

# ICOA1592: EMERGING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE REVITALIZATION OF MINOR HISTORIC CENTERS, CASES FROM CALABRIA, ITALY

[! 2<sup>nd</sup> amended version uploaded on January 17<sup>th</sup> 2019]

## Subtheme 01: Integrating Heritage and Sustainable Urban Development by engaging diverse Communities for Heritage Management

**Session 1:** Sustainable Development and Community Engagement

**Location:** Gulmohar Hall, India Habitat Centre

**Time:** December 13, 2017, 14:45 – 15:00

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**Abstract:** Calabria Region in southern Italy is home to many minor historic centers (MHCs) of Greek origin characterized by a strong territorial identity. Taking into account the political inaction and stagnating socio-economic development, this research aims to explore how emerging civic engagement resulting from empowerment of local population and community collaboration helps revitalize these MHCs through value-adding of their Heritage. To this end, based on literature review and case studies of two MHCs, Pentadattilo and Riace, the research first looks into the forms of emerging civic engagement in the revitalization of the MHCs. Then, it proposes a civic engagement pattern that follows a mixed approach that is heritage-based and networking-driven. Such a mixed approach is able to facilitate civic engagement and lever the revitalization of MHCs that contributes to sustainable local socio-economic development. Besides, this research also discusses the rationale for the mixed approach. It was found that the mixed approach that combines heritage-based and networking-driven approaches is critical to the effectiveness of civic engagement in the revitalization of the two case studied MHCs.

**Keywords:** *minor historic centers (MHCs), revitalization, civic engagement, heritage and networking, mixed approach*

## Introduction

In Calabria Region of southern Italy, the Grecanic Area, located in the southern part of the Ionian Sea, is well-known for its excellent landscape diversity, outstanding environmental quality and strong territorial identity. Numerous well-preserved minor historic centers (MHCs) of Greek origins, scattered across the Grecanic Area, best demonstrate the cultural, historical and landscape resources of Calabria Region. Actually, of the region's 420 municipalities, about 400 are MHCs, which means that they have fewer than 10,000 inhabitants<sup>1</sup>. These MHCs are commonly characterized by small-sized centers located in mountainous areas and isolated from urban basins. Their rich and original assets, such as unique landscape, tangible and intangible heritage, living traditions and rituals, endemic agricultural products, etc. are in essence resources critical to leveraging and catalyzing sustainable local development. Today, despite their huge potentiality, they make up, however, an weakest area in Europe with a high rate of abandonment<sup>2</sup>. The problems that these MHCs are facing and underlying reasons for their degradation are manifold. First, their geological characteristics, on the one hand, are the foundation of the uniqueness of their landscapes; however, on the other hand, they have also made these areas prone to natural disasters such as earthquakes and landslides, which threatens livelihood and environmental security. On the social level, these MHCs have seen a continuous depopulation due to aging population, outbound migration and low birth rate over the last four decades. Meanwhile, following a shift in policy of urban planning, there has been ever since a demographic concentration in new settlements<sup>3</sup> along the coast. Depopulation has a far-reaching impact on the subsistence of the MHCs, leading to the seemingly unstoppable abandonment. The abandonment, according to Molica and others<sup>4</sup>, is the main cause of degradation of the MHCs. Consequently, degrading built environment and scarce public facilities and services become widespread phenomena, which lead the MHCs to a vicious circle: degradation leads to increasing abandonment that in turn causes further degradation.

From a political economic perspective, there has been a shift of the functional positioning of the rural from productivism to multifunctionality in Europe over the last decades<sup>5</sup>. However, due to lack of capacity, capital and public resources, these isolated MHCs have failed to seize economic opportunities and respond to these external changes in productive patterns, therefore making economic restructuring a major challenge. Amaro (2009) reckons that the abandonment in MHCs is in essence an economic consequence, in that it is due to a lack of investment attention or economic processes, which leads to a «traumatic» result. Indeed, this territorial trauma largely results from a drastic economic change that has interrupted the continuity of an ancient culture deeply rooted in agriculture, the effect of which has been multiplied under mass migration and displacement. As for the political economic environment in Calabria Region, it has long been heavily dependent on public transfers, while undergoing fragmentation of the urban social structure. Both factors explain «the absence of strong local actors and the protracted subordination of local elites to exogenous agency, i.e. choices and actions determined outside the region»<sup>6</sup>. This tends to lead to a «spatial gap» between the endogenous assets, problems and needs of the MHCs and the exogenous political economic interventions often with limited effective relevance. As a result, the opportunities that are within the reach of these MHCs for revitalization and environmental restoration, in reality, are in conflict with «the scarcity of public resources and the need for

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<sup>1</sup>(Lauria 2009).

<sup>2</sup>(Molica *et al.* 2007).

<sup>3</sup>These new settlements have kept the same name as the original towns, yet are often differentiated from the latter with the word «*marina*», since they are coastal.

<sup>4</sup>(*ibid.*).

<sup>5</sup>(Essex 2005).

<sup>6</sup>(Barillà 2013: 256).

rationalizing expenditures and production of services»<sup>7</sup>. All in all, the above-mentioned natural, social and political economic dynamics altogether impede the MHCs from mobilizing and capitalizing on their assets. Revitalization of these MHCs to stimulate local socio-economic development in these areas is therefore problematic.

This research tries to investigate how to revitalize the MHCs through proactive civic engagement and community collaboration facilitated by community empowerment in planning and implementing place-based initiatives. To this end, it experiments with a mixed approach that is heritage-based and networking-driven, aiming at fostering a cooperative culture within local community. It poses two major questions:

- 1) How do the empowered grass-roots entities help revitalize the MHCs?
- 2) What are the components of such a mixed approach?

To illustrate how the civic engagement pattern based on a mixed approach is translated in the real world, this research carries out two case studies of Pentadattilo and Riace. The major aims are to 1) explore the forms of emerging civic engagement, and the methods adopted by the empowered community in the revitalization process of the MHCs; 2) analyze the construct of the proposed mixed approach that is heritage-based and networking-driven; and 3) cast light on a possible synergy among the public sector and the grass-roots entities.

### **Emerging Civic Engagement: Experience from Riace and Pentadattilo**

Nowadays, there is an increasing academic and political consensus that, «the state is no longer positioned as the provider of public goods, but is cast as a facilitator that enables communities to govern themselves<sup>8</sup>». The public sector therefore needs to realize that through a process of decentralization, all three governance institutions, namely government, the private sector, and civil society organizations, can become more creative and innovative in responding to public needs. Equally important, decentralization can help governments balance regional development, empower communities, and mobilize private resources for investment in public goods<sup>9</sup>. Taking into account not only the huge potentiality but also the social and political economic disadvantages these MHCs have, this research poses such a question: can local communities overcome the disadvantages and make a change to usher in local socio-economic development? The answer lies in the communities themselves. The World Bank (2010) has long advocated a community-driven approach to local development, for it gives control of development decisions and resources to community groups and representative local governments. Such an approach is acknowledged for its efficient use of public resources, empowerment of communities, and possibility of better local governance<sup>10</sup>. With the presence of empowered, proactive community members, depressed communities like the MHCs can be regenerated socially and economically through civic engagement and participation in community affairs. Civic engagement refers to the individual and collective actions that aim at identifying and addressing issues of public interests<sup>11</sup>. It is supportive of the shift from government to governance, which implies that «the legitimacy of governance comes from the direct participation of citizens and stakeholders in governing activities<sup>12</sup>». By engaging in community affairs, community

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<sup>7</sup> (Molica *et al.* 2007: 165).

<sup>8</sup> (Woods 2005: 164).

<sup>9</sup> (Cheema and Rondinelli 2007: 7).

<sup>10</sup> (World Bank 2010).

<sup>11</sup> (Barrett and Zani 2014; Danieri and Luong 2012).

<sup>12</sup> (Woods 2005: 164).

members can build up a wide range of personal and social capacities, which leads to personal empowerment<sup>13</sup>.

Both of the two cases, Riace and Pentedattilo, are located in the province of Reggio di Calabria in Calabria Region. Their revitalization has seen different ways of civic engagement. Pentedattilo (derived from Greek *Pēnta-dàktylos*) is a ghost village located on the Monte Calvario whose five-finger-shaped form gave its very name and its breath-taking landscape (Fig. 1). The entire village remained completely abandoned from the mid-1960 till the 1980s (Fig. 2). Since then under joint efforts of young people and associations, it has gone through a long course of preventative and regenerative preservation. Various grassroots-led associations have helped prevent the village from continuing degradation, using rural tourism as a pivotal tool in the value-adding of the heritage. The reuse and repurpose of its built heritage have served the principal purpose of revitalizing the village while regenerating it on an economic term. This not only helps maintain the integrity of its built environment, but also creates a synergy between the economy and the culture, and between the material and immaterial of the territorial identity<sup>14</sup>. Throughout the revitalization of Pentedattilo, civic engagement, in the form of inter-community collaboration led by grassroots organizations, has largely resorted to a cultural tourism-led approach. Such an approach focuses on mobilizing and value-adding of local assets, namely, the material heritage such as historic buildings and immaterial heritage such as handicrafts, endemic agri-food products and festivals. Today, Pentedattilo, small as it is, a home to quite a few cooperatives which are all from different places of the Grecanic Area. These cooperatives form quite tight networks among them, offering not only various handicrafts but also tourist information and cultural tours. The *Laboratorio Artigianale del Legno* (Wood Craft Laboratory) is a typical example (Fig. 3). Created under the support of the Association *Pro Pentedattilo* (active for about 30 years) and the *Borghi Solidali* (Solidarity Villages) project, the laboratory is now part of a recently-born cultural association *Vicoli dell'Arte* (Alleys of Art). Under the same roof, there is also the Crocheting Laboratory, which is in close collaboration with the Wood Craft Laboratory. The way how the laboratories are run is quite innovative, in that they repurposed the restored building as a multi-functional space which combines handicrafts and pedagogic laboratories, ethnographic museum and tourism information. Indeed, through collaboration and networking, these laboratories have been able to integrate their resources, innovate their knowledge and skills, and diversify their products. Besides a major focus on the value-adding of heritage, the grassroots organizations in Pentedattilo also collaborate on major cultural events to promote and revitalize the village. The most influential one is the *Paleariza* festival, an annual, serial ethno-cultural-musical event that takes place in public spaces of different MHCs. What is clear is, inter-community collaboration and broad participation of local population are indispensable to organizing such a large-scale event. Besides activities related to cultural tourism and popular cultural events, the grassroots organizations, reaching out to the communities from both home and abroad, organize annually under the stewardship of the Association *Pro Pentedattilo* a camp dedicated to the maintenance and preservation of paths, firebreak lines, dry-stone walls, houses, etc. The camp proves to be an experiment of active civic engagement in the preservation of heritage. It is a spring for change, and the platform for performing rights and duties of each citizen, «a miracle of civic 'glocality': citizens participate locally and cooperate globally»<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup>(Barrett and Zani 2014).

<sup>14</sup>(Ou and Bevilacqua 2017).

<sup>15</sup>(Barber 2013: 5).



Fig.1– Panorama of Pentedattilo.  
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Fig.2- Partially collapsed houses in Pentedattilo.

Riace (derived from Greek-Byzantine *Ryaki*) is a municipality (*comune*) perched on top of a hill. According to a 2016 census, it has a population of 2,343 residents (Istat), which best tells the rejuvenation of the town: the town was almost reduced to a «ghost town» fifteen years ago due to out-migration. In contrast to Pentedattilo, the revitalization of Riace has taken a multicultural social constructivist approach to tackle the town's own problem of depopulation and degradation and at the meantime address the «risk-opportunity» situation following the refugee crisis. Since 2004, through public and community collaboration, Riace has been a pioneer in Italy to host refugees, whose arrival has largely helped the reclamation of portions of its quasi-abandoned historic center through their repopulation<sup>16</sup>. Basically, grass-roots organizations and cooperatives have collaboratively planned and implemented various projects for refugees, aiming at promoting socio-economic inclusion and integration. A good example is the project *Villaggio Globale* (Global Village) which reclaimed and rehabilitated abandoned houses. Those houses were transformed, based on mixed-use principle, into social housings for refugees and handicrafts shops (Fig. 4). Among all the active NGOs present in Riace, the non-profit *Città Futura* (Future City) is the leading player. It is worth noting that *Città Futura*, directed by the mayor Domenico Lucano, is a fruit of the close cooperation between the public and the civil society. On the one hand, to promote the social integration of refugees, *Città Futura* carries out its activities in four fields, namely, housing provision by rehabilitating abandoned houses, conscious urban design to promote multiculturalism, amenities improvement to improve livability, and form and functional diversification of public spaces (Fig. 5). In so doing, social inclusion and integration have been promoted, which has laid the foundation for the civic engagement in economic inclusion, the decisive factor for the success of *Città Futura*'s projects. *Città Futura*, on the other hand, with public funding and in collaboration with other grassroots organizations, has established various artistic laboratories where refugees can receive training from local artisans and work as apprentices with a wage (Fig. 6). These laboratories are quite innovative in that they stimulate knowledge and skills exchange between the refugees and local people. As a result, the handicrafts, with both local and global attributes, tend to be attractive to tourists. Besides artistic laboratories, local people and refugees also collaborate to reclaim abandoned farming lands. All in all, this multicultural social constructivist approach that Riace adopts has largely encouraged civic engagement and proves to have brought about co-benefits for both the host community and guest community. This Riace model of civic engagement sees the collaborative participation of both the public sector and the civil society (grassroots organizations, host community and guest community). This broad, multicultural engagement has not only helped to solve the problem of degradation and depopulation, but also makes Riace socially and economically inclusive and creative.

<sup>16</sup> (Russo, 2014).





Fig.3- Multifunctional space in the Wood Craft Laboratory.  
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Fig.4- Entrance arch of the "Global Village".



Fig.5- A small square in the historic centre transformed into a stage decorated with multi-ethnic paintings.  
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Fig.6- Immigrant weaving in a tapestry laboratory.  
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## A Mixed Approach to Civic Engagement

It is said that place-based knowledge, collective vision, and collaborative strategy are three basic factors critical to community collective initiatives<sup>17</sup>. However, civic engagement will not occur unless people have the knowledge and the means to become engaged<sup>18</sup>. What can be learnt from the cases of Pentedattilo and Riace in terms of how to foster a proactive, effective civic engagement in the revitalization of MHCs? The author maintains that a mixed approach is the key. This mixed approach, on the one hand, highlights the assets embedded in the MHCs, namely material and immaterial heritage. In both Pentedattilo and Riace, heritage is the critical medium by which local communities can reflect on their advantages and disadvantages, on their strengths and weakness. That is to say, heritage allows local communities to gain a good understanding of the assets at their disposal for carrying out collective initiatives. On this basis, they can come up with solutions that enjoy popular supports and fit well into local contexts, be it for social or economic purposes. As the assets, very likely idle ones, are clearly defined and the MHCs' need of revitalization become the focal point, a consensus within the community tends to be reached simply because heritage is part of local population's collective identity. In this sense, heritage is prone to create an empathetic space within the community, which can contribute to the formation of a good morale. Consequently, communities engage themselves in the revitalization of the MHCs with place-based knowledge, collective vision, and collaborative strategy.

On the other hand, the mixed approach also suggests that inter-community networking, as a premise of collaboration, is a significant driving force of civic engagement. According to Putnam (2000), expansive

<sup>17</sup>(Morse 2014).

<sup>18</sup>(Gerston 2014).

social networks, which are clearly part of social capital, are key to the formation of civic engagement. Networking and collaboration are critical to enabling an effective civic engagement, in that through networking, communities can considerably increase their social capital. Social capital can help mitigate the insidious effects of socioeconomic disadvantage<sup>19</sup>. This is especially important for MHCs, which more often than not are excluded from external socio-economic processes due to their isolation and lack of public resources and local capacity. As the grassroots organizations dedicated to the revitalization of Pentedattilo and Riace demonstrate, none of them work alone. They always, without any exception, reach out to other civil entities, and sometimes even the public institutions. In Riace, for example, the NGO *Città Futura* is under the coordination of the institutional leadership, namely, the mayor. Networking and collaboration are the basic ethic in civic engagement. Through networking, the grassroots associations are able to exchange knowledge and expertise among them, therefore increasing their capacity in tackling complex community issues. In particular, facing emerging challenges such as the refugee crisis, civic engagement must be preceded by field-building to reinforce the community's social capital. This means that, civic engagement must respond to new challenges under multiculturalism with a broader perspective: engagement is not only about getting the ingroup involved, but even more importantly, getting the outgroup involved. Therefore, a shared collective vision needs to be formed within the community. Only when all interested groups within the same community are engaged can collective goals be achieved and public goods generated and distributed in a just, inclusive manner. In this sense, networking and collaboration are both a political and social discourse.

So why is a mixed approach to civic engagement relevant and effective? The author argues that first, based on heritage within the community, communities members and grassroots associations can collaborate to find endogenous solutions rather than replying on exogenous technical assistance. Heritage, as part of their territorial identity, is the source of creative thinking, which is important for the revitalization of the MHCs through innovative reuse and value-adding of the heritage. Second, networking among communities across the Grecoan Area and different cultural groups can build up their social capital and create a synergy among various actors in the civil society. Networking also paves the way for collaboration both within and among communities, which often results in reinforced community knowledge and collective capacity. Consequently, civic engagement in both localities manifest strong solidarity. Last but not the least, the networking-driven approach and heritage-based approach to civic engagement are complementing to each other. In this reciprocal relationship, the heritage-based approach plays a field-building role, in that it helps civic entities identify their assets, and community problems and needs and orient towards realistic starting points for engaging themselves. Networking, in contrast, is a facilitator of the heritage-based civic engagement, which means that it fuels the latter by helping civic entities innovate their collective knowledge and build up their collaborative capacity. This often leads to increasing social capital and sustainable value-adding of heritage, contributing to the revitalization of the MHCs in the long run.

## Conclusions

This research looked into the role of civic engagement in the revitalization of minor historic centers in Calabria Region. While Pentedattilo adopts a cultural tourism-led approach to its revitalization, Riace resorts to a multicultural social constructivist approach. Civic engagement plays a crucial role in the revitalization of the two localities. However, as the two case studies manifested, Pentedattilo and Riace have seen similar yet different patterns of civic engagement. Both communities have focused on the reuse and value-adding of their material and immaterial heritage so as to achieve revitalization. They both have also managed to build up their social capital by networking and collaboration within and among communities. In Pentedattilo, grassroots organizations network with each other and collaborate to bolster local development through rural tourism development. In Riace, instead, grassroots organizations network

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<sup>19</sup> (Putnam 2000: 319).

and collaborate among them, and different from Pentedattilo, they also collaborate with local community members of both the host community and guest community. Another difference is, their activities are under the guidance of the public sector and aimed at, apart from revitalizing the town, addressing socio-economic integration and inclusion of refugees. All in all, the mixed approach, composed of heritage-based approach and networking-driven approach, is critical to the effectiveness of civic engagement in the revitalization of the two localities.

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# **ICOA1592: ENGAGEMENT CITOYEN ÉMERGENT POUR LA REVITALISATION DE CENTRES HISTORIQUES SECONDAIRES. EXEMPLES DANS LA PROVINCE DE REGGIO DE CALABRE, ITALIE**

## **Sous-thème 01: Intégrer le patrimoine et le développement urbain durable en engageant Diverses communautés pour la gestion du patrimoine**

**Session 1:** Développement durable et engagement communautaire

**Lieu:** Hall Gulmohur, India Habitat Centre

**Date et heure:** 13 Décembre, 2017, 14:45 – 15:00

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**Résumé:** La province de Reggio de Calabre, au sud de l'Italie abrite de nombreux centres historiques secondaires d'origine grecque, caractérisés par une identité territoriale affirmée. Prenant acte de l'inaction politique et de la stagnation économique, la présente recherche a pour objet d'examiner comment l'engagement citoyen émergent, qui se traduit par la collaboration au sein de la communauté et la prise en charge par les habitants eux-mêmes, favorise la revitalisation de ces centres urbains en mobilisant la valeur ajoutée que constitue le patrimoine. Pour cela, cette recherche s'intéresse d'abord aux forces qui conduisent à cet engagement, en analysant les conditions et les formes de la collaboration et de la prise en charge au sein des communautés locales de ces centres historiques secondaires. Puis, se fondant sur les publications et les études de terrain dans trois de ces centres, Pentedattilo, Riace et Bova, elle propose un schéma d'engagement citoyen fondé sur une double approche, qui intègre la valorisation patrimoniale et le fonctionnement en réseau.

Une telle approche paraît de nature à favoriser un développement socio-économique local durable. Enfin, cette étude aborde les questions financières qui font que souvent les initiatives locales en faveur de la valeur ajoutée patrimoniale n'ont pas de réel impact économique durable. A cet effet, elle croise la notion d'engagement citoyen avec des instruments financiers tels les financements participatifs citoyens. Elle examine en outre comment, en pratique, ces instruments financiers, pilotés par la communauté peuvent aider à rendre effectives, de manière durable, les initiatives mobilisant le patrimoine local.

**Mots-clé:** centres historiques secondaires; engagement citoyen; initiative locale et collaboration; instruments financiers