvement of the entire community.

In 2003 they founded the cooperative "I Briganti del Cerreto" dedicated to promote the territory and its products. The reuse of the dismissed school for accommodation, the reactivation of ancient crafts and traditions (chestnuts collection, cheese productions), as well as the rehabilitation of traditional feasts were the very first

actions. Today Cerreto offers unique touristic experiences deeply rooted in the community including daily activities in nature. Senior citizens are engaged too, telling visitors about ancient brigands hiding over the mountains, and as valuable guides for mushrooms hunting. This authentic model of tourism is having a great success, according to the high visitor turnout all year round. This flow is fundamental in providing job occasions and ensuring the continuity of public services that are otherwise declining.

Healthy villages: longevity tourism and care farming

Relevance and applicability in Jorgucat village

Living in a small village has a number of downsides: fewer jobs and reduced access to basic services and public transport. But it has many advantages as well: pure air, home-grown vegetable consumption, topographic conditions requiring daily natural movement, and a greater sense of community. It is not only a matter of quality of life in itself, which is highly subjective; there are less obvious implications which make rural lifestyle more attractive.

In 2004, the explorer Dan Buettner teamed up with National Geographic and longevity experts to find the regions where people live much longer than average. The group discovered five geographical areas, defined "Blue Zones" from Loma Linda in California to Okinawa in Japan, with an exceptional centennial rate and striking similarities in their inhabitants' lifestyle: moderate and healthy eating habits, regular physical activity, the involvement in the community life and rituals and a close friends network. In this sense, rural village can take advantage of some of their intrinsic life-giving qualities and lead the way for longevity tourism. This new type of health trade has a huge potential, especially for encouraging both outdoor sport activities and the silver economy.

Referring to the case of Jorgucat, this strategy could be put into practice starting from the refurbishment of existing local hiking itineraries. This action is bound to the setup of multimodal transport and e-mobility points. The creation of a digital platform collecting information about the routes is highly recommended, allowing the modern visitor to plan the trip ahead. For rural villages with an agriculture vocation, there is one more possibility for standing out as healing places: care farming, a type of green care intervention, active across much of Western Europe, that promotes mental and physical health through normal farming activity.

On the one hand, people who suffer from mental disorders or stress-related problems might find great benefits through nature-assisted rehabilitation under the supervision of a team of skilled farmers.

On the other hand, this new type of healthcare service can help farmers diversify their business and create new forms of income.

Successful case study:

"Nos Oignons" is an innovative project of social farming in Wallonia funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and awarded with the second prize at the 2015 edition of "Prix de Innovation Sociale" by UNIPSO.

Since 2012 Nos Oignons has supported social inclusion for people with mental diseases or socially disadvantaged by the organisation of collective and individual activities on farmlands. The interaction with professional farmers helps patients fighting exclusion, build new relationships, get re-empowered and gain self-confidence. The results of this initiative have registered tangible reduced healthcare cost for patients, fewer relapses and hospitalisations. The innovation of this project lies in the creation of empowering connections, both for beneficiaries' personal well-being, and for farmers who can develop unexpected skills and explore environmental-friendly agriculture practices.

Conclusions and further work towards rural community engagement

The analysed practices show that small scale interventions and the introduction of innovative services at neighbourhood level may have direct positive outcomes and actually improve the residents' quality of life and

the appeal of rural villages as attractive place to live and visit. Undoubtedly, top-down policies and investments in infrastructures and public facilities are fundamental in creating the conditions for a future for rural areas, but the active participation of the community is vital. How to achieve broad stakeholder and community involvement in the enhancement of rural environment is a complex task: on-site interviews in Jorgucat were meant to be a preliminary step in identifying citizens' specific needs and their general attitude towards topics of social interest. The effective willingness and the ability of the local stakeholders and the community to participate in developing innovative projects should be further investigated by means of participatory process.

Events should be carried out in order to investigate the level of community power, the behavioural patterns of local stakeholders and identify local community leaders who would then promote collaboration between the stakeholder and the community.

The factors that facilitate local community involvement appear to be contextual (Bengi E., Gü K., 2012:24).

This study proposes a set of options in line with Jorgucat potentialities: if further developed, this may be the starting point to design for solutions at different scales, tailored to the Dropull community and more generally those shrinking rural villages with an agricultural vocation.



Fig.6 / Sardinian veterans in Villagrande Straili, one of the five Blue Zones
Source / Senes, Photographic Exhibition, by Daniela Zedda. Milan, 2016



Fig.7 / "Go Eastbelgium" an innovative LEADER project promoting hiking in the Belgian Eifel area by means of an online hiking planner tool, GPS navigation and a smartphone app.
Source / <http://www.experiencebelgium.be>



Fig.8 / Nos Oignons supports social farming with health benefits in Wallonia.
Source / <https://www.bonnescauses.be>

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