Sustainable Tourism, Young Entrepreneurship, and Social Innovation in Peripheral Rural Areas: Case Studies from Southern Italy

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1 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework behind this research is based on the relation between sustainable tourism and social innovation, and moves up through innovative dynamics between economy, society, and the environment. Innovation is meant as the bridging element between economic growth and a wider territorial requalification, and primarily references Bock's work and her definition of social innovation as "a motor of change rooted in social collaboration and social learning, the response to unmet social needs as a desirable outcome, and society as the arena in which change should take place" (2016, p. 555).

The study presented here focuses on the benefits sustainable tourism may generate in rural economies not only in terms of direct tourist spending and income but also from increased awareness from local residents and local resource enhancement, to new job opportunities, increased quality of life, and changes in lifestyle (Maretti

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and Salvatore 2012; Williams and Ponsford 2009; Wallace and Russell 2004). These post-agricultural trajectories of rural development have met the interests of academic research, and in the last 20 years scholars have conceptualized them along interesting lines, such as the New Rural Paradigm—NRP (Milone and Ventura 2011; OECD 2006), multifunctional agriculture (Halfacree 2006; Wilson 2007), nexogenous networked development (Murdoch 2000; Murdoch 2006; Woods 2007; Bock 2016), and the rural web (Van der Ploeg and Marsden 2008; Van der Ploeg et al. 2010; Messely et al. 2013). Accordingly, academics and policy makers have assessed the capacity of rural areas to play upon their local identity and reach a "double coherence," that is to say to mobilize social capital in order to turn their territorial resources into symbolic capital recognized both by insiders and outsiders alike (Bourdieu 1984, Bourdieu and Richardson 1986; Putnam 2000).

While the concept of innovation has gained popularity in this ongoing debate, it is far from being framed in a clear and consensually accepted way (Barbera and Parisi 2019). Social innovation is both a "vague" and "dark" buzzword and a supposed "inspirational," "magic word" to solve the wicked problems of contemporary capitalism. For example, policy-oriented literature addresses social innovation in compensatory terms, such as by recognizing its "compassionate" action in the (neo)liberal framework of increased deregulation and flexibility (Moulaert et al. 2013). The academic literature on the other hand focuses more on the changing modes of value production and the way this is culturally legitimated (Nicholls et al. 2015; Scott 2007). In other words, academics tend to be more critical, by investigating the symbolic and structural changes that improve collective well-being, with special regards to social movements and the local development of "weak territories" (Moulaert and Nussbaumer 2005; Borghi 2017; Bortoletto and Grignoli 2019). From this point of view, innovation studies emerge as a promising perspective when they concentrate on the new "cooperative" approaches to production and distribution of goods and services, namely, on-demand and sharing economy (Pais and Provasi 2015) or commons-based peer production (Benkler and Nissembaum 2006).

However, independent of the type of approach, we think that the point of a critical reading of social innovation should be to cast light on the role of social change agents. What we refer to as social innovators are not exceptionally skilled heroes inspired by redemptive goals but rather a specific population that enacts individual and collective social actions which, embedded in specific contexts, tackle unsorted problems through a hybrid, applied knowledge (Barbera and Parisi 2019).

For the scope of our investigation, and in some relevant literature, social innovation in weak territories is often coupled with the regenerative features of leisure activities, for instance in the context of gentrification policies (Evans and Foord 2008) or in the frame of a "New Rural Paradigm" (Horlings and Marsden 2014). Therefore, with special regards to inner rural areas, the assumption is generally shared that in weak territories (i.e., contexts particularly affected by loss of economic opportunities, depopulation, and population aging, as most rural peripheral areas are), sustainable tourism is a potential tool to support local development (Maretti and Salvatore 2012; Salvatore et al. 2018). Furthermore, several studies have shown that rural tourism, and ecotourism in particular (Ceballos-Lascuràin 1991; Beaumont
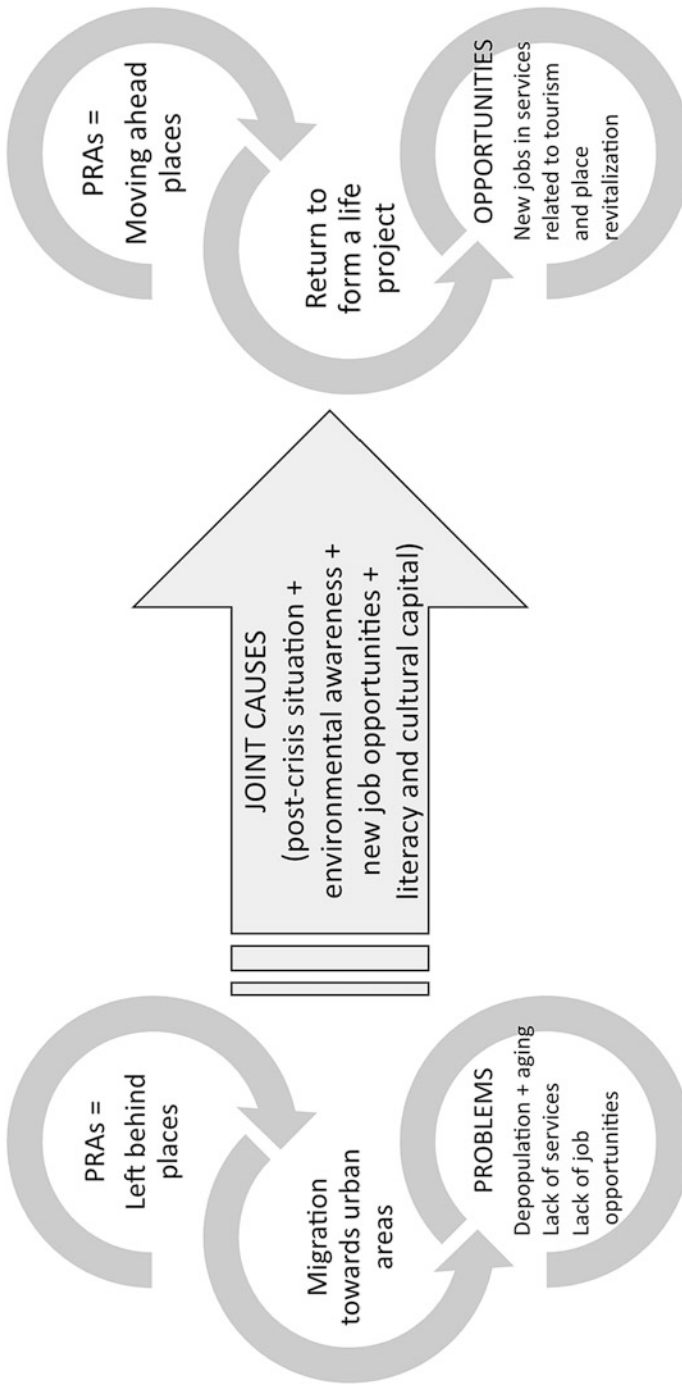
2011), when combined with cultural capital can offer an important tool kit to activate the different assets of local economies, thus revitalizing low-density territories (Sharpley and Jepson 2011; Beaumont and Brown 2018).

As it is widely known, most Italian peripheral rural areas (PRAs) have been characterized by deep social and economic problems such as depopulation, aging, lack of job opportunities, and lack of basic services (De Rossi 2018). Because of this situation, they have often been referred to as "left behind" places, with their social atmosphere often depicted as passive and inactive. As a matter of fact, a complex whole of concurrent causes characterizes the post-crisis situation, such as a higher digital and analogical literacy, a wider availability of ethical knowledge, a deeper environmental consciousness, and a growth of post-materialistic values. Therefore, these areas are now facing some important challenges, which also relate to new sustainability-oriented tourist practices that may trigger big changes on a socio-economic and cultural level (Carrosio 2019).

Due to the environmental crisis on one side, to the more recent global finance failures and public health concerns on the other, and in turn to a wider demand of post-materialist values, these areas may represent "safer" regions for experimentation, according to both environmental and socio-economical sustainability. For instance, they can aim at pursuing new, integrated territorial approaches to local development with the ambition of shaping alternative interconnected geographies. From this standpoint, it is possible to gain back places once lost in the deployment of a unidimensional, globalized paradigm of neo-liberal market-driven development (Wiskerke 2009). Thus, rural peripheral areas are primed for trying renovated ways of doing post-crisis development starting from a greener idea of quality of life. After being victims of abandonment, these small rural towns of the Apennines might now turn into spaces of debate and social experimentation where both the residents and the tourists may share the same sense of place and may think of a new way of making local society, in a more inclusive and sustainable way. In short, what were originally deemed to be problems are now potential opportunities, and these "left behind" places may find themselves as spatial socio-cultural labs, or places that are "moving ahead" (see Fig. 1).

Some of these opportunities are actually related to the possibilities sustainable tourism can offer as a kind of bridging field among different socio-economic sectors. Thanks to the involvement from a new generation of young entrepreneurs, tourism has become an important means to change the way people can actually live and perceive the quality of life in these towns and, in turn, the proximal relations within local communities. We have attributed this change with social innovation in the frame of sustainable tourism, which seems to work quite well in some inner areas, such as the Alpine mountain districts (Kuščer et al. 2017). To what extent that might actually be realized in relation to the hospitality and tourism sector in a peripheral Southern Italian inner area, which is nonetheless rich in natural and cultural heritage, is the main objective of our research.

We hypothesize that thanks to an increased "life project" investment of social innovation-oriented young entrepreneurs, these places can change through experiment and find themselves as prepositive, rather than passive, places. Against this

Fig. 1 Theoretical background

PRAs = Left behind places

Migration towards urban areas

PROBLEMS
Depopulation + aging
Lack of services
Lack of job opportunities

JOINT CAUSES
(post-crisis situation + environmental awareness + new job opportunities + literacy and cultural capital)

PRAs = Moving ahead places

Return to form a life project

OPPORTUNITIES
New jobs in services related to tourism and place revitalization

idea, sustainable tourism might catalyze all the different endogenous resources, perhaps not previously recognized, and organize them into a local tourist offer (local cuisine, agricultural products, rural settlements, cultural experiences, natural landscape, etc.). A key turning point in the framework is represented by the role of these young entrepreneurs that we refer to as "reflexive selves," that is as subjects carrying on a place-centered vision by paying particular attention to the human impact on both society and nature in a wider sense. We derive the notion of "reflexive selves" first from the sociological works that were mostly influenced by the phenomenological and existentialist tradition. In particular, we bear in mind the following ideas: "intentionality" as a central feature of the experience of reality (Brentano 1874/1973); the *Lebenswelt* or "lifeworld," the empathic connections with the lifeflow and the consciousness of "things" after the suspension of judgment (Husserl 1989); and the existence of only subject-dependent, relatively natural world as opposed to the objectified representation of the world coming from positivist tradition (Scheler 1980). In this context, we refer in particular to the contribution made by Alfred Schutz and his attempt to expand and improve the category of comprehension of social life derived from Dilthey and Max Weber (Schutz 1967).

Schutz follows the "interpretative" tradition by narrowing the focus on the meaning of social action but, in addition to that, brings the examination of the making of sense—a precondition of any authentic social action—to a further level by distinguishing a subjective, intentional sense and a "second order," an objective typification of the sense. Namely, Schutz describes the lifeworld in terms of inter-subjective structuration and claims that any social action makes sense only when inscribed within a "project." In other words, it is possible to grasp the sense of a social action only when one can think of it as "already done"—the social action has meaning as an anticipation of a project to be deployed. Only under these conditions can we rightfully talk of "social action" as distinguished from behavior or routine because the action is performed in the lifeflow as part of an existential unity. In these conditions, it can also be observed *ex-post* as a "reproduction," with the result of attaching different patterns of sense depending on the viewpoint and the time of observation. From here we understand that selves are reflexive as they act intentionally but are also subject to self-observations in the frame of an ongoing structuration of projects within an inter-subjective social world. As a result, we witness an explosion of "sense" through multiple "typizations" and "observation levels" (Wagner 1970).

Among the more recent interpretations of the "subject in the world" theme, a quite successful one has been proposed in the 1990s by Ulrich Beck with his understanding of the individual self-accomplishment in terms of "own life" (*das Eigene Leben*) (Beck and Ziegler 1997). Interestingly, Beck brings forward a long-term investigation of the process of differentiation and autonomization of the individual actors as part of the shift from first to second modernity. However, he progressively moves away both from an individualistic (utilitarian and hedonistic) and a normative (emancipatory and anti-systemic) notion of the "self" that belongs to a long-established European and Continental tradition, dating back to Durkheim and Simmel and still popular with the Frankfurt School (Privitera 2015). In a different

fashion, Beck does not focus on the unsolved tensions between the individual and the collective, but rather turns the perspective upside down by looking at the individual subject as an agent of social integration through increased individualization. Here, Beck draws on the lessons of Talcott Parsons and his distinction between utilitarian and institutional individualism (Parsons 1978), and, therefore, he does not conceive the subjective pursuit of the individual interest as contradictory to the collective interest. Conversely, Beck reconnects with the tradition of democratic individualism, more popular in the American scholarship and revived by authors such as Rawls and Habermas. In this perspective, an increased individualization happens within the system and expresses the interiorization of the institutional norms by the individualized subjects.

Moreover, Beck suggests that the ability of the actors of the social "lifeworld" to differentiate and liberate from traditional roles brings about an innovative potentiality to achieve new and aware forms of social integration. In other words, Beck's reflexive modernity shows that although an increased individualization means both a loss of empathy as a sensory guide to interpret reality and a progressive disconnection from the traditional norms of the lifeworlds (living through secondhand non-experience) (Beck 1986), the destiny of the self is not necessarily written in terms of psychological fragmentation, anonymity, or a-critical integration into the functional logic of the political and economic systems. On the contrary, to pursue a life project as a form of free self-accomplishment makes the individuals the true builders of their "own life" and turns them from passive recipients of societal transformations into active subjects of social change in the eve of second modernity.

When combined with personalized forms of post-mass tourism, the notion of reflexive self appears as a very promising research tool and, as a matter of fact, it has already been applied in some intriguing ways. For instance, Pritchard et al. discuss reflexive selves as "responsible tourism intellectuals" concerned with pursuing "tourism knowledge which directly relates to the challenge of creating a more just and sustainable world" (2011, p. 942). They call this Hopeful Tourism and claim that it is

> a values-based, unfolding transformative perspective (imbued by principles of partnership, reciprocity and respect). It offers a 'reflexive accounting' (Seale 1999) of the development of hopeful tourism, a pause for reflection which aspires to stimulate debate on the philosophical scope of tourism enquiry and the potential role of tourism scholars as change agents. (p. 942)

In a similar fashion but perhaps with less ambitious goals, the young entrepreneurs of the two case studies presented in this chapter are acting as agents of civic transformation through innovative tourism practices. The reflexivity of their selves is manifested in life projects aimed at pursuing one's "own life" by reshaping tourism practices around the concepts of sustainability, responsibility, and quality of life. Thus, they are not consuming new land in order to build big hotels but they are promoting the idea of "dispersed hospitality" by requalifying the old abandoned houses; they offer open-air activities and encourage slow mobility; they invite the tourist to rediscover a "peasant way" of doing agriculture as van der Ploeg has defined it (2009) where the use of the resources is balanced with their future

regeneration; and finally, they work in order to shorten the tourist and gastronomic supply chain. A still preserved natural environment, high quality agricultural products, the uniqueness of the historical and cultural heritage, and the architectural style of the settlement are just some of the many elements they may refer to, to both decide for a new project of life away from urban contexts and to plan a place-based tourist offer. Thanks to these subjects' actions, tourism, sustainability, and social change interrelate with the place's inner vocations.

2 Methodology

A three-month fieldwork was conducted in spring-summer 2019 in several small towns of the Basilicata and Calabria regions, specifically located within the Gallipoli Cognato—Piccole Dolomiti Lucane Regional Park and the Pollino National Park. The main research task was to understand how the particular environmental, cultural-historical and architectural assets of these towns may be interacting in order to favor sustainable tourism and social innovation within small rural towns and low-density areas. The selection of the cases, their identified assets, and a theoretical framework have been built upon the successful case of the town of Matera (Basilicata region), where the unique anthropological-historical value of the site has allowed for a large cultural and tourism transition (Salvatore et al. 2018) and lately received recognition as the European Capital of Culture 2019 (Aquilino et al. 2018).

In this research period, during a preliminary visit and an explorative two-week visit, several small rural towns were visited in the inner areas across the Basilicata region (Castelmezzano, Grottole, Rotonda, San Costantino Albanese, San Paolo Albanese, Senise, Terranova del Pollino) and the Calabria region (Acquaformosa, Cerchiara di Calabria, Civita, Morano Calabro, Mormanno, San Basile, Saracena) (see Fig. 2). The places were selected because each one of them had interesting elements to be investigated in relation to the theoretical framework, whether it was the tourist enhancement of the cultural dimension (i.e., the Arbëreshë towns of San Costantino Albanese, San Paolo Albanese, Acquaformosa and Civita or Grottole), the young generation commitment (i.e., San Basile, Castelmezzano, Civita), the regional food (i.e., Mormanno, Cerchiara di Calabria, Saracena, Rotonda, Senise, Terranova di Pollino), or the environmental context (i.e., Terranova di Pollino, Civita, Castelmezzano). In this phase, about 40 key informants were interviewed including tourist operators (both guides and B&B owners), farmers, administrators, association members, and other local entrepreneurs.

On the basis of this first exploratory research experience and of direct observation, two case studies (Castelmezzano in the Lucanian Gallipoli Cognato—Piccole Dolomiti Lucane Regional Park, and Civita in the Calabrian side of the Pollino National Park) were chosen in order to more deeply reveal the relation between the local tourist offer within a protected area and the ongoing social change within the towns (Hammer et al. 2007). The reasons why these two cases were studied more

Fig. 2 Map of case areas (Basilicata and Calabria) rendered with Google My Maps tool

Table 1 Structure of the population in the area under study (2002–2018)

Municipality	Province	Population			2002–2018 variation %	Average age 2018
		2002	2013	2018		
Castelmezzano	Potenza	970	835	789	−18.7	50.3
Grottole	Matera	2607	2327	2116	−18.8	45.1
Matera	Matera	57,785	60,009	60,403	4.5	43.9
Rotonda	Potenza	3888	3475	3435	−11.7	55.6
San Costantino Albanese	Potenza	884	754	686	−22.4	44.1
San Paolo Albanese	Potenza	416	280	260	−37.5	51.2
Senise	Potenza	7182	7077	6995	−2.6	44.5
Terranova di Pollino	Potenza	1534	1291	1141	−25.6	51.1
Basilicata (whole region values)		**597,768**	**576,194**	**567,118**	**−5.1**	**45.3**
Acquaformosa	Cosenza	1295	1158	1108	−14.4	47.3
Cerchiara di Calabria	Cosenza	2942	2439	2344	−20.3	47.8
Civita	Cosenza	1125	926	912	−18.9	49.9
Morano Calabro	Cosenza	4966	4606	4413	−11.1	46.9
Mormanno	Cosenza	3729	3186	2955	−20.8	48.6
San Basile	Cosenza	1285	1058	1034	−19.5	50.5
Saracena	Cosenza	4309	3908	3744	−13.1	48.1
Calabria (whole region values)		**2,011,466**	**1,958,238**	**1,956,687**	**−2.7**	**43.6**

Data source: Authors' own elaboration on ISTAT (National Institute of Statistics) data
The bold values are related to the whole regions of Basilicata and Calabria

deeply is related to several conditions they showed to have in common, despite their differences and uniqueness:

- As the following secondary data has clearly stressed (see Tables 1 and 2), despite their loss in population and their high average age, both have had a recent and noteworthy increase in the number of tourist establishments, particularly in the Defert's tourist function index (DFTI) (Defert 1967; Marković et al. 2017) (see Figs. 3 and 4).[1]
- Both are situated in protected areas that require economic development based on sustainability principles.

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[1]This index is focused on researching the relation between the accommodation capacity and the population size within a specific destination. It determines the tourist function of a place by indicating its capacity to satisfy tourists' needs in terms of hospitality and it is calculated by putting into relation the number of beds and residents.

**Table 2** Tourist capacity and DFTI in the area under study (2002–2018)

Municipality	Province	Tourist capacity						DFTI		
		2002		2013		2018		2002	2013	2018
		Acc. est.	Beds	Acc. est.	Beds	Acc. est.	Beds			
Castelmezzano	Potenza	2	18	13	138	23	170	1.9	16.5	**21.5**
Grottole	Matera	1	16	3	27	7	39	0.6	1.2	1.8
Matera	Matera	20	1140	160	2747	639	4739	2.0	4.6	7.8
Rotonda	Potenza	8	220	18	269	22	281	5.7	7.7	8.2
San Costantino Albanese	Potenza	8	171	6	95	6	66	19.3	12.6	9.6
San Paolo Albanese	Potenza	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Senise	Potenza	3	82	6	202	7	136	1.1	2.9	1.9
Terranova di Pollino	Potenza	7	160	12	241	11	197	10.4	18.7	17.3
Basilicata total		**450**	**32,595**	**749**	**39,113**	**1409**	**36,306**	**5.5**	**6.8**	**6.4**
Acquaformosa	Cosenza	1	6	3	19	5	37	0.5	1.6	3.3
Cerchiara di Calabria	Cosenza	5	72	10	124	11	113	2.4	5.1	4.8
Civita	Cosenza	3	40	16	107	17	113	3.6	11.6	**12.4**
Morano Calabro	Cosenza	9	173	36	353	37	399	3.5	7.7	9.0
Mormanno	Cosenza	4	40	21	223	24	276	1.1	7.0	9.3
San Basile	Cosenza	0	0	1	7	1	7	0.0	0.7	0.7
Saracena	Cosenza	1	12	8	86	8	87	0.3	2.2	2.3
Calabria total		**1263**	**193,245**	**2888**	**187,845**	**3512**	**192,797**	**9.6**	**9.6**	**9.9**

Data source: Authors' own elaboration on ISTAT (National Institute of Statistics) data
The bold values are related to the whole regions of Basilicata and Calabria

Fig. 3 DFTI
Castelmezzano
(2002–2018). Data source:
Authors' own elaboration on
ISTAT (National Institute of
Statistics) data
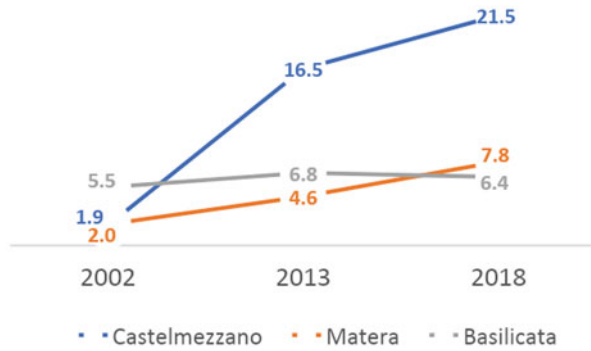
Fig. 4 DFTI Civita
(2002–2018). Data source:
Authors' own elaboration on
ISTAT (National Institute of
Statistics) data
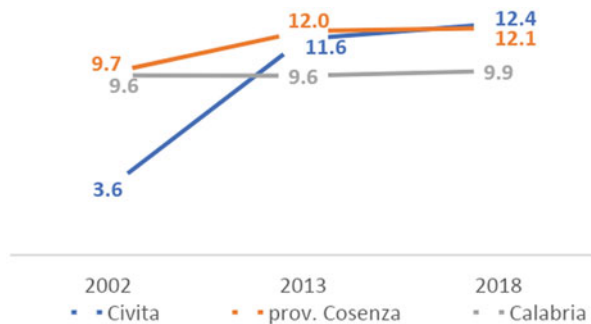
- Services and hospitality are run and managed by young entrepreneurs and administrators.
- Both have a particular and remarkable historical-architectural structure working as an effective pull factor.
- The tourist offer is strongly based on ecotourism activities.[2]

Because of these features, it was possible to study the conditions under which sustainable ecotourism may trigger social innovation processes thanks to the specific commitment from innovative entrepreneurs (reflexive selves), in accordance with our starting hypothesis. Are Castelmezzano and Civita actually shaping up to be proactive places in which new modalities of living can be experimented especially by young entrepreneurs? If so, is that happening in close relation with their innermost vocations (cultural heritage, environmental habitat, rural/urban landscape)? These have been the central questions and issues addressed in our research. To what extent this is actually going on was the focus of our fieldwork.

Given that the phenomenon under observation (the tourism transition of low-density rural towns) is still in progress and closely related to a contemporary context, we have chosen a particularly flexible research method in terms of research

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[2]This is in reference to The International Ecotourism Society definition of ecotourism (www. ecotourism.org).

techniques and data collection. Therefore, the research has been taken on according to the multiple case studies methodology (Yin 2017; Barkley 2006) with the double role of exploratory/descriptive tasking and hypothesis testing. The objective of this study is clearly far from showing any statistical representativeness but at the same time it looks for a theoretical meaningfulness by highlighting new elements of qualitative interest (such as the role of the "reflexive selves," the contemporary revitalization of local heritage through tourism, the social impact of the innovations, the integration among different tourist assets, and the commitment from institutions) that are worth being analyzed in depth.

For these reasons, a second phase of the research project was entirely dedicated to these two cases in which the border between new entrepreneurship and the way of life characterizing the context was not clearly distinguishable. For this reason, the data and the information gathered in the field during a second visit have referred mainly to qualitative techniques (such as direct observation, field notes, photos, document collection, and interviews) whose application has relied on multiple sources of evidence based on the main theoretical propositions and categories. Overall, the case study research design has revealed itself as a "comprehensive research strategy" (Barkley 2006) particularly suited to the aims of this study, including the development of a theoretical framework, data collection, and data analysis.

The main findings of the research have come out of two overlapping stages: secondary data analysis and qualitative data analysis. The former was used to better understand how both the tourist offer and the tourist demand have changed and increased in more recent years, with meaningful changes. In order to analyze their condition, the main tourist indicators were taken into consideration (tourist capacity and occupancy, and tourist function).

The second stage has involved a code-based analysis (Ryan 2004) realized through the use of the Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) Nvivo. This analysis has been realized on the basis of 10 in-depth interviews of "key informants" selected from private tour operators, local administrators, farmers, business owners, and tour guides living in one of the two case studies examined for their theoretical representativeness. The pieces of their statements related to the main categories used within the theoretical framework have been selected and categorized under a "node" whose name synthesizes the content of the reference. These nodes were then grouped when applicable as "child nodes" under "mother nodes," which indicated analytical categories to be used for the themes during the reporting phase of the research, hereafter to be referred to as "codes." Nvivo was also used to produce a word cloud for each case based on the most repeated relevant terms found in the interviews (see Fig. 6 in the conclusions). The word clouds visually represent word frequency which, with the elimination of common words such as auxiliary parts of speech, might indicate the core themes of the interviews. The abstraction and compilation of these words occurred at the end of the secondary data analysis stage to gauge how our codes aligned with these themes.

Fig. 6 Word clouds for interviewees residing in Civita (left) and Castelmezzano (right)

2.1 The Cases

2.1.1 Castelmezzano and the "Volo dell'Angelo"

Castelmezzano (750 m a.s.l.) is one of the most representative places within the Gallipoli Cognato - Piccole Dolomiti Lucane Regional Park. Due to its unique biotope, this area was first identified by the National Research Council (CNR) for protection, and then in 1997 instituted as a regional park. The park falls entirely in the region of Basilicata, partly in the province of Matera and partly within the municipalities of Castelmezzano and Pietrapertosa, in the province of Potenza. In the latter two municipalities, geological sandstone formations evocatively stick out of the landscape. The site is unique to the Mezzogiorno because of its resemblance to the Alpine dolomites.

Like most of the Italian inner areas, Castelmezzano is a low-density town, with a total of 789 inhabitants and an average of 23.3 inhabitants per km^2. It also has an older population, with an average age of 50.3, and over one-third over 65. During the period from 2002 to 2018, it lost almost 20% of its population (see Table 1).

However, despite these deep criticalities, Castelmezzano now shows one of the highest values (21.5) in the DFTI within the region and definitively the highest of the area under study. Compared with the entire territory of Basilicata, this indicator was over three times higher. Therefore, by observing this value and how it has changed over time (see Fig. 3), we can assume that—in a relatively short time—Castelmezzano went from a place practically with no tourist activity (sixth and last position in the scale of the tourist function proposed by Pearce) (Pearce 1995; see also Borzyszkowski et al. 2016 for application) to a municipality with an important, if not predominant, tourist activity (fourth position in the same scale). The analysis of the processes and the dynamics that eventually led to this important change have

been the main interest of this study during the collection of the qualitative data in Castelmezzano.

For the uniqueness of its settlement, Castelmezzano was one of the first Italian towns to be included in the club of *I Borghi Più Belli d'Italia* ("the most beautiful villages of Italy"). The urban structure is medieval, with sandstone slab roofs and homes built into the rocks.

> When the club I Borghi Più Belli d'Italia was instituted in 2001 due to an initiative of some small Italian municipalities, Castelmezzano was among the founders. It was 37 of us spread across the national territory. Now we have reached 270 to 280 members all across Italy! [...] That was the beginning of this small town's development path! (Administrator 02)

However, what most contributed to the widespread popularity of this small town is the *Volo dell'Angelo* (flight of the angel, hereafter to be referred to as the Volo)*,* an innovative experiential tourism attraction that sends participants flying on a zip line over the wilderness of rocks and forest located between Castelmezzano and the neighboring town of Pietrapertosa. Realized in 2007, the Volo has evolved over the years and has meaningfully contributed to the economic growth of the local community. This major attraction has also been a driving force for other minor attractions, such as the Via *Ferrata* (fixed rope routes for climbers), *Il Percorso delle Sette Pietre* (the path of the seven stones), and *Il Ponte Nepalese* (the Nepalese bridge), making Castelmezzano a popular ecotourist destination in the south of Italy. Our interview with the mayor of Castelmezzano elaborated on this history:

> Before we got all the permits needed both from the Park and from the EU, it took more than 7 years to realize the Volo and it cost one million euros which were funded by the EU. When we first opened it, I met all the young people and invited them to work for free during the first period because it was going to be a great challenge for our community on the whole. I thought we would need at least a one-year time to assess whether it was going to be an economic success or not... but it boomed from the beginning, also because it quickly spread on YouTube worldwide. Some of the videos shot from the zip line have been watched by over 400,000 people! [...] We managed the attraction through a public company owned by the two municipalities of Castelmezzano and Pietrapertosa. Today this company invoices about €650,000 a year and it has employed 22 young people. [...] Something like 200 beds have been realized out of the restructuring of previously abandoned houses and three new restaurants and two bars have opened. (Administrator 02)

These actions have had an impact even in terms of tourist fluxes and growth. Due to the lack of data availability in the previous period, we can only look at what happened in the four years from 2014 to 2018. According to these data, there has been a widespread meaningful growth all over the Basilicata region (+54% in arrivals; +24% in the overnight stays). Compared to these regional rates, Castelmezzano shows a slightly lower growth rate than the regional one (+44.9% in the arrivals) (but still a noteworthy growth) and a decline in overnight stays (−21%). The average stay in fact has decreased from 2 days to 1. This suggests that more people are visiting Castelmezzano but are spending less time there. This may also suggest that tourists spend just enough time in Castelmezzano to take the Volo dell'Angelo and then leave to spend the rest of their holidays in the nearby places of

Basilicata, maybe Matera which, in the same period, saw an increase of 125.4% in the number of arrivals and of 123.6% in the number of nights spent.

2.1.2   Civita: An Arbëreshë Town in Pollino National Park

Civita (450 m. a.s.l.) is one of the ten Arbëreshë towns on the Calabrian side of the Pollino National Park, making it part of one of the most important linguist islands whose origins date back to the fourteenth century (Fiorini et al. 2007). In that period, groups of Albanian refugees settled in this area of Southern Italy in several flows of migration which went on for centuries, following the establishment of the Kingdom of Albania, the death of the Albanian national hero Skënderbeu, and the gradual conquest of Albania by the Ottomans. Their history has always strongly character-ized their cultural identity in terms of language, religion, traditions, and gastronomy and is now recently turning into an important tourist pull factor in this area of Pollino, in addition to the environmental draw.

Pollino National Park, whose defining trait is the mountain range from which it takes its name, covers 192,565 hectares of land, is located between two regions, Basilicata (or Lucania) and Calabria, and is the largest protected area in Italy. The Pollino area was first recognized as a regional park by L.R. n. 3/1986 and then as a national park four years later. It took three years for the establishment of the park authority and another for the management bodies, finally taking off in 1994. The tourism pull of the park includes natural attractions, food, culture, natural history, and landscape beauty. The latter includes the mountains but also picturesque views from several points in the park, such as Civita and Cerchiara di Calabria, both of which have access to views of the sea.

Thanks to the above elements, and also for the unique architectural structure of its historical hamlet, Civita has been included in the Club of *I Borghi Più Belli d'Italia,* was awarded the Orange flag from the Italian Touring Club (a quality brand for the tourist rural towns), and is recognized as an important setting within the UNESCO Geopark site. Therefore, the tourist offer is integrated and based on a variety of assets which might host tourists all year round to participate in non-seasonal related activities (food and culture) and enjoy both the summer months (hiking, canyoning, river rafting, etc.) and the winter months (skiing, snowshoeing, etc.).

> Tourists come to Civita because we have unique natural attractions such as the Ponte del Diavolo (the Devil's Bridge) and the Gole del Raganello (Raganello River Gorges) but also because they can eat good food and experience Arbëreshë culture and its Greek Orthodox rite. So, if we set a value scale, I would say nature is the first pull factor. The territory of Civita goes from 400 meters to 1200 a.s.l. so you can do ecotourism activities in the river in the spring-summer and walk on the snow in the winter season. Then, once tourists arrive here, they discover our Arbëreshe peasant culture with its food, its museum, its colors and costumes. . . (Administrator 03)

Drawn by these potentialities, several young entrepreneurs have started up new businesses in town, in the hospitality sector, as well as in tourist services (there is one travel agency/tour operator in the town and there are also several ecotourist

guides), in agriculture, in restaurants, and in small shops, thus in some way revitalizing the socio-economic fabric.

> Most of the B&Bs we have in Civita are managed by young people. I personally know a girl who moved from Milan to come back here. As soon as she had sufficient economic resources, she restored her grandparents' house and opened a B&B. She now lives here and works in the tourism sector. But there are also new young farmers. . . two young guys started a new farm and opened a small shop in the central square to sell their products and other unique regional products. Two other guys have become farmers and they go around the towns and in markets with a small truck to sell their products. The ones who had the chance to stay and start up a new business, they did it! (Tour Operator 03)

These young people continue to face the big challenge of living in a population that is both decreasing in size and aging. Civita currently has 912 inhabitants with an average age of 50 (6.5 years over the regional score), and since 2002, it has lost almost 20% of its population (see Table 1). Moreover, almost one third is over the age of 65. Notwithstanding these criticalities, Civita—although less evidently than Castelmezzano—has shown a noteworthy increase in its DFTI which peaks in 2013, passing from 3.6 in 2002 to 12.4 in 2018. This is even more meaningful when compared to the regional trend which, even if in 2002 showed a much higher score (9.6), has remained almost unchanged within the considered time period (see Fig. 4). Thus, even if Civita lost an important percentage of its population, it seems to have invested in the availability of new accommodation in the hope to host more tourists. In 2003 it only had 3 accommodation establishments which became 16 in 2013 and 17 in 2018, with an overall increase of 73 beds (see Table 2).

Unfortunately, because of the unavailability of more recent data in some municipalities of the Calabria region, we cannot say exactly what kind of impact this increase in tourist capacity has had in a significant time lapse. We can only see that, compared to Castelmezzano, Civita managed to obtain a higher average stay by keeping its tourists sleeping in the town for an average time of three days. This may be related to a more integrated tourist offer: ecotourism activities alongside a rich gastronomy and a particular cultural offer related to the Arbëreshë identity. Moreover, looking at the occupancy data in the time period going from 2014 to 2016, we realize that Civita's tourist performance in relative terms has been definitively more positive than that of the province and the region. As shown in Fig. 5, its growth rate (both in the arrivals +17.9% and in the nights spent +23.1%) is higher than the Cosenza province rate (+15.2% and 16.2%) and Calabria regional rate (+14.3% and 9.7%).

Fig. 5 Growth rate in
arrivals and nights spent
(2014–2016) %. Data
source: Authors' own
elaboration on ISTAT
(National Institute of
Statistics) data
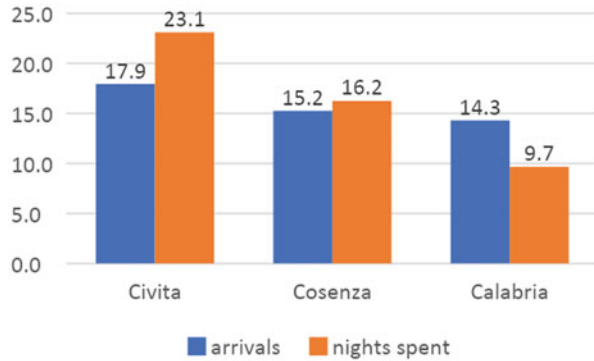
Table 3 Motivations for remaining/returning/moving from elsewhere for Castelmezzano (case 1)
and Civita (case 2)

Case	Respondent appellation	Age	Status	Motivations: No. of references		
				Roots	Rural idyll	Self-realization
1	Administrator 01	48	Returned	1	1	3
1	Administrator 02	50	Returned	1	0	1
1	Agri-tour Operator 01	32	Returned	1	1	1
1	Tour Operator 01	30	Returned	0	2	4
1	Restaurant Owner	41	Never moved away	3	1	3
2	Administrator 03	38	Never moved away	1	2	2
2	Agri-tour Operator 02	23	Never moved away	0	3	1
2	Tour Operator 02	47	Moved there from elsewhere	3	0	3
2	Tour Operator 03	40	Never moved away	1	0	0
2	Tour Operator 04	26	Moved there from elsewhere	0	2	0
Total no. references				11	12	18

3 Thematic Findings

3.1 Who Are the Actors of Tourism Development in these Two Cases?

The actors of tourism development in our two case studies include administrators,
tour and agri-tour operators, and a restaurant owner. These actors were demarcated
by their migration status, having moved away from the town and returned, having
moved to the town from elsewhere, or having never moved away (see Table 3). The
actors themselves are between the ages of 26 and 50, and can be considered young
actors, given their present age or their age at the time of their initial involvement in

the tourism development process, and the average age of the inhabitants of these towns (one third of the inhabitants are over the age of 65, see Table 1). When we look at the profile of the community members who have chosen to live in these "left behind" places and involve themselves in socially innovative projects, we find that their age is the most commonly shared characteristics, with eight interviews referencing young people as having an important role with a total of 13 references.

In Civita, the administration is "comprised of young people" (Administrator 03) and the "majority of B&Bs are managed by [young people]," mentioned Tour Operator 03, a young person who also cited how three of their peers either returned to or stayed in Civita to grow tourism-related businesses. In Castelmezzano, young people are encouraged to take on an active role. A young person involved in the Volo dell'Angelo at the onset while still in high school (and continued to work there at the time of this research) expressed that a senior administrative official of Castelmezzano made the effort to involve young people since the beginning and reimburse them as quickly as possible for their contribution (Tour Operator 01). This was confirmed by that official who remarked that the success of the Volo allowed for all volunteers of young people (25 to 30 years old) to be paid within the first year after its launch, and today employs 22 young people (Administrator 02).

Of course, both cases continue to depopulate with young people as the first to go. This was also well noted in the interviews, but not without reference to the impact of the loss. For example, both in Civita and Castelmezzano young people contribute to the success of tourism through filling physically demanding jobs required of such outdoor excursions that both towns offer, canyoning and zip-lining, respectively (Administrator 03, Tour Operator 01). Their absence is also noted in a more general sense with comments such as, "B&Bs aren't made by elderly people, it's young people that invest" (Administrator 03), "this town needs young people [...] otherwise it will become a ghost town" (Tour Operator 04), and "there could be more" (Agri-tour Operator 02, regarding involving young people in the tourism offer to meet the growing demand). Both in their presence and their absence, young people are acknowledged as critical actors in the growth of these towns.

3.2 What Makes these Actors Social Innovators?

It was the decision by these actors to remain, return, or move to Castelmezzano or Civita that initially informed us of their reflexive tendencies. These young people were actively deciding to live in a place that was rapidly depopulating (and continues to do so today), and with limited access to services and leisure activities. This conscious effort to live in a place considered to be "left behind" required a decision-making process weighing the challenges and the benefits of such a move. The challenges included the economic costs of remaining (Tour Operator 01, Restaurant Owner, Agri-tour Operator 02), limited access to necessities such as schools (Tour Operator 01, Restaurant Owner, Agri-Tour Operator 01, Administrator

02, Administrator 03, Tour Operator 03, Tour Operator 04), and the limits to self-realization (Tour Operator 01, Tour Operator 02, Tour Operator 04, Restaurant owner).

The emotional response to these challenges came out naturally in the interviews, with frequent comments: "We chose to live and work here, even if there's a ton of difficulties. There are few consumers, so lots of difficulties" (Agri-tour Operator 02), "Here, if you want to live well, you have to make a lot of sacrifices, I mean a lot" (Restaurant Owner), and "I have my limits to staying here, I'm not in a creative context, I'm not able to find people that give me input or feedback for developing an idea, and so I have to get out of here, two weeks in Milan, two weeks out of here" (Tour Operator 02).

For the benefits, we analyzed and coded every interview for references to this decision-making process to remain, return, or move from elsewhere. The codes were then subdivided into varying motivations behind this decision, and the three most cited were "roots," "rural idyll," and "self-realization" (see Table 3) to be explained in detail below. Analyzing these three motivations, while recognizing the interviewees' affirmation that these challenges exist, begins to show us in practice what Pritchard et al. have referred to as the "collaborators in tourism storying" and "co-creators of tourism knowledge" (Pritchard et al. 2011, p. 952). They are the reflexive selves both very aware of the challenges they face and hopeful in addressing those challenges.

3.2.1 Roots

First, seven of the interviewees spoke about family or their connection to the town as a reason to return and participate in its reclamation, referenced 11 times. Two of these interviewees used the term *radici* or "roots" to describe this connection, while others referred to attachment of place and family, all of which were ultimately categorized under the "roots" code. In our first case, when asked what aspects of Castelmezzano convinced them to return, one interviewee said, "I don't know how to explain it. . . it's a love for the territory, for the town, the roots of my own land" (Administrator 01). Another answered, "new perspectives, because having my own business I preferred to go out a bit and visit everything in order to gain inspiration to bring back to the family business" (Agri-tour Operator 01). A third spoke more about the obligation to their family:

> I thought about leaving many times, but we put the brakes on that idea because my husband had a farm here in town. Before having married me, he invested a lot of money [. . .] so it would have been a shame to abandon it all. [. . .] Later, [after the financial crisis] we didn't think any more about leaving. We stayed here because the kids were young, so we had. . . we relied a bit on the family. We stayed here. (Restaurant Owner)

Three interviewees of Civita carried similar sentiments. The first, who never thought about leaving to begin with said, "I've always had this connection to Civita. My idea was always that I must do everything I can to stay and work here" (Tour Operator

03). The second, "My grandparents were farmers, so I come from a family of farmers and they transmitted that passion to us. More than anything it started as a hobby, and then instead it became an actual job" (Agri-food Tour Operator 02). The third, an interviewee who had moved to Civita from elsewhere, nevertheless referred to this attachment:

> When I arrived here, it was a choice to live in the town of my paternal grandparents because I hadn't lived here before. I came on Sundays to spend a few hours with my grandparents. [. . .] Then, over the years, 12 years in Rome, I always felt more strongly the need to reintegrate something that was inside of me, still yet in an unconscious way. But I was above all connected to this place. I mean, my roots were here. Actually, I call it father land and father tongue because my grandfather always represented the person that I visualized whenever I was in hard times. . . I was always very attached to him and I didn't know it [laughs]. (Tour Operator 02)

For Civita, both Tour Operators 02 and 03 spoke of this attachment regarding their Arbëreshë heritage. Tour Operator 03 boasted direct ties, having been born and raised in Civita and speaking fluent Arbëreshë. The former spoke of their paternal ties to the Arbëreshë culture, how their father opened the Arbëreshë museum in Civita, and how "there is Arbëreshë blood inside of me, but I really really live in Arbëreshë music more than the language because my mother wasn't Arbëreshë" (Tour Operator 02).

3.2.2 Rural Idyll

The second motivation, what we have referred to and coded as "rural idyll," was referenced 12 times in seven interviews. Five traits were found to make up this code, and were added as sub-codes: "social proximity" (Restaurant Owner, Agri-tour Operator 02, Administrator 03, Tour Operator 04), "access to nature" (Administrator 03, Tour Operator 04), "quality food" (Agri-Tour Operator 02, Tour Operator 04), "a sense of tranquility" (Tour Operator 01, Agri-tour Operator 01, Administrator 03, Tour Operator 04), and an "overall healthier lifestyle" (Administrator 01, Tour Operator 01, Tour Operator 04).

Rural idyll is a motivation particularly valuable to understanding the reflexive self and the subjective side of sustainability, both to be considered fundamental to stimulating social innovation. As mentioned above, there are many economic and social challenges of living in these small towns, but when analyzing the rural idyll motivation, we saw that interviewees were not only considering the draw of these villages, such as family and roots, but also the drawbacks of living elsewhere: rural as alternative to urban. This was especially true for sub-codes "sense of tranquility" and "overall healthier lifestyle." One interviewee recounted their time living in Rome where they were happy up to a point and then, "I didn't like living there anymore, I noticed the disorganized life, the problems with public transportation, always full. . . so the tranquility of the countryside. . . you live it differently when you're born in that place" (Tour Operator 01). Later they said, "The elderly, in respect to those who live in the city, maybe have a more accentuated physical

strength [. . .] they walk so much!" (Tour Operator 01). An administrator from Civita also made a direct comparison to Rome, "Every time I go up to Rome for a meeting, I get a headache. The tranquility here allows you to also work in a serene way" (Administrator 03). Other comparisons included, "It's a small town so there isn't the stress of the city" (Tour Operator 04), and "there's tranquility, plus there's no traffic, no metro, it's the countryside" (Agri-tour Operator 01). In their words, Civita and Castelmezzano are represented as the opposite choice to Rome, a place symbolizing the urban/metropolitan context with all its chaotic and stressful qualities, and a polarized choice to the rural idyll.

3.2.3 Self-Realization

Of all the motivations for staying, returning, or moving from elsewhere, the most prevalent (18 references, eight interviews) was coded as "self-realization." This code refers to the comments made by interviewees who found that, by deciding to live in Civita or Castelmezzano, they had the opportunity to form their identity, most commonly through their profession. This is closely related to the issue of social innovation, because in order to realize their life project, they had to invest their professional knowledge in finding possible solutions to improve the social situation of these places and to favor the needed changes.

The previous citations regarding the roots code also carry a connotation of self-realization, such as Tour Operator 02 who wanted to follow a feeling inside of them or Agri-food Operator 02 who turned a hobby into a career. These three motivations (roots, rural idyll, and self-realization) are not mutually exclusive and often overlap. Finding self-realization to be a prominent motivation for our interviewees is in accordance with our theoretical framework, where we refer to how Beck's reflexive modernity allows for such individuals to seek out their life project while still contributing to collective action towards social innovation in these towns, in non-contradictory terms.

In Castelmezzano, as mentioned, the Volo dell'Angelo employed local young people who were not only motivated by the economic benefit of employment, but also saw it as a chance for self-realization. For one interviewee, the Volo kickstarted their career in tourism. They said, "My entire path revolved around the Volo, because when I started this training [for the Volo] I was still in high school. But after, I decided to go to university and so also decided to study Tourism Science" (Tour Operator 01). They said that this decision to return was strong because "I have an attachment to the Volo, maybe because, yeah, I was there when it was born and saw it grow. But not only me, all of us who work there. Especially those who have been there since the start." They continued on, adamant about their early decision to return, "People told me, 'what are you going to do with a degree?' and I always responded, 'but sorry why can't there be a qualified person working in the Volo ticket office?'" (Tour Operator 01).

For the administrators involved in the establishment of the Volo, they also saw a benefit to developing their career in Castelmezzano. Adding on to their comments about *radici* (see above), one administrator said:

> I don't know how to explain it... it's a love for the territory, for the town, the roots of my own land... to believe in an economic-touristic development project, even if it's in a small town... it's like a challenge. It's a challenge because everyone thinks that in small towns, you can't do it. Maybe we in Castelmezzano are an example that even in small places, de-centered and with less services, you can develop. (Administrator 01)

They went on to say that after living in Milan, a city where all the services, essential or otherwise, can be found:

> At a certain point, one of the reasons I returned was because [in Milan] I found myself in the Piazza del Duomo one Sunday, very sad... you are one number, only one, a drop in the middle of the ocean of people who pass by. You have all the services you need but... I don't know... better to be an integral part of an economic and social project in a small town than to be one number in a city of three million people. (Administrator 01)

The second administrator, the mayor of Castelmezzano during the establishment of the Volo, said, "Being a mayor is the most gratifying thing, even if you do it in a place so small, because whatever you think up you can realize, if you are lucky, consistent, resilient and also supported. If all of these elements are combined, what happened at Castelmezzano could happen again" (Administrator 02). Choosing to live in a small town meant that our interviewees had an opportunity to make more of an impact, for the resources available per capita and for the opportunity that arises from need in these "left behind" places. One young agri-tour operator spoke about choosing to start a business in a completely new sector for them and their family:

> My father and my brother started with a construction company, but this sector was in crisis right away. About ten years ago, the sector was already in decline [...] so they thought to create, let's say, an activity parallel to that one, changing to a completely different sector. There was this land here, left fallow by our grandparents, about two hectares, and from there we set off to cultivate it. (Agri-tour Operator 02)

This interviewee's family invested in a business completely unrelated to their original family business, yet chose to do so given that they already had the land. This again checks out with the theoretical framework, where we find risk-taking as characteristic of the reflexive self who tends to take these risks in rural peripheral areas as they represent "safer" regions of experimentation specifically for post-crisis development based on greener ideas of quality of life (Wiskerke 2009).

For our interviewees on the whole, the decision to stay, return, or move from elsewhere was motivated primarily by roots, rural idyll, and self-realization, meaning that they were considering their place attachment, the beauty of rurality, and their life project potential in these towns. Partaking in sustainable tourism ventures from this standpoint fulfills that vision of a greener quality of life, but above all requires hope to turn these challenged "left behind" places into places that are moving ahead (Pritchard et al. 2011). The appeal of returning to the roots, along with the desire for self-realization and the realization of a shared project among different actors (both private and public) who work as a leading group, seems to be the basic ingredient for

opening the way to social innovation and to the transformation of the rural idyll into a working reality.

3.3 From Sustainable Tourism to Social Innovation and Back

The CAQDAS analysis of the interviews revealed that sustainable tourism in Civita and Castelmezzano has changed the socio-cultural status of these towns fostering a wider territorial requalification. Over time, these social changes have allowed tourism itself to develop. However, the purpose of this research is to look beyond the economic status and toward the dynamics between economy, culture, society, and environment. The findings presented here show the benefits tourism may generate in rural economies not only in terms of direct tourism spending and income but also from increased awareness from local residents and local resource enhancement, to new job opportunities, increased quality of life, and changes in lifestyle. The interaction between these two different levels (the purely economic one and the immaterial one) leads to and is fed in return by what we identify as social innovation.

Accordingly we identified the four most prominent codes of social innovation (Table 4): (1) "nexogenous networking," coded at any mention of networking between businesses or individuals in the case with external actors; (2) "tourist encounter," coded at any mention of exchanges between residents and tourists and/or what effect this exchange has on residents; (3) "community involvement," coded at any mention of efforts made to involve the community in social change processes with success; (4) "local networking," coded at any mention of networking between businesses or individuals within the case.

By definition, social innovation is rooted in collective citizen action across places and fostered by social collaboration and social learning (Bock 2016), so it is no surprise that our interviewees spoke about networking, community involvement, and interactions with tourists in reference to the success of these social innovation processes. To start, the community was involved both formally and informally when requalifying Castelmezzano and Pietrapertosa around the Volo dell'Angelo. Formally, the Volo was managed by a *società pubblica* or public enterprise, "that was constituted by the two municipalities, and also before by the mountain community, a consortium with exclusively public participation" (Administrator 02). The requalification on the whole for Castelmezzano also formally saw community members convert spaces into touristic places, such as places for lodging and eating,

Table 4 Codes related to social innovation

Codes	# Interviews	# References
Nexogenous networking	8	18
Tourist encounter	7	12
Community involvement	7	11
Local networking	6	11
Total no. references		52

as we saw in the description of the cases above. However, some community members would take part in other, less formal ways:

> In Pietrapertosa, you will see some small houses in the Arabic district, almost all of them uninhabited. Among the last, literally way up at the top there is a 90-year-old woman [...] She waits for people, dressed in the clothes as we say from once upon a time, so the woman with the black scarf on her head. She's behind her door, waiting for people to pass by and then, when they do, she opens the door. Since there are all these empty houses, the people don't expect it. So, they start to speak with her right away, "how are you able to live up here? How do you bring the bags?" [...] They start to ask the standard questions, and she starts to speak about everything. She tells them about what she cooks, about her clothes [...] It's as if she is waiting behind her door to give a personal interview. It's very beautiful. (Tour Operator 01, coded at *community involvement*)

In Civita, one tour operator described their community as very hospitable, and "a bit sentinel." They went on to say, "They willingly provide information" (Tour Operator 02). In the same town, another tour operator attributed the cleanliness and order of the streets to involvement of the community, rather than to the municipality: "Everything here is beautiful and perfect, but when you live here every day, you know that the streets are cleaned thanks to the citizens that clean and cut the weeds" (Tour Operator 04). The behavior is similar in Castelmezzano, as noted by an administrator who said,

> You've seen the flowers... at the beginning we [the administration] planted them, but with the heat they dried up... However, today if you take a look, on every balcony there are flowers. It's become a value to decorate the front of your own home, and before it wasn't like this, it wasn't at all like this. (Administrator 02, coded at *community involvement*)

These informal tourist activities represent the towns' dependence on civic self-reliance and self-organization that Bock proffers as distinctive of rural social innovation (2016). She adds that another distinction is its "cross-sectoral and translocal collaborations" (p. 554) or *nexogenous* development (p. 569). In the case of sustainable tourism, the relevant actors are not only the residents of the rural areas but also their urban and peri-urban counterparts, the tourists themselves (the exogenous resource), who are linked to rural spaces thanks to the enhanced capital of that space (the neo-endogenous resource). Referring to our interviewees, other examples of nexogenous development tools may include: brands and certifications (such as the club *I Borghi Più Belli d'Italia*), social networking sites (mentioned by Agri-tour Operator 01, Tour Operator 01, Tour Operator 02, Tour Operator 03, Tour Operator 04), alternative food networks that shorten the supply chain (mentioned by Agri-tour Operator 02), extra-regional tour collaborations (mentioned by Agri-tour Operator 01, Tour Operator 01, Tour Operator 03, Tour Operator 04), and film (mentioned by Administrator 02).

The revitalization for Castelmezzano and Civita is then twofold. Through innovative collaborative structures, tourism flows and the responding hospitality have been enhanced, but another process is occurring at the same time: our interviews expose not only the observation by interviewees of an increased number of encounters between residents and tourists, but also the positive effect this has on the community (Tour Operator 01, Administrator 01, Administrator 02, Agri-tour

Operator 01, Restaurant Owner, Agri-tour Operator 02, Tour Operator 03). Comments include "the work is great. You wind up getting to know so many people" (Tour Operator 01) and "tourism brings culture and it opens your mind" (Administrator 01). The outlook that residents had on tourists had not always been so positive:

> The people like having tourists. I notice it also when I hear them speak with them, when they respond to their questions. At the start maybe they were bothered by the continuous questions, [. . .] a bit fed up by them. Instead now I really see that there's an opening, even with the elderly, to converse and speak, to recount lots of things, so I think there was an evolution. Actually, I would say maybe an education of the inhabitants [laughs]. (Tour Operator 01, coded at *tourist encounter*)

A similar observation was made about Civita:

> In the last few years even them, the elderly, are seeing tourism in a different light. They are way more open to conversing with [tourists], also passing down old traditions and their ways of cooking. Today cuisine is a very vast cultural exchange. So, this is opening up a lot, this aspect of understanding between the tourist and the resident [. . .] Sometimes [the elderly] literally organize demonstrative kitchens, like in B&Bs. They show you, like how to make our traditional pasta or how to make bread. (Agri-tour Operator 02, coded at *tourism encounter*)

The relationship between the resident and tourist is fostered by a sense of hospitality and the pre-existing tendency for these rural areas to favor social proximity, but at the same time the encounter itself and the investment from young people to believe in change has prompted for the actual tourist development. Our sustainable tourism actors and community members on the whole are sharing in this reciprocal tourism exchange. As mentioned, these subjects have a place-centered vision, one that requires a positive outlook in order to ultimately transmit the place to the tourists as desirable to visit. While some of our actors perceived this positive on the outset, which may have motivated their decision to stay, return or remain in their respective towns, other actors, like the above-mentioned elderly folk, acquired that outlook over time, largely in part thanks to the actions of young people, our reflexive selves.

4   Conclusions

The purpose of this research is to address the links between sustainable tourism and social innovation by looking beyond the pure economic status of the case areas and casting a light on the dynamics between economy, culture, society, and environment. The role of young entrepreneurs as innovators, the actors who have chosen to live in these peripheral areas, is pivotal for the development strategies of such areas, and the reflexive approach to one's "own life" is what makes it possible to steer the trajectories of these areas away from abandonment.

In both Castelmezzano and Civita, towns situated in a regional and national park respectively, sustainable tourism has favored social innovation, mainly through the manmade and natural landscape beauty which has allowed for tourism to prosper both directly (for visitors who want to escape the city and enjoy the views) or

indirectly (for visitors who benefit from the natural beauty through the availability of ecotourism activities such as hiking, rock climbing, canyoning, zip lines, etc.). The word clouds below (Fig. 6) indicate that the core themes in the interviews align with these resources, with some shared points between towns ("tourism," "young people," "park," "food," "community," "territory") and their unique defining points: "Arbëreshë," "Pollino," and "anthropomorphic" (referring to the homes that resemble faces) in Civita, and the "Volo dell'Angelo," the "Dolomites," and "honey" in Castelmezzano.

Peripheral rural areas can act as a sort of incubator for social innovation experiments where our actors can unfold their life projects with low risk, utilizing a tourism development based on the need to change the living conditions of these places.

Italian natural protected areas are even more primed for such experimentation when it comes to sustainable tourism given their intrinsic ability to combine economic growth, environmental sustainability, and protection of common goods (Phillips 2002; Cassola 2005; Consorzio Aaster 2013). With the longstanding recognition that these natural areas also contain a built environment valuable to the identity, economy, and wellbeing of the Italian people, parks have more recently applied strategies capable of combining conservation and enhancement, with the involvement of local communities (Salvatore and Chiodo 2017). We named the formal and informal involvement of community members in our thematic findings and identified how revitalization processes that engage the community create a sort of feedback loop: sustainable tourism feeds social innovation (such as innovative networking strategies, community-based development, and changes in lifestyle through encounters with tourists [see Table 4]) which in turn enhances the tourism offer. The impact on the observed towns was increased awareness from local residents, local resource enhancement, new job opportunities, and increased quality of life.

Furthermore, our investigation reveals a new approach to mobility and community that is taking shape in our selected cases. Staying, leaving, or returning are incorporated into people's "own life" trajectories as a realistic but impermanent choice, often giving way to circular movements that affect the "sense of place," even for the permanent dwellers. This new sense of community is particularly important in the perspective of resilience because these peripheral inner areas display strategic resources to mobilize in times of economic, environmental, and, more recently, public health crises. For instance, more recently the outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic are revealing to us the importance of resources such as clean air, open spaces, and low population density to create sustainable alternatives for development.

In this context, tourism's role has yet to be clearly outlined. After our fieldwork and data elaboration, it seems that tourism could be an important, strategic tool to improve life quality and sustainability through resource mobilization. On the other hand, it is not clear how and when this might happen. We do know, however, that a fundamental part is played by the community members old and new, and by their ability to pursue shared paths of innovation. Thus, continuing a critical read into the

role of these actors will remain pertinent to following the socio-cultural and eco-nomic change that social innovation, in the framework of sustainable tourism, is bringing to these peripheral rural areas.

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