



# INCLUSION OF MIGRANTS FOR RURAL REGENERATION THROUGH CULTURAL AND NATURAL HERITAGE VALORIZATION

\*ELISA CONTICELLI<sup>a</sup>

CLAUDIA DE LUCA<sup>a</sup>, AITZIBER EGUSQUIZA<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Architecture, Alma Mater Studiorum, University of Bologna, Italy  
e-mail: elisa.conticelli@unibo.it  
claudia.deluca5@unibo.it

<sup>b</sup> Sustainable Construction Division  
Tecnalia Research & Innovation, Spain  
e-mail: aitziber.egusquiza@tecnalia.com

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## ABSTRACT

*Rural areas all over Europe are facing similar chronic economic, social and environmental problems such as depopulation, reduced service provision, ageing, decline of agriculture income, inhibited accessibility. At the same time, rural landscapes are continuously threatened by loss of biodiversity, climate change impacts and short-term management decisions and perspectives that further aggravate the economic and social conditions of rural communities. Despite these critical socio-economic conditions, rural areas are cradles of civilization, repositories of old traditions, dialects and languages, of uses, handcrafts skills and social practices which must be preserved and exploited. The majority of the European heritage is found in rural areas, therefore Cultural and Natural Heritage can represent a driver for migrants' integration, by fostering a heritage based sustainable regeneration of rural territories that is able to support a new model of integration. The overall aim of the paper is to investigate the challenges and possibilities offered by migration trends in rural areas to create rural regeneration models for inclusion of migrants and refugees, based on cultural and natural heritage introducing them to the job market. Section 2 explains the methodology of the study and gives an insight of the research topic within the overall RURITAGE project methodology. Two case studies of rural regeneration through the inclusion of migrants into the valorisation processes of cultural and natural heritage are presented in Section 3, while the preliminary results and main findings are discussed in Section 4. In Section 5, conclusions and future research steps are presented.*

## KEYWORDS

*Cultural Heritage; Natural Heritage; Rural Regeneration; Migration*

\* The other authors are: Angela Santangelo, Simona Tondelli.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Rural areas all over Europe are facing similar chronic economic, social and environmental problems: depopulation, reduced service provision, ageing, decline of agriculture income, inhibited accessibility are the most critical challenges that hardly find effective and long-lasting solutions. Moreover, rural landscapes are continuously threatened by loss of biodiversity, climate change impacts and short-term management decisions and perspectives that further aggravate the economic and social conditions of rural communities.

Despite these critical socio-economic conditions, rural areas are cradles of civilization, repositories of old traditions, dialects and languages, uses, handcrafts skills and social practices which must be preserved and exploited. Moreover, the majority of the European heritage is found in rural areas, therefore recognizing rural areas as poles of excellence, where the role of Cultural and Natural Heritage is relevant in heritage capitalization, which could be a different perspective to establish new rural regeneration paradigms.

In many places, rural environments have been nurtured and managed effectively so to attract and retain young people, develop new business, and increase biodiversity (ICOMOS, 2016) benefiting from CNH in myriad ways: from the restoration of historical buildings, to the holistic usage of rural landscapes and biodiversity assets, including the revitalization of ancient traditions, arts, and crafts. In this framework, a positive contribution could be found in foreign people arriving in a given place for different reasons.

Strong migration flows to rural areas are part of a more global phenomenon in the European context that worth investigating (Jentsch, 2007). Beyond the challenges, the arrival of migrants can create new opportunities for growth – particularly for areas suffering from population decline, demographic ageing and closing services that have been afflicting European rural areas for decades, thus contributing to maintain rural communities alive. The ageing of the rural and farm population and the need to accommodate or reduce the flow of young people out of the countryside has been a serious challenge to the generational renewal and the sustainability of the European rural regions (Kasimis, 2010). The importance of hosting newcomers have been recognized by policy makers and issues of their integration are relatively high on the political agenda.

Cultural and Natural Heritage (CNH), rich in rural areas, can represent a driver for migrants' integration, fostering sustainable regeneration of rural territories, involving newcomers as well as the host society. Moreover, highlighting the positive contribution of migrants to the development of rural areas can be fundamental for the creation of an inclusive society (Lourens, 2007).

In this context, the overall aim of this paper is to investigate the challenges and possibilities offered by migration trends in rural areas and to introduce rural regeneration models for inclusion of migrants and refugees, based on cultural and natural heritage, introducing them to the job market. The proposed approach has been developed within the H2020 project RURITAGE<sup>1</sup> – Rural regeneration through systemic heritage-led strategies, that considers migration as one of the key areas of innovation to be adopted in rural territories where a regenerative potential could be identified. Section 2 explains the methodology of the study and gives an insight of the research topic within the overall RURITAGE project methodology. Two case studies of rural regeneration, through the inclusion of migrants into the valorisation processes of cultural and natural heritage, are presented in Section 3, while the preliminary results and main findings are discussed in Section 4. In Section 5, conclusions and future research steps are presented.

## 2 METODOLOGY

The research aims at better understanding the positive contributions that cultural heritage can provide for migrant integration in rural areas, by using an empirical case study analysis approach, a well-established research method (David, 2006; Gerring, 2007; Yin, 2009) that examines a contemporary phenomenon and help to inform practice by illustrating what has worked well, what has been achieved and which have been the main issues or challenges.

The investigation has been implemented within the H2020 RURITAGE project, where cultural and natural heritage is considered as a key driver and enabler for sustainable development in all its dimensions, and crucial for the recognition as valuable roots for economic and environmental growth and regeneration, as well as major contributor to social cohesion and civic engagement. RURITAGE has identified six Systemic Innovation Areas (i.e. pilgrimage, sustainable local food production, art and festivals, resilience, integrated landscape management and migration) whose intersections constitute a European model of heritage-led rural development.

In this paper, the contemporary phenomenon studied is migration, considered as a driver for rural regeneration through the valorisation of cultural and natural heritage. Indeed, despite

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<sup>1</sup> RURITAGE is a four-year EU-funded research project, initiated in June 2018, which strives to enable rural regeneration through cultural and natural heritage. Throughout the RURITAGE project, 13 rural areas have been selected as Role Models. Role Models can be considered as successful cases where rural areas have been regenerated thanks to cultural and natural heritage. Role Models practices are analyzed to be transferred to 6 selected Replicators, one per SIA. Replicators represent local communities within rural territories that are in the process of building their own heritage-led regeneration strategies, but need to improve their skills, knowledge and capacity building. For further information: [www.ruritage.eu](http://www.ruritage.eu)

the posed challenges, rural areas can take advantage of the opportunities provided by an influx of migrants as a source of new vitality to restore declining villages. In areas suffering from population decline and closing services, the arrival of migrants can create new opportunities for growth; migrant contributions can be financial, but also in the form of social remittances, exchange of expertise and cultural change. There are clear potential win-wins for migrants and declining local areas in Europe. Nevertheless, well-coordinated and sensitively managed integration policies are needed in order to benefit both migrants and hosting communities.

Beyond the challenges presented by the migration crisis, especially in the countries most affected by the migrants' arrivals (e.g. Greece and Italy), and by the received application of asylum (e.g. Germany), the arrival of incomers can also create opportunities for repopulation, growth and potential for rural regeneration. In this context, cultural and natural heritage, in terms of local tradition, languages, art and crafts, etc. can play an important role in boosting and accelerating the process of integration and regeneration.

### 3 CASE STUDIES ANALYSIS

In the RURITAGE framework, specific model territories and communities have been identified for each Systemic Innovation Area (SIA), aiming to analyse their regeneration process and then to extract good practices that could be successfully transferred to other territories to help them in building their own regeneration strategy. In the migration SIA, two different case studies have been identified and analysed: the PIAM Onlus and the Lesvos Global Geopark. These are different integration models representing two steps in the hosting process migrants are subjected: Lesvos Global Geopark has developed a model for managing the emergency, when migrants arrive in Europe, mainly through illegal and unofficial channels; while PIAM is working for establishing a more structured integration of migrants in local communities.

#### 3.1 MODEL OF MIGRANTS HOSPITALITY AND INTEGRATION IN ASTI PROVINCE

The activities of migrants' hospitality in the Asti Province have been led since 2014 by PIAM Onlus, an NGO working in the field of migrants' integration and inclusion. Asti Province, located in the heart of Piedmont Region, has an outstanding heritage, featured by the Monferrato and Langhe wine landscapes that in 2014 have been awarded the prestigious Unesco world heritage recognition. Besides, the area suffers a population decrease (-3% since 2010) with an unemployment rate of 9.5%. The presence of foreign people is around 12% of the total according to the Italian statistic bureau data.

The economic sector is characterized by local enterprises mainly concentrated in agriculture and manufacturing sector. The good reputation of the province of Asti as a holiday destination has increased: it is one of the Italian provinces with the highest concentration of quality restaurants and wines and offers an environment often still intact and a series of traditional and folkloristic events<sup>2</sup>.

Within this territory, a model of hospitality based on cultural heritage recovery and rediscovery has been implemented with relevant results. PIAM started its work in the framework of the SPRAR programme, with the aim of providing concrete solutions to contrast human trafficking of women and migrants. The NGO hosts foreign people in some historical buildings in the countryside of Asti, where it started to involve them in practical activities, such as the recovery of Villa Quagliana, an ancient villa of the last century located in the Asti countryside and owned by the religious order of the Oblates of St. Joseph, and abandoned for some years. The renovation of the villa and its rural system ensured to host about 45 migrants, creating guest rooms and wide spaces for various events (conferences, parties, cinema, etc.). The same way of intervention was used for the recovery of the old railway station of Chiusano, which has been completely restored and is now a housing facility for a hospitality and integration program dedicated to refugees. These activities enabled migrants to fully fit into the local community. The old villa renovation allowed to start other different heritage-based activities directly involving migrants: ancient grains cultivation and distribution to the territory, where some people involved in the cultivation process have been taken part in the product selling in local markets for organic farming products, establishing relationships with farmers in the province; recovery of the old vineyard and its cultivation foreseeing the collaboration of oenologists who trained 2-3 migrants each. This supported the creation of a migrant-ethnic cuisine catering that is now active in the whole province. A stronger collaboration with local winegrowing companies is foreseen in order to deal with different processing techniques; job traineeships for refugees in the urban maintenance sector, employing several youngsters as menders in the public works sector of the Municipalities of Asti and Settime, in order to form professional people and to finalize the activities of refugees in works for the public interest, to serve the local community. Ad-hoc training courses conceived for refugees in the catering and in the artistic craftsmanship sectors have been organized as well, leading to the development of a brand "Terre di Monale" that produces hand-made ceramics for professional kitchen and home.

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<sup>2</sup> For further information: [www.provincia.asti.it](http://www.provincia.asti.it)

### 3.2 BOOSTING MIGRANT INTEGRATION WITH NATURE IN LESVOS ISLAND

Lesvos is the third largest island in Greece, located in the northeaster Aegean Sea. It faces the Turkish coast from the north and east; at the narrowest point, the strait is about 5.5 km wide.

The entire territory of Lesvos is awarded as "Lesvos UNESCO Global Geopark", a UNESCO status given to territories with an outstanding geological heritage. Lesvos contains one of the finest and rarest geo-monuments in the world (Zouros, 2015) and it has been declared a Protected Natural Monument. Fossilised plants have been found in many localities on the western part of the island.

Socio-economic trends in the island register a population decrease (-6%), and an unemployment rate of 15.8%. Lesvos's inhabitants are mainly local, only 6% are foreigners. However, this percentage does not consider the big trend of migrants' arrivals that have been affecting the island during the last years. Lesvos Geopark received in 2015 and 2016 more than half a million migrants making it the most important entrance gate for migration in Europe. The entire community of Lesvos has done its utmost to support and handle this extreme situation and tried to make the life of the migrants as good as possible. The Geopark has supported these activities and has developed several integration and information programmes aiming to help migrants in becoming familiar with the new environment since the very beginning of their arrival, by organizing educational programmes. The programmes include the collaboration with authorities for the integration and information on the Lesvos Island UNESCO Global Geopark, the geological history of Greece and the importance for the preservation and conservation of the Natural and Cultural heritage.

Groups are accompanied by bus from the refugees' camps to the Natural History Museum of the Lesvos Petrified Forest and pass a day away from their everyday programme in the camp. This programme runs in collaboration with NGOs working specially with children and young refugees. The activities run from special informative presentations on Lesvos Island UNESCO Global Geopark and the Petrified Forest to guided tours for families, young teenagers and children who have migrated to Lesvos. The objective is the acquaintance of migrants with the cultural and natural heritage of the island and to train them in case of Natural disasters, especially earthquakes, by using the museum's earthquake simulator. The programme also includes the simulation of the conservation procedures that are implemented in the fossils and the migrants are allowed to conserve specially selected fossils in order to appreciate and value the importance of the petrified wood. Moreover, refugees get to know the local products and the gastronomy of Lesvos, discovering flavours and similarities between their country and the host country.

## 4 PRELIMINARY RESULTS

RURITAGE activities are currently focused on the analysis and systematization of the models' practices, in order to extract sort of "regeneration recipes" to be transferred to other territories. Notably, the analysis of the case studies in the migration sphere has been targeted to collect relevant information for decipher the processes and changes that have led on the one side to rural regeneration through the inclusion of migrants and on the other side to boost migrants integration through cultural and natural heritage. First of all, the two case studies have been analysed independently in their context. Secondly, the practices developed and implemented in each case study have been mapped and classified according to several aspects: challenges; proposed strategy objectives, drivers and barriers; initial and obtained capitals (Tab. 1).

	ASTI PROVINCE	LESVOS ISLAND
Challenges	Ageing of the population, especially in rural areas; high concentration of international immigrants	Ageing of the population, especially due to the departure of young people; international immigrants, especially due to the proximity with the Turkish coast; depopulation, due to the economic crisis in Greece; unemployment
Proposed strategy objectives	Providing trainings to migrants; reviving and preserving local agri-food and handcraft production heritage; promoting safety and maintenance of the natural environment	Boosting migrants integration through the development of Lesvos as a geotourism destination
Proposed strategy drivers	Innovation in culture and heritage; cultural and natural heritage preservation	Natural heritage preservation; tourism; innovation in culture and heritage
Proposed strategy barriers	Market related issues with new products developed	Living conditions of migrants and different social, economic and cultural background
Initial capitals	High cultural and natural heritage; educational activities, especially in food sector	High cultural and natural heritage educational activities and humanitarian actions
Obtained capitals	New skills related to the local culture; social cohesion; reuse of historic buildings	Improved recognition of natural heritage; migrants inclusion in the local natural and social environment

Tab. 1 Case study analysis through challenges, proposed strategies and capitals

The analysis showed that rural regeneration through migration can be considered as challenge-driven, and that the initial capitals that have been mobilised are more related with human and social resources. In both cases the initial capitals present in the territory, mainly based on natural and cultural heritage, have been enriched by new or improved capitals related with human and social aspects.

Indeed, the regeneration process led in Asti province started from several challenges, such as migrant hospitality emergency, a necessity of actions contrasting human trafficking, but also lacks of resources for reducing abandonment and degradation of rural assets. These challenges became the drivers for a overall regeneration strategy routed on training to migrants, preservation of local agri-food and handcraft production heritage, safety and maintenance of the natural environment. A relevant role in this process was played by PIAM Onlus, local public services and communities, which have supported the process of inclusion and consequently the rural regeneration and reappropriation of Villa Quagliana and its surroundings.

Lesvos Geopark started its experience in 2016, facing the challenge of addressing the need to relief the pressure migrants suffer by living in large camps, with people having different social, economic and cultural backgrounds, without any contact with the local environment. This challenge has been tackled through a strategy that has been involving migrants in the discovery of the local cultural and natural heritage, proposing geotourism related activities managed by the Geopark. This approach have been producing social and mental benefits for migrants, while preserving local identity and economic activities. This model experience has been possible thanks to a deep involvement of relevant stakeholders, such as the Natural History Museum, NGOs active in educational activities for migrants, and the local community. Lesvos Geopark ensures to train around 200 migrants every year upon the 6.000 people yearly arriving. Finally, the case study analysis has allowed the identification of specific good practices, summarized as follows: (i) to integrate migrants within the local agro-food chain and the creative industries, (ii) to restore old and unused buildings to give hospitality to the migrants, (iii) to offer training to migrants and residents related with organic farming, arts, built heritage restoration, traditional crafts and trades, etc. (iv) to facilitate the connection with residents with defined food and art-related activities, (v) to offer internships for migrants in local businesses, farms, tourism related activities, (vi) to to develop integration and information programmes for migrants and citizens, (vii) to offer educational programmes and guided tours, specifically tailored for migrants to introduce them in the CNH of the territory. These practices represent the basis for boosting and accelerating the process of integration and regeneration since the very beginning of the migrants coming.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The two model territories analysed have shown how relevant is the role of cultural and natural heritage not only for migrants integration within the local society, but also for rural regeneration by repopulating the area, reusing historical assets, strengthening local traditions and raising awareness of local natural and cultural resources. Indeed, the involvement of



migrants in local activities has been activating an integration process which involves cognitive, cultural, behavioural and attitudinal change for both newcomers and the host society.

Basing on these actions that have been identified as relevant for boosting the rural regeneration of the interested territories, the further steps of the investigation aim at extracting significant "lessons" to be transferred in other rural territories which suffer similar challenges and want to build innovative heritage-led regeneration strategies for integrating migrants in a significant rural renaissance. Cultural and natural heritage will thus emerge as a universally shared human trait with transnational similarities that are able to facilitate contact and exchange in a safe environment and it will highlight the positive contribution of migrants to the development of rural areas and for the creation of an inclusive society.

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## AUTHOR'S PROFILE

**Elisa Conticelli** is a Ph.D. in spaces and times of city and the territory, she is junior assistant professor at the University of Bologna, Department of Architecture. Her research is mainly focused on sustainable rural and urban regeneration processes, landscape valorization, sustainable mobility in rural and urban contexts, which are investigated at planning and design levels. She is currently involved in several European projects on the aforementioned topics as research group member. She is author of over 45 publications.

**Claudia De Luca** is a Ph.D. candidate at the department of Architecture, University of Bologna. Environmental scientist (MSc), now focusing on sustainable urban planning and urban regeneration processes related with the use of nature into the cities (Nature Based Solutions). Involved in the Planning and Regeneration research groups, led by Prof. Simona Tondelli, she is actively involved in several H2020 and INTERREG funded project (RURITAGE, ClimateKIC NBS and MATCH-UP).

**Aitziber Egusquiza** is a Senior Researcher at Tecnalía. Ph.D. on decision making processes for improving sustainability and liveability of historic districts using multiscale information management. She has graduated as architect with a post degree in Restoration and Rehabilitation of the Historic Architecture and a master degree in Urban Management and Valuation. Scientific coordinator of RenoZEB project. Member of several coordinating teams of European and National research projects developing decision making methodologies, multiscale information models and decision support systems for the improvement of the sustainability of buildings and districts. Member of the scientific committee of EECHB.

**Angela Santangelo** is a Building engineer and Ph.D. in Architecture, she is research fellow at the Interdepartmental Centre for Applied Research - Buildings and Construction at the University of Bologna. Her research has mainly focused on urban planning and particularly on policies and tools dealing with energy efficiency and occupant behaviour in the public housing sector. She is member of the planning and regeneration research group coordinating the H2020 RURITAGE project and collaborating on several other European projects. She is MC Substitute of the EU COST Action European Energy Poverty.

**Simona Tondelli** is an Environmental engineer and PhD in Building & Spatial Engineering and she is associate professor of Urban Planning. She has 20 years of research experience in sustainable urban planning and regeneration. She is the scientific responsible of the Refurbishment and Restoration division of the UNIBO Interdepartmental Centre for Applied Research on Buildings and Construction (CIRI-EC). Coordinator of RURITAGE H2020 project, of MATCH-UP INTERREG EUROPE project, ECOTALE INTERREG IVC project, and currently partner in one ERA-NET JPI Urban Europe project (SPN), SHELTER H2020 project, SEERRI H2020 project and many Erasmus + projects, and scientific responsible of many regional/local Research Projects. Vice-Director of the Emilia-Romagna section of the National Urban Planning Institute - INU. Member of the scientific board of the UNIBO PhD Programme in Architecture and Design Cultures. Author of over 100 publications.