

***Sustainable development processes
in the marginal alpine communities of Trentino (Italy)***

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, alpine populations are facing the challenge of balancing quality of life with maintenance of cultural identity. The majority of rural municipalities have a small number of inhabitants, whose income level is lower than that of urban areas, and entrepreneurship is weak. In addition, self-esteem of rural people is generally low, who consequently, drive to leave their birthplace. To study in depth the phenomenon of depopulation, we have conducted anthropological fieldwork in peripheral alpine communities. Researchers have observed particularly inconveniences that are more likely to induce residents to leave. From a methodological point of view, we have opted for participatory action based research. Problems almost invariably associated with mountain communities are not merely of an economic nature. By and large, what is most conspicuous is the widespread distrust towards the territory itself, and the unravelling of family networks. As a result, local services close down, and this increases the marginality of these areas, for it becomes increasingly difficult for both residents and local administrations to embark on new business enterprises. Therefore, the original contribution of our project lie in its focus on the procedures to detect, analyze, and diagnose the experience of marginality in alpine communities and which would be premised on a combination of various elements and conditions that are most likely to ensure a self-sustaining process of development, based on local values and opportunities.

KEY WORDS: Alps - Depopulation – Marginal communities – Cultural identity – Fragmented society

The municipalities in which our ethnographic fieldwork has taken place are located in Trentino, in the Italian Alps. Each one of them has a population of a few hundred inhabitants and reflects the widespread depopulation crisis affecting so many alpine and rural communities.

We have adopted the participatory action-research method, which includes two procedures that are normally performed simultaneously: data collection and initiatives designed to foster sustained community development. These combine traditional rural activities with innovative programmes concerning tourism, culture, handicrafts and, above all, new technologies and web services. This goal can be achieved through flexible projects, likely to produce qualified labour locally, so as to allow women and young people to make a living for themselves where they were born.

Such development initiatives, deeply rooted in the region and premised on the active participation of many of the inhabitants of local communities, are not unparalleled in the history of Trentino. Analogous experiments have already taken place in other areas. Subsequently, qualitative and quantitative statistic data have been compared. Census data from 1951 to 2001 for every municipality in the Italian Alps have been gathered, and graphically displayed through maps which, as it were, could well be viewed as “depopulation maps” and which represent the phenomenon both in absolute terms and with respect to the women’s specific predicament. Interview data have also been statistically analysed and those propositions that were most frequently recorded have been grouped together according to subject affinity, in order to document frequency and salience.

Contextualizing the research

A propensity to abandon settlements and jobs in the most remote regions, points to a major fragmentation of socio-cultural sentiments. Inhabitants of small alpine villages “sense” their marginality, the decreasing standards of life and the growing psychological and existential distance from major urban areas. Within the space of a generation, traditional economic, social and cultural guideposts have gone.

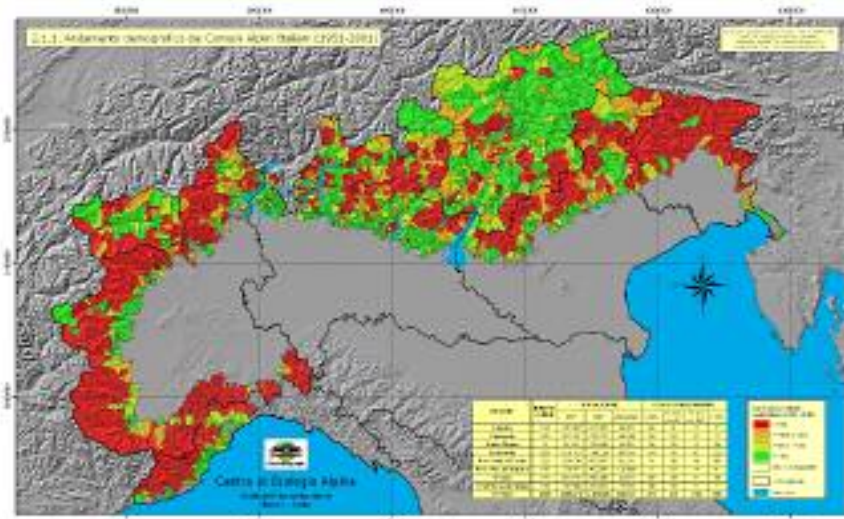
From a broader perspective, the situation is even more serious than that. Demographic projections of international institutes like FAO show that, by 2025, 87 percent of the entire European population will be concentrated in urban districts. In Italy, depopulation incidence varies from 30 percent, in Trentino, to a staggering 80 percent in Friuli Venezia Giulia (near the Slovenian border). All the more so if we consider that, despite the fact that more than 70 percent of the Italian landmass is made of mountains, Italians, on the whole and even in mountainous regions, regard themselves as urbanites.

What is taking place is a gradual, imperceptible ethnocide, which takes away from the people who are still determined to live in their place of birth not only work opportunities, but also their cultural, emotional and symbolic frames of reference, undermining their sense of belonging and the quality of their existence. For all efforts to generate a greater appreciation of popular culture, mountain and countryside dwellers are still viewed as backward, somewhat dumber than the average, and unable to adjust to changed conditions. These rhetorical assaults appear to target especially those who are more vulnerable to the globalization process.

The Alps: mountains of problems

The alpine region, which stretches across 190,919 km², comprises 13 million inhabitants. In 2001, 4.5 million people lived in the Italian side, that is, nearly 40 percent of the total. There are approximately 1,850 mountain municipalities in Italy, corresponding to 22.8 percent of the total number of Italian municipalities and 44 percent of those included in the regions that we consider. Following the work of Werner Bätzing, a renown alpine geographer who was the first to produce demographic maps for the entire alpine region in the ‘80s, we have gathered the relevant census data for a period of 50 years, between 1951 and 2001, to generate depopulation maps. These are the results for Italy. The first map shows demographic increase and reduction trends over the past 50 years.

Map 1: Demographic increase and reduction trends over the past 50 years



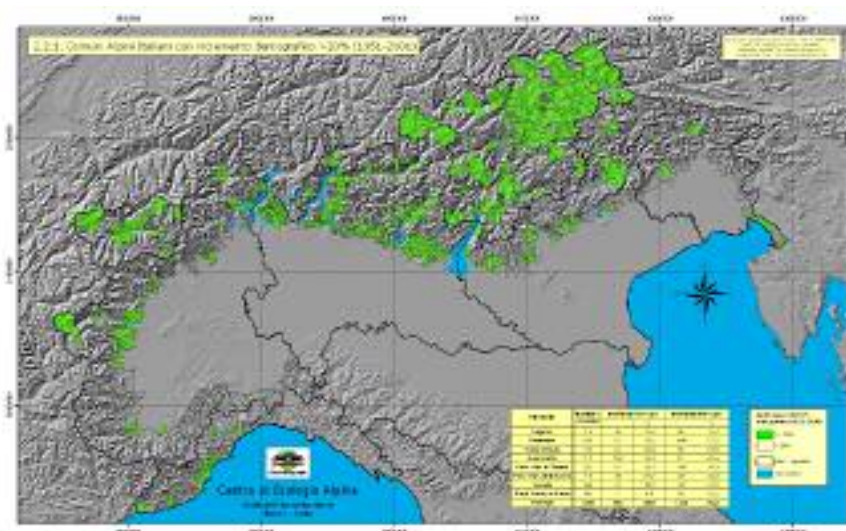
The red colour indicates areas where the decrease has exceeded 15 percent, orange is for the -15% - 0 interval, yellow for the 0-15% interval; green for an increase of over 15%. If we bear in mind that, over the past fifty years, the world population grew by 250% and the Italian population by 20.86%, yellow zones should also be considered at risk of depopulation.

The second map documents in a greater detail which municipalities are losing population and which ones are not.

The abandoned mountain

To understand the nature of this depopulation process, one has to introduce the concept of “demographic equal opportunities”, that is to say, to acknowledge that the alpine area is entitled to growth patterns that should be comparable to those of other Italian areas. In order to do this, we compare the average rates of demographic growth in the Alps and in the rest of the Peninsula, and show which districts have managed to keep up the pace over the previous half a century (highlighted in green). With barely 27% of the total, these municipalities represent a distinct minority.

Map 3: Demographic trend over the past 50 years. Municipalities grown above the national figure.



Further data corroborate this impression: Werner Bätzing and the Geographic Institute of Zurich have pointed out that the settlements most affected by the demographic crisis are:

- 1) those located higher on the mountains;
- 2) those more distant from larger settlements which provide those services that are regarded as essential, such as associative opportunities, shops, schools, health basic sources of entertainment. At the time of the study in question, these settlements normally exceed 5,000 inhabitants and were within the distance of 20-30 km.
- 3) The smaller ones, with up to 300 inhabitants (Scaramellini, 1998)

The attempts by provincial and regional authorities to undertake expensive developmental policies for their rural communities in the mountains have usually been frustrated by the unwillingness of residents to continue to live there. We suggest that there are cultural components that partly explain this propensity to leave and that should be thoroughly researched, starting from those who, bucking mainstream trends, prove

that there are alternative views and options. The 2001 national census showed that 79.7% of municipalities in the region of Aosta Valley had less than 2000 inhabitants. This proportion diminishes only slightly in Piedmont (73%), Trentino (67,8%), Liguria (59,6%), Lombardy (45,5%), Friuli (42.5%), Veneto (22,1%). Of these, more than half are considered, for various reasons, “at risk”(Scaramellini, 1998). 40.9% of municipalities in Liguria lie within this category. The same is true for 15.1% in Friuli, 13.5% in Aosta Valley, 10.9% in Trentino, 9.4% in Lombardy, 3.4% in Veneto.

But then again, over 97% of alpine settlements have less than 10,000 inhabitants. Grenoble in France, with over 160,000 inhabitants, is the largest city of the Alps.

According to the 2001 Italian census, the average alpine municipality has 2,436 inhabitants, but this figure belies the fact that the census also considers urban districts located in the Alps. As a matter of fact 864, that is, 46.7% of alpine municipalities – twice as many than in the rest of Italy – have less than 1000 inhabitants.

There are 206 municipalities at greater risk, with less than 300 inhabitants, that is, slightly more than 14% of those located in the Alps.

The majority of alpine settlements are losing their population, with alarming rates such as 85% in Friuli, approximately 77% in Piedmont, and 60% in Veneto and Liguria. In Lombardy, Aosta Valley and Trentino half of them are shrinking.

Among the provinces with an autonomy statute, only in South Tyrol the depopulation rate remains below 20%. The fact of the matter is that financial aid does not seem to be responsible for the differential demographic patterns of South Tyrol as opposed to other Italian regions. The Aosta Valley has received an even greater amount of subsidies, but this has not reversed the downward-spiralling trend. This is a clear indication that South Tyrolean policies targeting the strengthening of local identities have been most successful.

Preliminary fieldwork results

A fragmented society

One of the hallmarks of segmentary societies like those that can be found in the Alps is social fragmentation: clans, tribes, hamlets that do not share common interests even though commonalities are self-evident to outsiders. Rival groups that do not seem to understand that their often unreasonable internecine conflicts are self-destructive. In order to shed some light on these phenomena, one has to cast a glance at the past, when alpine settlements were scattered, so as to enable the community to best harness the local resources. The alpine landscape, far from being “wild”, was tamed and systematically exploited and inhabited. People grouped together in hamlets connected to a larger settlement, as in a galactic polity. When the climate was harsh, these communities became self-sufficient, with their priest, their small grocery store, their school, tavern, and dairy and, of course, their own peculiar identities. Weddings were celebrated between members of families who lived next to each other in order to strengthen their ties of loyalty. In some cases, as a further demonstration of their autarchic bent, the local council was periodically relocated from a hamlet to the next. Distinction was hardly tolerated, as in the saying “the nail that sticks up will be hammered down”. There also was a need for particularism and localism, as villagers were reluctant to surrender any room for self-determination to a modern, centralized administration.

One of the major obstacles to the development of alpine communities is indeed the difficulty that people encounter in overcoming localisms and parochialisms in order to build up a proactive approach to the solution of problems which, after all, affect everyone.

Then, to make things worse, there are the endless and seemingly unsolvable feuds between families and clans, whose origin is lost in the mists of time. Such rivalries reach their boiling point when, because of depopulation, schools, which truly represent the spirit, the essence of the community, probably more than the council house and the church, are forced to close. Thankfully though, it appears that parochialism is not as endemic among the younger generations



Sagròn-Mis

Associationism and volunteering: obstacle or engine of change?

Despite the received view that cities are brimful of intense social activities, the evidence points to a greater participation to community life in alpine villages. However tiny, every municipality features its own clubs and associations. Life in a village is always associated and nobody can stand a chance to be admitted to the higher echelons of the local civil service, banks and cooperatives, unless one has first “voluntarily” taken part in one of these associations. People are accustomed to sharing and self-government and the “do it ourselves” philosophy is pervasive in the life of the community, which is founded on a high degree of mutual trust. It is precisely this trust that should make the attempt to set up local business enterprises for a sustainable development a feasible undertaking.

Unfortunately, this is hardly ever the case: fear of conflict and responsibilities, and of a meritocratic assessment of individual efforts based on accounting criteria, leads to the outright rejection, sometimes exhibited with pride, of earnings and of the possibility that someone might actually profit from it. When

voluntary associations are ready to take a step forward and become small companies, psychological and socially induced inhibitions are so strong that people prefer to renounce rather than become entrepreneurs. Paradoxically, then, the volunteering mentality is apt to retard the economic growth of the community and to perpetuate the precariousness and vulnerability of certain categories of residents, especially young people and women.

The question of generation gaps and the incommunicability of aspirations and values between the young and the aged is probably the root cause of this socio-economic inactivity. Even when a company is created, its management is generally accorded to the elder associates or full-time employees, who are moved by the belief that their ethos must be one of service, and often a thankless one, and are not willing to adopt a genuinely entrepreneurial attitude. They do not need to earn money, because their incomes are already secure, and so they put a major emphasis on dedication and vocation, and feel entitled to run the business according to their principles.

When a cooperative enterprise or a small company is formed, which involves younger professionals, more inclined to seek a steady profit, inner contradictions come to surface: “they have done nothing so far, and now look how demanding they are. We used to do things for free”. Because business management entails responsibilities and older partners don’t feel like running into too much trouble to increase their incomes, which generally are supplied by the state or regional governments in the form of retirement benefits or subsidies, the whole entrepreneurial spirit can hardly establish itself.



Luserna

A further source of conflict, is gender: oftentimes women are the best candidates to run a local business, but their male partners have a hard time getting adjusted to the idea that “their women” are entrepreneurs and

must spend a relatively large amount of time, energy and passion to keep the business going, rather than taking care of the family. The difference between an office clerk with fixed working hours and a self-employed woman need not be stressed and can be the cause of violent rows between spouses, especially when the elderly must be entrusted to nursing home or assisted-living facilities because women cannot be there to tend gratuitously to their needs.

As a consequence, numerous families fall apart and new disputes arise within the community, which is little used to open confrontations, to the challenge to culturally ingrained practices and power-relations, and to the “natural selection” of the fittest and more deserving that lies at the core of market economy. Eventually, at times, the old customs and generations give way to the new ones. Or else they don't, and the process or replacement does not come to fruition, because the more dynamic forces of society dare not openly challenge the status quo and fear the social costs of such a confrontation.

Needing someone from the outside: patterns of inclusion and exclusion

People living in small villages on the slopes of the Alps are aware that envy and fragmentation fray the fabric of the society in which they live and believe that these problems can only be solved by the intervention of a strong leader supported by outsiders who, by definition, are thought to be objective. In these small communities the role of town halls and local civil servants is crucial, because they are looked to for help and leadership, regardless of their political orientation. Political disagreements can be set aside in a milieu in which nearly everyone can become an active participant in the decision-making process – as opposed to the neat separation of private life and politics in the cities –, and competent majors enjoy a greater measure of legitimacy. Even when they do commit mistakes, that can be easily forgiven, provided that their blunders are not too serious, that they display a sincere commitment to work for the benefit of all and to further their own agenda. Therefore, if gossip, hearsays and slanders don't force them to take a step back and refuse to run for re-election, they are reconfirmed several times and may profit from this political continuity.

Aside from an acknowledged leader, people also suggest that they would favour initiatives to bring detached professionals from the outside. It is openly conceded that rivalries and fragmentation squelch all attempts to promote an entrepreneurial spirit. This is why alpine communities have proven far more open to external advice than urban districts. Most interestingly, patterns of inclusion and integration have worked far better and faster than in the plains. Needless to say, this does not mean that everything proceeds smoothly. It is not infrequent that experts from the outside hold on to a romantic view of rural communities (Kilani, 1992) which partially blinds them to the realities of life and work in the mountains and does not help them understand the actual potential of the region under scrutiny.

Psychological relinquishment and escapism

The choice between leaving and staying and effect some changes is of an anthropological nature, and involves people's mentality. Since the end of the Fifties, massive waves of emigration have taken away with them much of the vitality and resourcefulness of alpine communities, causing an epidemic of alienation and uprootedness. The impact of industrial and metropolitan culture is also destabilizing. Alpine villages are

physically and culturally colonized so rapidly that changes of conventions, values, and practices cannot be metabolized, also due to a growing sense of inadequacy vis-à-vis city-dwellers, who far too often display little understanding and tolerance of the local culture and ways of speaking and knowing. Elderly people are especially affected by these transformations, because they are the least willing and capable to adapt to new frames of reference and symbolic repertoires that displace the reassuring benchmarks of their ancestors (Salsa, 2002).

Of course we are not here to gainsay the evidence of greater prosperity, literacy, and health that typify today's Alps. However, the social costs of this development are high in terms of marginality, dignity, and self-esteem. Herding and farming are regarded as undignified and dirty and the number of farms and amount of farmland in Italy is shrinking more rapidly than anywhere else in the Alps (Salsa, 2002).

Young people are anything but enthusiastic about finding employment in the cattle-breeding sector and labour is almost always imported. Social isolation, periodical disconnection with those peers who spend the summertime elsewhere, and lack of entertainment are among the reasons why young people choose not to do that kind of job. This phenomenon is less dramatic where communities have organized ways to contrast the sense of solitude: in France government policies and trade unions have helped seasonal workers to get involved in cultural initiatives. This helps alleviate the loneliness.

The root of the problem is not economic. Those who accept to work in a shepherd's hut earn far more money than those who work in hotels and restaurants and some may well find out that this job is also physically less demanding. Also, from the point of view of psychological well-being, working exceedingly long hours without interruption, with little spare time to interact with colleagues and guests, is definitely less pleasant than having time to think and read and write, when the daily chores are over and done. But these advantages are sometimes hard to see, especially when this kind of employment is not viewed as temporary and is unrelated to other, more "fulfilling" occupations (Salsa, 2002).

The question of identity loss is tied to the process of cultural marginalization, occasioned by a certain kind of historical evolution that has devalued the status of manual workers, especially if they have to deal with foul-smelling organic matter.

These days, the highest aspiration for a worker is to find a permanent and well-paid job, congruent with the achieved level of education and specialization, with regular working hours, well-defined goals and little need for further training and refreshing, in a healthy and clean environment, and with a reasonable amount of spare time.

Those who fail to attain these standards are pitied and, at the same time, most people maintain that that ultimate goal is almost unattainable unless one is prepared to leave. Thus the actual abandonment of a place is preceded by the psychological habituation to abandonment. Those social categories that are more vulnerable to this kind of pessimistic discourse, namely women, youth, and the more literate, who often feel discriminated in a traditional society, end up despising their own culture and identity by comparing it with the more free, open, sociable and entertaining urban culture, more attentive to individual needs and therefore more likely to meet great expectations about oneself and the future.



Cimego

CONCLUSIONS

It would be necessary to adopt prevention to depopulation and effective measures of repopulation and resettlement as a legislative priority in the mountain areas with direct consequences on the territorial and economic planning, on the social services. For this reason, it is necessary to raise the quality of life in the mountain zones, remove the small municipalities from geographic and, above all, social and cultural isolation. Besides the environment defence, it is important to preserve the cultural specificity of the mountain, his diversity in terms of cultural diversity. We need initiatives of support which consider the culture as a primary resource, equal value of energy sources, infrastructures, health.

In the mountain it is necessary to create cultural services and rare functions (biblioteques; research centres; documentation centres; exhibition structures; meeting occasions; thematic archives; and so on), that can create aggregation, tourism and economic chances on the territory, qualified jobs, exchange between local population and guests who come from outside, visits of high-level personalities, which can contribute to reduce the marginality, to strengthen feelings of pride for the homeland, sense of membership and identity of local population.

Facilities could be established to make high quality training on the spot, involving the local people, using the school structures which, this way, could avoid to be closed. Initiatives of participative training of all the inhabitants, community animation, run by specialists could be introduced.

Municipalities must give operators such facilities (communal house etc.) to push them moving permanently. Such professional must be of high level, with specific competences and capacities of communication, otherwise the population rejects them. In order to raise the interest of young people towards agricultural jobs, it is necessary to make them attend the mountains from children age and to introduce them to agriculture, with special aimed school programs. Moreover, it would be useful to create professionals as the “substitution peasant”, already successfully experimented in North Europe and in some Lombardy farms. Such a professional figure can permit to the staff engaged in agriculture to take rest, time off and holidays.

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