Experimenting on the Recovery from Territorial marginalisation. The Case of the B.A.R.E.G.A Project Action Group (Sulcis - Sardinia)

Anna Maria Colavitti, Fabio Parascandolo

1. Living in a depressed area: the critical context of the Carbonia-Iglesias district

Sardinia is going through one of its worst crises in recent history. Several telltale signs of hardship may be listed here: growing unemployment rates, a precarious job market, the reduction of qualified jobs and delayed, if not wholly hindered, young work-force participation into the productive market. Such elements appear to be on the verge of igniting explosive social conflicts within the territory and surrounding communities. Evident (mainly generational) contrasts appear between those who still enjoy the stability of certain privileges (such as secure work and ensuing guarantees) and those excluded from the production process as they witness the crumbling of any democratic representation. With the benefit of hindsight, we shall notice that the development centred on the supposed social and financial benefits of large industrial poles, which landed on the island in the 60s and 70s, appears not to meet the imaginative design of projected welfare. The progressive intentions of the Rebirth paradigm have failed: its outcomes are still under ongoing debate within their historical perspective (Colavitti 2013; Soddu 1998). As a result, questionable financial and national policies have privileged the rise of a limited number of productive sectors partly or wholly financed by the state. The negative impacts of such situation are forcefully handed down to the new generations, penetrating their ideas and mentalities. Certain multinational giants appear as the beneficiaries of such situation, their presence tightly intertwined to main-stream profit opportunities, as has been amply demonstrated by the widely broadcast Alcoa case (Lelli 1983; Perna 1994).

With the exception of a few decades, such model of financial evolution and social project did not offer valid job opportunities to local inhabitants, who, removed from their farming traditions and employed in the industrial, tertiary sector, have undergone radical lifestyle changes. A development without progress (P.P. Pasolini in Siti, de laude 1999, 455-458; Saragossa 2005, 64-68) has imposed on current and possibly on future generations an austere burden of negative externalities. The concrete eco-monsters which sully the island’s landscape testify to this; albeit a landscape ever marketed to tourists as ‘the last Eden’ in Europe. Rather than an actual, it is an apparent paradise for those who live there. Suffice it to say that Sardinia holds the national lead (445,000 ha) for contaminated environments as a result of industrial activities (to which we should add the devastation left by military bases). With regards to the pollution of the ground/underground and of sur-
face/underground aquifers, the south-west of the island is one of the most critically affected regions, in particular abandoned or about to be abandoned mining areas in the Sulcis-Iglesiente district. Here the production and dismantlement processes have called for the identification of Sites of National Interest (SIN) contaminated with a high concentration of polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons, dioxins, heavy metals, chlorinated solvents, polychlorinated byphenils and so on.\textsuperscript{1} From an environmental point of view, conditions in Sulcis are worrying indeed, in combination with the state of the local economy,\textsuperscript{2} the general picture is definitely at a critical stage. Such term is not used lightly here. The ecological, financial, social and health problems in the area are indeed a heavy impact emergency the younger generations in the district. Unfortunately, this is not the only such situation in Sardinia. In some respects, it can indeed be extended to other regions and environments in progressive decline. It appears as the inevitable consequence not only of the global crisis, but also of the inability to think of and implement adequate policies aimed at social, ecological and financial sustainability. The context thus far outlined has served as backdrop to some initiatives by local committees and citizen associations who have gathered with the aim to reinvent an environmentally and responsibly sustainable communal life.

\textbf{2. The BA.R.E.G.A Project}

The acronym BA.R.E.G.A is an intentionally complex synthesis: “Bio Architecture, Economic Network, Action Group”\textsuperscript{3}; it is also the toponym of the region in the Carbonia-Iglesias district in which the Association is located and operates. The origin of the project is contextually linked to the association itself and its namesake. It attracts individuals potentially able to sustain basic social and ecological reproducibility, a self-sufficient and self-sustaining community (Tönnies 2011).\textsuperscript{4} The group ranges between 30 and 40 years of age, people trying to realise their life and work expectations, inspired by self-imposed principles of sobriety and harmonious coexistence of means and ends in the communal life. Their connective sense of belonging consists in their common interest to re evaluate all local resources according to sustainable modes, thereby maintaining the local environment unaltered and welcoming also through initiatives of long-term environmental awareness. They are characterised by a powerfully reactive attitude towards the local socio-economical context, which is indeed typified by a stagnating job market\textsuperscript{5}. The revival of local economy stands as one of the primary targets, by means of a network to feed into and promote constructive synergies amongst its members. The Barega Project Action Group (the membership of which is by far greater than that of the formally recognised association) promotes research into environmentally

\textsuperscript{1} Source: Ministero della Salute [Ministry of Health and Safety], Relazione sullo stato sanitario del paese 2009-2010, <http://www.rssp.salute.gov.it/imgs/C_17_navigazioneSecondariaRelazione_2_listaCapitoli_capitoliItemName_0_scarica ta.pdf> (last accessed 23.11.12); see also Rapporto bonifiche FederAmbiente, 2010.

\textsuperscript{2} See Programma operativo Regionale Sardegna ST “Competitività regionale e occupazione” FESR 20087-2013, pp. 12ff.

\textsuperscript{3} The word ‘community’ is to be understood in Tönnies’ original sense, in Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft published in 1887.

\textsuperscript{4} One of the salient aspects which surfaced during our interviews with members of the community is psychological depression, in many ways connected to financial depression typical the region.
friendly, renewable and sustainable alternatives to living solutions and a variety of activities poignant from a cultural, social, financial and environmental point of view. It aims at a constructive interaction with the existing economy (typified by small, scattered industries), which, despite its many inadequacies, is an intrinsic aspect of the region. Open source ecology forms one of the means used to promote the search of such alternatives. This is a well-established system in the global network; it shares and further improves on technological knowledge geared towards the most common problem-solving approaches (Latouche 2008). On the basis of our preliminary investigations and interviews within this community, it has become clear that "living in Sardinia means living in a region with very high potential and yet without future prospects," and that "trying to overcome the crisis means to overcome inadequate policies" (excerpts from a public speech of the current president). The action group has focused its attention on what appear to be most efficient economical models in a disadvantaged territory. The group has come to the conclusion that adequate use of local resources is a priority in order to attain the sustainable objectives (for example with minimal environmental impact, as an alternative to the energy problems). Use of naturally retrieved materials (so-called 'Km 0'), which are financially efficient and can be worked and treated at non-high temperatures (Sertorio 2000) has allowed for the exploitation of techniques at very low financial and energy cost. The techniques employed and tried are actively and convivially shared among all parties interested in the course of pre-planned meetings. Thus a mutual circle of support is created in which each gives and receives. The project branches off in the territory, thereby creating new energies as multi-fold, self-fulfilling pathways (Magiocchi 1997). With monthly or bimonthly meetings, the construction of a living prototype, an icon building, gradually took shape, around it, "a self-standing extensive network and not just a local one, focused on themes of self-development". A further strength to the project consists in a dwelling space conceived as a vessel to many experiences and necessary integrations and an enhancer to form and share innovative knowledge. The living prototype represents the fulcrum in the local network for it engenders a wealth of options otherwise barred to new generations: namely the options to design and employ resources in view of a future, independent life project. Indeed, the idea of the progressive construction of the community mirrors a basic need, that of sharing a path and technical acquisitions, as well as the openness of its membership unconditional and regardless of individual experiences.

3. Shared training and other initiatives

The idea of a shared training forms an especially close theme to the ideals of the B.A.R.E.G.A. action group. The search for new training pathways originates from an awareness that every action, every energy movement aimed at any activity, may be replicated and transmitted to other communities, through IT channels as an instant vehicle of the action-knowledge flows. Such is the philosophy and the structure be-

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5 The method was founded by the physicist Martin Jakubowski. It conforms to the theory of ‘serene degrowth’ introduced by S. Latouche.

6 L. Sertorio highlights from the point of view of matter physics the impact of industrial processes on the planet’s sustainability.

7 In 2012 the Action Group hosted six workshops on the following themes: “Composite vegetable garden,” “Stone lab,” “Making clay objects,” “Building with haystacks,” “Clay plaster,” “Plaster and lime-finish.”
hind the participation to some international activities within the range of envi-
ronmentally friendly communities. Further sectors have joined in, and not exclusively
connected to bioconstruction; for example the development of some art networks
to which artists of different origin took part.

Social promotion forms the main aim of the action group with the following objec-
tives:
- global improvement in terms of sustainability, social justice and quality of life, at-
tainable through priority (yet responsible) use of material and non-material local
resources, thereby reducing dependency on fossil fuels and production of green-
house gases;
- promotion and circulation of sustainable life-styles;
- territorial development and promotion to be made compatible with environmen-
tal, cultural and economic local resources;
- sustainable tourism, in synty with the environment, tradition and history of the
local culture;
- creation and promotion of self-development and self-promotion local networks;
- publication of knowledge and themes which are relevant to the local culture, to
promote and favour sustainable development;
- promotion of public health and work-place security;
- sustainable mobility;
- development in the research and spreading of models, techniques and innovative
technologies with positive effects on local environment, economy and society, and
on public health;
- short-haul commerce with low impact on the environment and a positive socioec-
onomic impact on the rural and handcrafts world;
- implementation of initiatives to sustain cultural, artistic and social interchange be-
tween the local and the global levels;
- promotion of social involvement of all individuals, with close attention to the weak-
er groups (the elderly, disadvantaged children and so on) in recreational, artistic,
social, educational, rehabilitation initiatives;
- promotion of artistic, cultural and technical training activities;
- construction of chattels and real estate.

4. Final remarks

Our first remark will focus on the concept of resilience, which has made a comeback
to the scientific world and indeed represents one of the most innovative compo-
nents within the Italian debate on development.
A resilient community is a community who finds in itself the strength to survive, in-
vventing new strategies and solutions. Without a doubt, this represents a novelty, with
some limitations and problems, however - mainly of efficiency and equity. A coop-
erative is not always capable of conflict-solving, indeed a natural occurrence even

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8 In May 2012 the B.A.R.E.G.A. Project was among the top recipients of a reward for “training” in the Medi-
terranean Bioarchitecture Congress organised by Catalonia architects.
9 We cite here Marta Fontanà’s and Monica LuGa’s artwork (2012). The art installations and, more in gene-
ral, the art events promoted by the Action Group were hosted with the cooperation of GiuseppeFrau-
Gallery from Gonesa (Carbonia-Iglesias district) and other local cultural enterprises, among which the
music events at Agrifest 2012 - Sensorial Fest of Bucolic Eclecticism” and the “AgriArt Factory”.
within resilient communities. If in the past all availability of goods was framed within a market perspective, nowadays the mentality change introduced by the cooperative, resilient community considers every used good as a means and not as an end (Ostrom 2010a; Ostrom 2010b; Poteete et al. 2010). 10

On the other hand, a final reflection must be canvassed within the specifically Sardinian context and the critical paucity of goods and services created and produced within and by the rural communities, in contrast with their material and cultural needs. Following ‘the development without progress’ which made an insistent appearance as of the ‘50s, the region has undergone a radical change of perspective: the production and consumption of local goods and services have primarily been taiylored and conformed to the needs of the national and/or international markets. The tendency reversal of such economic extrovert trend could, sustainably speaking, requalify cultures and rural landscapes regenerating at the same time social practices, once fundamental to a communal life: family agriculture; vernacular construction, various kinds of handcrafts, local food industries and short-haul commercial activities. These sectors are virtually no-longer existent nowadays as they have been culturally devalued by an age-old industrialising urbanization and barred from the market by modernisation processes superimposed in the aftermath of WW II (Italian public policies, European CAP; techno-economical rationalisations and expansions of large-scale economies, emigration, demographic-aging) (Parascandolo 1995; 2005). Unpublished territorial systems could, on the other hand, be enhanced by modernised and wide-ranging flows of environmentally friendly goods and services, exchanged in the diversified, extensive and incremental multifunctionality contexts of farming enterprises. Insofar as is possible, the economy’s flows would be produced and distributed in new proximity contexts, by reviving the regional and sub-regional markets of essential goods.

References


Latouche S. (2008), Breve trattato sulla decrescita serena, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino.


10 According to Ostrom’s qualification of cooperative, cooperative components limit inefficiency risks, proper to traditional and capitalistic economies.
Abstract

Sardinia is going through one of its worst crises in recent history. Several telltale signs of hardship may be listed here: growing unemployment rates, a precarious job market, the reduction of qualified jobs and delayed, if not wholly hindered, young workforce participation into the productive market. Such elements appear to be on the verge of igniting explosive social conflicts within the territory and surrounding communities. The context thus far outlined has served as backdrop to some initiatives by local committees and citizen associations who have gathered with the aim to reinvent an environmentally and responsibly sustainable communal life.

The B.A.R.E.G.A. Project Action Group “Bio Architecture, Economic Network, Action Group” promotes research into environmentally friendly, renewable and sustainable alternatives to living solutions and a variety of activities poignant from a cultural, social, financial and environmental point of view.

Keywords

Economic crisis, Sustainability, Social conflict, Community, Bio Architecture

Authors

Anna Maria Colavitti
Università di Cagliari - DICAAR
amcolavt@unica.it

Fabio Parascandolo
Università di Cagliari - DSBCT
parascan@unica.it