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Abstract. The paper aims at providing a methodological path to improve local communities' ability to re-discover the value of their local, natural, and cultural capital, and outline shared strategies for its enhancement. The defined methodological path, addressed to knowledge co-creation and co-design of visions and strategies for future development, has been tested on selected case studies in Southern Italy, both of them characterised by high levels of marginality. Preserving local identities and increasing the sense of belonging of communities to their living places are, indeed, crucial for ensuring a sustainable and shared development process in marginal areas.

Keywords: Inner areas; Marginal areas; Communities engagement; Knowledge co-creation; Co-design.

Introduction

The concept of marginality, and consequently of marginal regions/areas, has been discussed for long in scientific literature, although it is still open to multiple definitions. Marginal areas can be defined with respect to their geographical and physical isolation as well as to economic or social conditions, regardless of their geographical location (Cullen and Pretes, 2020).

The European Territorial Agenda 2030 highlights the large variety of marginal areas facing severe depopulation or suffering segregation phenomena, and emphasises the need to promote a long-term place-based strategy by "strengthening awareness and empowering local and regional communities to protect, rehabilitate, utilise and reutilise their (built) environments, landscapes, material and immaterial cultural assets".

Based on these premises, this contribution aims at providing a methodological path and effective tools to improve local communities' ability to re-discover the value of their local, natural, and cultural heritage, and outline shared strategies for its enhancement in marginal areas. To this end, different tools for knowledge co-creation and co-design of visions and strategies for sustainable development have been tested on different types of marginal areas, precisely an "inner area", characterised by geographical isolation and demographic and economic decline; an urban peripheral area, and a large public housing neighbourhood, characterised by significant phenomena of physical, social and environmental degradation.

"Inner areas" are defined as areas located significantly far from the supply centres of essential facilities (education, health and mobility), (Barca *et al.*, 2014). In Italy, since the processes of urbanisation and economic growth have especially affected coastal and plain areas (Sommella, 2017), inner areas are mostly composed of small hill and mountain villages¹. These areas suffer several problems, from the decreasing and ageing population to the lack of accessibility and economic marginality. All these problems are, however, interconnected and, due to long-term

processes, often result in the loss of both tangible, such as historic centres, and intangible heritage, such as memories and traditional practices, which have contributed to preserving local culture and ecosystem services (Galderisi, 2023). Over the last decade, numerous scholars have contributed to shift attention from urban to inner areas (Copus *et al.*, 2017; De Rossi, 2018; Carrosio, 2019; Cersosimo and Donzelli, 2020), highlighting their key role in ensuring a more socially and environmentally sustainable development process both at national and regional scales. Inner areas are, in fact, characterised by a significant natural and cultural heritage, whose value is often barely recognised by local communities themselves. The Faro Convention (CoE, 2005) emphasised the close link between local heritage and communities, recognising cultural heritage as the result of the dynamic relationships among communities and territories, and highlighting the key role of local communities in keeping heritage alive and transmitting it to future generations. According to the Faro Convention, cultural heritage can no longer be understood as the quantity and quality of existing cultural assets, but it largely depends on the established relationships between settled communities and local heritage. Unfortunately, in inner areas, despite the widespread presence of a significant heritage of material and immaterial resources, the abandonment processes are causing a growing loss of the relationships between local communities and their heritage, which could result in de-territorialisation processes and loss of both place and community identity (Magnaghi, 2010). Furthermore, the creation of 'heritage communities' (CoE, 2005) might enhance the sense of belonging of a given community to a given place, and the effective transmission to future generations of the peculiar values of cultural heritage.

Large public housing estates, built in most of the European cities between the 1970s and 1990s, are often characterised by significant phenomena of physical, social and environmental degradation, representing paradigmatic examples of marginal areas, although very often located close to or within large urban or metropolitan areas. However, despite their marginality, these areas are nowadays not only an important legacy, as the expression of architectural and urban planning culture has profoundly changed today, but also privileged test areas for improving, regenerating, and economically revitalising extensive degraded urban areas. Nevertheless, also in these areas, residents' participation has been recognised as crucial to a sustainable regeneration process (Hoatson and Grace, 2002).

Hence, this paper focuses on the key role of local communities' engagement, and discusses pros and cons of different tools enabling participation processes aimed both at integrating expert

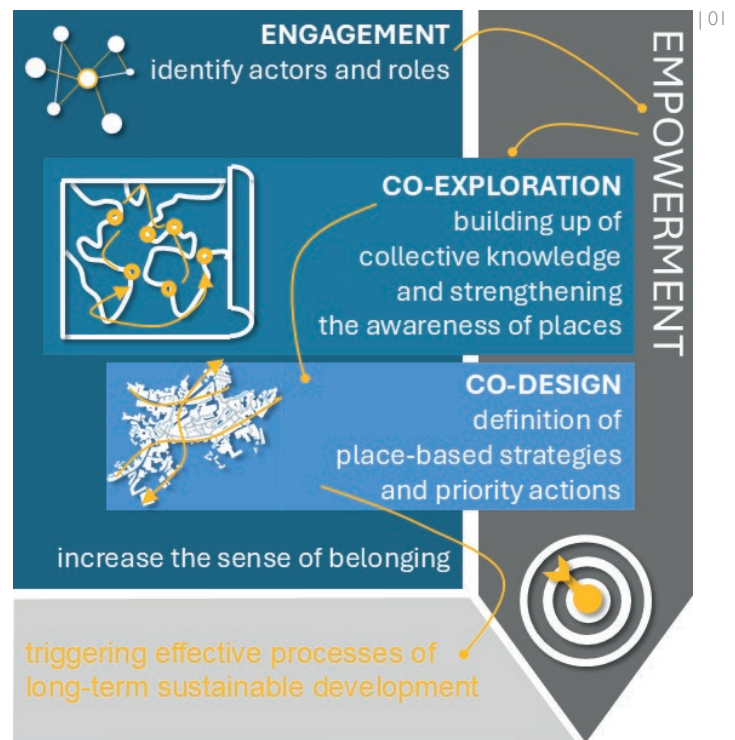
and local territorial knowledge, and outlining shared visions and strategies for sustainable development of marginal areas. Based on different experiences developed in both inner areas and public housing neighbourhoods, the research provides an overview of the heterogeneous tools capable of facilitating the involvement of local communities in different research phases and territorial contexts. Furthermore, each tool can be appropriate to involve different categories of stakeholders (youth associations, students, entrepreneurs, institutions, etc.), and to provide different outcomes. The following paragraphs provide a methodological path and present some of the multiple tools useful to involve local communities in territorial knowledge co-creation and development strategies' co-design in marginal areas.

**Community engagement:
a methodological
path to enhance
relationships between
local communities and
territorial heritage**

The creation of virtuous relationships between a community and its environment is an important base to enhance a territory (Magnaghi, 2010), envisioning new trajectories of sustainable and place-based development (Barca *et al.*, 2012). Many scholars (Wilson and Sanjal, 2013; Carrosio *et al.*, 2018; Pappalardo and Sajia, 2020) recognise the active involvement of communities as an effective way of activating revitalisation strategies. Such an involvement is particularly significant when marginal areas are at stake. These areas are characterised by phenomena of abandonment, marginalisation, and socio-economic decay that may lead to the progressive loss of both the relationships between settled communities and places, and the sense of belonging of local communities.

Strengthening relationships between communities and territories passes through both the co-exploration of cultural and natural local resources, and the co-design of shared strategies for triggering effective sustainable development processes.

The Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society was an important step forward in the way we look at heritage, shifting the attention from objects and places to people (Fabbricatti *et al.*, 2020). It defined two fundamental concepts, namely cultural heritage and heritage community. «Cultural heritage is a group of resources, inherited from the past, that people identify, regardless of ownership, as a reflection and expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions. It includes all aspects of the environment resulting from the interaction between people and places through time» (CoE, 2005, art.2 a). «A heritage community consists of people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage which they wish, within the framework of public action, to sustain and transmit to future generations» (CoE, 2005, art.2 b).



Individuals and communities have the right to enjoy cultural heritage as well as the responsibility to respect it and the opportunity to enhance it. Hence, nowadays the concept of heritage goes far beyond the institutional values attributed to the relevant buildings or places, extending itself to any place to which the community attributes a collective value. In the context of marginal areas, both the link between the environmental and the anthropic system that constitutes the “territorial heritage” is still recognisable, as well as the traces of the practices that have contributed to shape it overtime (Ferraresi, 2012). However, abandonment and decay of places and practices contribute to increase the risk of losing both heritage and its collective memory. Moreover, actions aimed at re-activating collective knowledge and sense of belonging can lead to the rebirth of relationships between places and people.

The path towards the outlining of place-based development strategies goes through some fundamental macro-phases, which can be carried out by using different participatory tools and involving heterogeneous actors with different roles (Buren, 2009; Cook and Nation, 2016) (Fig. 1):

- engagement/empowerment phase; it represents the background-phase of the entire process. Here, the key actors and their roles are identified (local institutions, citizens, stakeholders, associations, but also the role of the researchers as an active actor), as well as both the internal dynamics that contributed to weakening the sense of belonging and the existing potential that is useful to trigger new development trajectories;
- co-exploration phase; it aims at building up collective knowledge and strengthening the awareness of places and a sense of belonging. The role of researchers is addressed to mediate the process of collective knowledge and exploration of places and memories, and to support bridging the gap between existing values and future opportunities;

- co-design phase; it represents the step towards an effective local development starting from the definition of collectively worked out place-based strategies. Here, the role of researchers is addressed to guide the definition of goals, strategies, and actions, providing suggestions, best practices, and scientific support to summarise, elaborate, and prioritise them according to the existing potential.

As mediators, researchers may adopt different tools to support the participatory process, in line with the main principles of inclusion, transparency, and empowerment (Parker, 2006).

According to the macro phases described above, the process starts with the identification of a wide range of local stakeholders, including local authorities, citizens, citizens' associations, businesses, practitioners, and their involvement through individual and collective meetings to favour interactions among the various parties involved. Roles and interests of involved actors can be framed into a network of people-topics-places to organise targeted groups involved over the following co-exploration and co-design phases.

The co-exploration phase follows two parallel but integrated paths. One is the technical analysis of the territory carried out by experts and addressed to identify the main local resources, existing facilities, gaps in essential services and future projections. The other one is the collective knowledge, addressed to identify features and peculiarities of the territory, according to the direct experience of local communities. The creation of collective knowledge is usually carried out through individual interviews, focus groups, workshops and walks. To bridge the community with its own heritage, community maps can also be very useful to share and communicate political principles, social and economic needs (Perkins, 2007).

The co-exploration phase, while broadening community engagement and empowerment, lays the foundation for the co-design phase. Indeed, the latter is based on a collective intention to pursue goals and single actions under the umbrella of a shared vision, which generally arises from the recognition, as an informed community, of the values of the territorial heritage in its multiple meanings.

The co-design phase may refer to several established practices, such as Living Labs (Hossain *et al.*, 2019), based on the Quadruple Helix Model and aimed at fostering co-creation and open innovation (Miller *et al.*, 2018). Living Labs are one of the most widely used tools for triggering participation processes. Living Labs, which originate in the world of industrial production, aim at facilitating the identification of complex solutions, which are then tested and transformed into prototypes or, in the case of urban planning research, into territorial visions and strategies (Guida, 2023; Galderisi and Limongi, 2024). They can be physical or virtual environments in which different stake-

holders work together towards a common aim, namely that of identifying strategies to cope with shared goals arising from a co-produced knowledge base, exchange of experiences, and interdisciplinary approaches.

Living Labs can be very useful to address socio-economic challenges, especially in marginal areas, since they contribute to improve social inclusion and sense of belonging of local communities. However, they might be ineffective due to a lack of willingness to participate from local community, the absence of key stakeholders and leading actors, as well as of adequate resources to sustain momentum and keep the participatory process active over time. Nevertheless, if the previous phases (empowerment and co-exploration phases) have effectively contributed to reactivate the sense of belonging of the community, Living Labs will count on a higher capacity of the local community to organise itself around common goals. Operationally, to effectively support the co-design process, researchers may contribute to identify priority actions, long and short-term tasks assigned to groups and leading actors, and potential places for transformation, capable of triggering a cascade activation of more widespread actions (Wilson and Sanyal, 2013).

Field experiences and lessons learnt

Based on the methodological path depicted above, two research projects, focused on marginal territories, scarcely resilient to current environmental, economic and social challenges, will be briefly presented, highlighting pros and cons of participation processes.

The first one specifically addresses an “inner area,” the Matese area in the province of Caserta, at the northern border of the Campania region. The selected area consists of 17 municipalities, most of which host less than 2,000 inhabitants and are classified as “peripheral” by the Italian Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI). They present several weaknesses, such as population decline and limited accessibility, but also numerous strengths, such as the relevant natural and cultural heritage (Galderisi, 2023).

The research project RIPROVARE² interpreted local communities' engagement as a key step of project development. Local stakeholders, citizens, and institutions were involved both in the knowledge phase and in the design phase, aimed at outlining new visions and shared development strategies to increase resilience, sustainability, and enhance site-specific resources. The participation process was based on a dual “Dialogues and Living Labs” model, which accompanied all phases of the project.

During the different steps of the research work, most of the different approaches and tools presented in the previous paragraph have been tested on the field to co-create knowledge and co-design vision and strategies for future development. In detail, heterogeneous stakeholders were involved, according to

different goals, precisely youth, to discuss their needs and aspirations; local authorities (e.g., municipalities, regional park authority) to deepen the difficulties they have to face but also to collect ideas and ongoing or already implemented projects for the development of the area; local associations, very active in the enhancement and promotion of the local natural and cultural heritage, to understand barriers and opportunities to their activities; individual entrepreneurs and their associations, to focus on obstacles and perspectives for economic growth. According to the outlined methodology, the participatory process was structured as follows:

- engagement/empowerment phase, which included several visits to sites, and individual interviews with local authorities and citizens to identify the main stakeholders to involve in the process;
- co-exploration phase, which included both questionnaires and unstructured interviews administered during individual face-to-face meetings with representatives of the local institutions. This phase aimed at improving expert knowledge built up through analyses carried out by the research group both on the real and potential resources, and on existing territorial gaps as well as on the implemented and on-going projects. Workshops with youths were also carried out in secondary schools and with local associations, such as youth forums, by using different tools such as questionnaires and problem and solution trees (Fig. 2). Workshops with youths contributed to deepen the challenges posed by living in these areas, and to gather ideas and aspirations for local development;
- co-design phase, carried out through living labs, structured into thematic tables. This phase involved a broad range of local stakeholders, including local authorities. The different stakeholders were divided (based on their specific areas of interest) into three thematic tables, according to the thematic axes previously identified by the research group: Innovate Matese, Enhance Matese, Re-inhabit Matese. Each table carried out a SWOT analysis, aimed at highlighting strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats of the area, and contributed to outline, through collaborative mapping, a strategic vision and a set of strategies and related actions for each thematic axis.

The outcomes of the different steps of the participatory processes were collected and elaborated by the research group into a comprehensive vision for a sustainable and resilient local development, structured into different strategies and actions; a Masterplan, synthesising the main actions to be implemented in the whole area; a “flag project”, aimed at enhancing the western part of the Matese area that, according to the analyses carried out, was found to be the most affected by several weaknesses, in terms of depopulation, lack of services, accessibility, and tourist attractiveness.



Hence, the participatory process provided useful strategies and actions for triggering a sustainable development process, capable of counterbalancing current weaknesses, offering new life perspectives especially to the youth, who are still inclined to leave the area, due to the lack of essential services, of job opportunities, as well as of cultural activities, which are still mostly concentrated in urban areas.

The main difficulties arising from the participatory process carried out in the Matese area can be identified in the lack of a continuous participation of local stakeholders, especially local authorities, in the several meetings organised by the research team, and in the poor attitude of the involved stakeholders to shift from identifying problems to outlining desired solutions. The second research work is framed into the still ongoing project “Proximity Places. A methodology for the regeneration of collective spaces in modern neighbourhoods”³, funded in 2023 by the Italian Ministry of University and Research. The main goal of the research work is to outline and test strategies to improve liveability by enhancing available resources with a focus on public spaces, “in-between” areas, interactions within the neighbourhood. The research project involves different neighbourhoods in the cities of Turin, Rome, and Naples. In the case of Naples, the research work focuses on the public housing neighbourhood called “Parco Verde” in the municipality of Caivano.

Despite being located at the boundaries of the Metropolitan City of Naples, one of the most densely populated urban areas in Italy, the neighbourhood can be characterised as a marginal area, due to high levels of physical, social and environmental degradation. The Parco Verde neighbourhood was built in 1981-82, with post-earthquake funds provided by Law No. 219/1981. It is a critical neighbourhood both in terms of distribution and maintenance of public spaces, especially the “open” ones. Conversely, the strengths of the area include the presence of several actors in the so-called “third sector” and of numerous primary schools, which act as civic and legality supervisory bodies, worth mentioning (de Biase *et al.*, 2024) (Fig. 3).

Neighbourhood walks (promoted by joining the so-called Jane’s Walks network) and unstructured interviews with different actors, particularly third-sector associations, representa-

tives of local school and religious associations have been carried out so far in this area. Both these preliminary steps contributed to start the engagement/empowerment process that is going to lead the entire research path.

In particular, some walks within the public spaces of the neighbourhood and the surrounding agricultural/urban/industrial areas were carried out in cooperation with representatives of local associations as well as of citizens. They allowed to explore latent spaces and informal uses (Di Ruocco, 2024), which are hard to discover and understand through traditional urban planning analyses. Thanks to the walks, a new understanding of the Parco Verde emerged both for the researchers and the involved local stakeholders. Moreover, the idea of a "right to the city" was implicitly strengthened, along with the duty of all actors to guarantee it by promoting a culture of "care" in such a marginal area as a starting point for new strategies and policies. The interviews highlighted considerable mistrust among the different actors involved, and diverging ideas about the future of the area itself. This suggests conflicting scenarios and non-collaborative social arenas, highlighting a limited willingness for engagement in co-design activities. These may be the reasons that have been keeping this neighbourhood anchored to its past of marginalisation and decay with limited perspectives for the future. However, it is worth noting that few courageous forms of self-organisation, such as the association "Un'infanzia da vivere" (Cellamare, 2019), are trying to partially fuel new perspectives for the future. Since the research is still ongoing, it is early to draw any conclusion. However, the research is showing how the activation of participatory processes in marginal areas, such as Parco Verde, might contribute to favour a paradigm shift, enhancing the community's trust in future perspectives, and increasing resilience of a "tough" and less malleable context. Hence, a relevant outcome of the research work could be the improvement of local community's capacity to rebuild their mutual relationships, and re-establish a "care relationship" with their heritage, especially of public spaces.

Concluding remarks

This paper has emphasised the key role of community engagement in triggering effective processes of long-term sustainable development in different typologies of marginal areas, often characterised by a "disconnection between shared imaginaries and social life" (Roy, 2024). Indeed, in these areas, desocialisation, individualisation, and deterritorialisation intersect with economic marginality, shrinking and ageing of the population, lack of living opportunities, especially for youths. All these factors risk hindering an effective participation process by reducing the willingness of users to be involved, especially for prolonged periods. However, the methodology and the different



tools briefly discussed in this contribution may provide a relevant opportunity to bring out latent knowledge, strengthen relationships between people and places, and support planners and policymakers in the difficult and complex task of outlining effective and shared strategies to revive highly marginalised territories. The outlined methodology, as well as the different tools presented (interviews, workshop, walks, Living Labs, etc.), although fully tested only on one of the two presented case studies, proved to be effective in building collective knowledge, merging expert and local knowledge, strengthening the communities' awareness of places and sense of belonging, co-designing shared strategies for the enhancement of local heritage and, above all, reviving the relationship between communities and territories in marginal areas. However, only the conclusion of the research activities on the second presented case study will demonstrate whether the methodology and the proposed tools are flexible enough to trigger an effective participatory process in contexts where marginality, in all its different dimensions, has been for years a key obstacle to sustainable development.

NOTES

¹ https://politichecoesione.governo.it/media/2831/20220214-mappa-ai-2020-nota-tecnica-nuvap_rev.pdf

² The Research Project "Riabitare I Paesi. Strategie Operative per la Valorizzazione e la Resilienza delle Aree Interne (RI.P.R.OVA.RE) was funded in 2020 by the Ministry of the Environment and Protection of Land and Sea (today Ministry of Environment and Energy Security). It was developed over a three-year period and involved three Italian Universities.

³ PRIN (Research Projects of Relevant National Interest) – Tender Notice 2022. Prot. 2022XZZYA5.

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