FOSTERING AGENCY IN MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES: PARTICIPATORY METHODOLOGIES AND TOOLS FOR TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT

PROMUOVERE L'AGENTIVITÀ NELLE COMUNITÀ MARGINALI: METODOLOGIE E STRUMENTI PARTECIPATIVI PER LO SVILUPPO TERRITORIALE

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ABSTRACT

Fostering agency within marginalized communities is essential to addressing inequalities and stimulating local planning capacities. Can Needs Mapping be meaningfully integrated with Community-Centered Design and Design Thinking? If so, under what conditions and at what levels? Through the analysis of participatory practices and digital tools, this study examines experimental case studies from the south-eastern Salento region, proposing co-design as a means to strengthen territorial agency.

Promuovere l'agentività nelle comunità marginali è necessario per contrastare le disuguaglianze e stimolare la progettualità locale. Può, la Mappatura dei Bisogni, dialogare con il Community-Centered Design e il Design Thinking? Se sì, a quale condizioni e livelli? Dall'analisi di pratiche partecipative e strumenti digitali, attraversiamo casi studio sperimentati nell'area del Salento sud-orientale, proponendo la co-progettazione come strumento per rafforzare l'agentività dei territori.

KEYWORDS

Agency, community development, participatory design, co-design, enhancement of the territory
Agentività, sviluppo di comunità, design partecipativo, co-progettazione, valorizzazione del territorio

Introduction

In recent decades, both in political and scientific spheres, there has been a growing interest in the social, economic, and cultural inequalities affecting marginalized communities within our country. This heightened attention has contributed to foregrounding practices and tools aimed at fostering community agency, with the objective of promoting active participation capable of influencing processes of territorial transformation and local development.

This work seeks to undertake a theoretical examination of the concept of *agency*, emphasizing its significance within the field of community pedagogy as a generative resource for marginal areas. We will explore the models and methodologies employed to translate the theoretical implications of this construct into practical interventions, sharing the insights that emerge from the theory-practice circularity which characterizes the research-intervention initiatives conducted by our research group in specific contexts within a marginal area. These initiatives aim to experiment with models and methodologies that promote community development, enhance local assets, and initiate genuine processes of transformative learning for local development. Over more than a decade, this program of work has enabled us to define and refine a model for listening to local social actors in order to uncover potentialities and risks—what we have termed *Needs Mapping* (NM). At present, we are investigating whether, and under what conditions, it is possible to integrate the *Community-Centered Design* (CCD) approach and *Design Thinking* (DT) methodology into this model, with the goal of enhancing the effectiveness of our actions, particularly in regard to participatory processes aimed at increasing youth engagement. Finally, we will present two case studies conducted in the reference area of our experimentation. These cases involve the engagement of, respectively, young people and cultural associations within the community, from which we have drawn valuable insights for continuing our focus on participation and intervention strategies—also supported by digital technologies.

1. Agency as a resource for marginalized communities

Agency refers to the capacity of individuals and communities to act intentionally, consciously, and responsibly within their living environment, interacting with and

upon contextual conditions and constraints, actively influencing them (Battaglini, 2022; Colazzo, 2024). Psychosociological (see Bandura, 2006) and ecological perspectives frame agency as the result of reciprocal relationships, situated along a *continuum* between individual and collective agency (Faggioli, 2021). In this sense, Crivelli and Balconi complement the concept of agency with that of *inter-agency,* "which can be defined as the feeling and subsequent conscious recognition that *we* – I together with the Other – are those who have generated an action and caused its effects" (Crivelli & Balconi, 2017, p. 352). Agency is therefore a form of co-agency expressed through relationships with the context and potentially leading to community empowerment. The latter is understood as the result of a transformative learning process that allows the subject to develop a critical awareness of the self, the context, and of the self within the context (Colazzo, 2024). Agency is connected to the notion of *capabilities*, i.e., the set of possible combinations (between subjective potential and contextual opportunities) that a person is able to actualize (Sen, 2020). It implies not only the possibility to act and make decisions, but also the effective availability of favorable contextual conditions for its development. In marginal contexts—characterized by economic depletion, low use of local resources, depopulation, and a lack of essential services— promoting agency is highly complex. By marginal communities, we refer to those social and territorial groups that find themselves in structurally disadvantaged positions with respect to dominant economic, social, and cultural centers. Theoretically, the definition of *marginality* in relation to territories and communities is not univocal: it can be interpreted in geographical-spatial terms, in relation to centers, or as a social condition, the result of historical and systemic processes that have generated inequalities over time (Pozzi, 2019). Petrillo (2018) emphasizes that new forms of marginality derive from global economic transformations and also acquire a symbolic dimension. Similarly, Wacquant (2016) identifies advanced marginality as a direct consequence of the withdrawal of the welfare state.

Overcoming marginality involves increasing the capacitation of the community and its members: recognizing opportunities offered by the context, but also transforming it, through citizen participation in decision-making processes and investment in the community's internal resources. Agency has an *entrepreneurial* dimension (Costa & Strano, 2016), which should not be confused with the concepts of "entrepreneurship" or "self-entrepreneurship" promoted by neoliberal rhetoric. *Entrepreneurial agency* emerges when local actors are able to imagine alternatives,

take initiatives, mobilize knowledge and endogenous resources, build networks, and leverage their skills and competencies in relation to contextual resources. In the realm of territorial development, agency can translate into the community's ability to enhance local knowledge and exercise forms of self-determination, influencing local and institutional dynamics. In this sense, the territory can be understood as an *agentive laboratory* (Pignalberi, 2021), in which to experiment with new social and economic models and practices capable of activating latent resources, generating shared opportunities, and strengthening social cohesion. The territory, along with its inhabitants, takes shape as a relational *ecosystem* in which possibilities and trajectories for local and community development are constantly redefined. It is possible to reverse the gaze on marginality: in this regard, bell hooks invites us to recognize in the margin a *space of possibility* (hooks, 1998), in order to grasp its generative potential. The possibility of reframing marginality positively is also increasingly addressed in the scientific literature on inner areas, seen as strategic spaces for social innovation and the experimentation of new models of economic development and community empowerment. In this light, inhabiting—or rather *re-inhabiting*—takes on a meaning that goes well beyond merely returning to or remaining in such areas. Re-inhabiting implies a renewed relationship between community and lived environment, "[...] it also means evoking a possible, somehow desired scenario, capable of bringing people, things, and territories back into play [...]" (Lanzani & Curci, 2018, p. 134).

2. The contextual setting and our *"in vivo"* experimentation

By adopting the concept of the margin as a challenging yet generative observatory, the communities we have selected as *in vivo* laboratories for experimenting with socio-pedagogical models oriented toward agency are small rural and peripheral municipalities located in the southeastern Salento area (Apulia, Italy), beginning with the town of Ortelle and gradually extending to neighboring municipalities.

Ortelle is a small town in the province of Lecce, classified within the framework of the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI) as an *intermediate* area (Department for Cohesion Policies and the South, 2022). As of December 31, 2023, the resident population numbered 2.179 (ISTAT, 2025), with a well-established trend of depopulation, particularly among younger cohorts. Currently, 550 residents between the ages of 15 and 39 live in the town, signaling a significant decline in the

community's active demographic component. Specifically, according to ISTAT data from January 1, 2024, the dependent population of Ortelle (ages 0–14 and ≥65) totals 962 individuals, amounting to 44.1% of the total population, whereas the working-age population (15–64 years) includes 1.217 individuals, or 55.9%. Consequently, the structural dependency ratio (dependents to independents) is 79.0%. At the provincial level, Apulia recorded a structural dependency ratio of 59.6% on the same date, indicating a significantly lower demographic burden compared to the municipal level. ISTAT data thus confirm a progressive aging of the population and increasing difficulty in attracting and retaining youth, students, and professionals—factors that constitute one of the primary drivers of social and economic decline. The local productive fabric is mainly concentrated in agriculture, construction, commerce, and, to a lesser extent, in artisan trades and services related to tourism and hospitality (Lecce Chamber of Commerce, 2025). Access to public services is limited to essential needs, with few social, sports, and recreational facilities. Ortelle hosts a preschool, a primary school, a lower secondary school, and a municipal library, though the overall educational and cultural offerings remain limited. Similarly, local public transportation is characterized by infrequent connections, which significantly hampers the daily mobility of students, workers, and the elderly. From a landscape and cultural perspective, the territory is rich in biodiversity and includes several natural areas, such as the Otranto–Santa Maria di Leuca and Tricase Forest Regional Natural Park. The area is further distinguished by elements of historical and architectural interest and a rich intangible heritage, manifested through popular traditions, religious festivals, and traditional agricultural and artisanal knowledge and practices.

Over the past decade, we have developed a range of actions in the field that have enabled us to engage local communities, mapping their specific characteristics, tangible and intangible resources, challenges, and key informants. Our participatory research-intervention has involved local institutions, associations, schools, public agencies, and citizens in initiatives focused on the valorization of cultural—particularly oral—heritage and landscapes, the interrelation of local socio-economic dimensions, local production, artisanal knowledge, community rituals, and agro-food traditions. Since 2012, all research activities have been conducted by EspérO, a university spin-off now recognized as an innovative SME. As of 2024, this work has converged into P.L.A.C.E., Laboratory for Social Innovation and Community Development, established through a collaboration between Pegaso University and EspérO. Currently, the laboratory is initiating a foundational

process for a *Community Ecomuseum*, envisioned as a tool for implementing participatory territorial governance, fostering community reflexivity, and enabling a productive re-narration of local identity. Within this process, participation serves as a fundamental component for promoting active citizenship, empowering local actors, and cultivating shared responsibility.

3. The theoretical and methodological framework of our research

The theoretical framework is rooted in *community studies* and community pedagogy (Colazzo & Manfreda, 2019), with the goal of fostering participation and engaging people in decision-making processes that affect them; of supporting individuals in developing self-awareness and realizing their potential; and of empowering communities in their development and in the governance of their territories (Colazzo, 2024). Our interventions are complex, multi-layered systems of engagement designed to reach and involve the various target groups that make up a territory. They are carried out by designing 'open' and informal environments (actions take place in public and everyday spaces) and deeply situated experiences (Manfreda, 2024). The aim is to promote change that emerges from within communities as a result of increased awareness (Colazzo & Manfreda, 2019). Digital technologies, when meaningfully integrated, can serve as enabling and inclusive tools, enhancing collective learning, shared decision-making, and contextual innovation. They go beyond a mere support function by making visible and integrating distributed competencies that often remain marginalized. Collaborative platforms, shared digital archives, multichannel storytelling tools, and participatory visualization instruments—when selected and co-designed *with* and *for* the communities—become infrastructures of agency and participation. Studies such as those by Brown and Ratzkin (2011) and the guidelines issued by Arts Council England (2017) highlight how accessibility and cultural relevance can significantly influence both the quality of participation and the sense of belonging to the activated processes. All of this work begins with the *Needs Mapping* (NM)—a model for assessment and intervention that aims to reveal the tacit dimensions and systems of meaning through which individuals interpret themselves and their context. It acts as a tool for individual and community empowerment, guiding the design of the transformative learning interventions that we develop with the community (Manfreda, 2024). A key feature of the NM is its reinterpretation of the concept of 'Need', which diverges from its traditional understanding as a lack or

deviation from an ideal or theoretical profile. In this model, Need is viewed as a dynamic resource and a potential driver of change. Behind NM and the reformulation of the construct of Need there's the semiotic theory of social action. This perspective, explicitly inspired by Peirce's semiotics and enriched by anthropological contributions, views social action—that is, *action* that *constitutes society*—as the (even unconscious) effort of individuals to make sense of reality and to exchange communications in order to define the meaning of their lives and environments. To act, therefore, is always to interpret. As a consequence, social reality is not seen as an external, objective given, but as a *collective construction* generated through discourse, practice, symbolic exchange, and shared meaning—interpretive acts that underpin *culture*, understood as a stratified and evolving system of shared codes that characterizes a given social or territorial group or society and offers interpretive/action coordinates to its members. A core aspect of this theory is the *performative nature* of every social act: what we say and do not only describes but also actively positions us socially and seeks to influence others. The interpretive acts of individuals both reaffirm existing meanings—socially established and shared—and challenge the status quo, envision new narratives, and reimagine both the self and the context in which one acts. They generate change. *Need*, then, is precisely that *restlessness* that drives us beyond simple repetition, fueling the imagination of alternatives, the re-narration of experience and memory, and the projective tension toward change (Manfreda, 2024). Need, as *restlessness* toward the 'known', the 'already given', becomes a resource to leverage in a project of learning and transformation. This is the essence of the NM process: a *dialogical process* that encourages and supports participants in reading their local cultures and practices, unveiling implicit representations and meanings, and facilitating reflexivity so they can interpret themselves, their contexts, and their positioning within them. The NM highlights the transformative dimension of Need: it helps individuals bring it to light from its tacit state, connect it to contextual resources and opportunities, and translate it into a project of learning and change (Manfreda, 2024). From a methodological standpoint, the NM presents the following key features:

- *qualitative and hermeneutic approach:* it seeks to deeply understand situations and subjective meanings, adopting a clinical and ethnographic posture;

- *centrality of narrative:* storytelling is considered a privileged mode through

which individuals construct meaning, rework experience, and project themselves into the future. The NM uses both endogenous and exogenous narrative prompts to surface interpretive and meaning-making dynamics;

- *dialogic and co-constructive process*: need is not made of objective data to be measured, but of meaning to be revealed and co-constructed through dialogue between researchers and participants;

- *focus on context*: it examines individuals in connection with their social and cultural systems of belonging—their "local culture".

The approach favors qualitative methods that value interaction and deep understanding. The narrative material generated during the NM (interview transcripts, written texts, etc.) is subjected to multi-factorial qualitative-quantitative textual analysis to extract latent meaning structures, identify thematic clusters, and visualize the relationships between concepts and the positioning of subjects within the semantic space explored—going beyond mere semantic-descriptive content.

The methodologies employed in the NM are participatory, grounded in an epistemological vision that acknowledges the legitimacy of situated knowledge and experiential competence, positioning itself as an alternative to top-down planning and traditional interventionist models.

4. Needs Mapping and Service Design tools: a comparison

We are currently exploring ways to enhance the Needs Mapping process, particularly in the phases of *feedback* and *co-construction*[1], which serve as the starting point for community co-design. In this regard, we find methodologies and tools from the field of participatory design particularly relevant—especially the *Community-Centered Design* approach and *Design Thinking*.

Community-Centered Design (CCD) is characterized as a design approach oriented toward the co-design of solutions *with* and *for the benefit* of communities,

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[1] The ND process is structured into four main phases: 1. Preparatory and contextual analysis phase; 2. Narrative exploration phase; 3. Analysis and interpretation phase (construction of the "map" of meanings and latent needs); 4. Feedback and co-construction phase (for a detailed discussion, see: Manfreda, 2024).

grounded in the analysis of needs, resources, and aspirations of local actors. Unlike the more common *human-centered* approach adopted by various design fields, CCD assigns to communities the role of custodians of situated knowledge, collective memory, and untapped design potential (Villari, 2013; Manzini, 2015). This approach emerges at the intersection of theoretical frameworks such as social design, critical pedagogies, and participatory practices, positioning itself as a strategic tool for fostering collective agency and implementing territorial regeneration processes. As a non-linear process, CCD positions researchers as facilitators, promoting dialogue on shared issues and the co-construction of solutions. As emphasized by Sanders and Stappers (2008), co-design is a key element in shaping shared design landscapes, in which the boundary between expert and non-expert becomes increasingly blurred, enabling collective design processes oriented toward innovation. Listening, participant observation, storytelling, and feedback become essential tools for building trust-based relationships and structuring practices of contextual care. In contexts marked by marginality or structural vulnerability, CCD proves to be a valuable approach for addressing inequalities through pathways of empowerment and epistemic justice, aimed at reconfiguring power dynamics (Bang et al., 2015). Within the CCD framework, the design output is subordinate to the quality of the intersubjective relationships that are activated and to the capacity to trigger enduring social change. In this preliminary analysis, significant points of convergence clearly emerge between CCD and the NM approach, insofar as both share a needs-centered perspective, are grounded in practices of listening and participation, conceive of intervention as a transformative device, and transcend the traditional stance of the researcher/facilitator as sole expert—recognizing instead a plurality of knowledges, both formal and informal. They share an enabling and plural posture, a prioritization of process over outcome, a dialogical orientation, and a commitment to fostering community agency and empowerment.

Within the methodological toolkit of participatory design, Design Thinking (DT) emerges as a valuable approach for facilitating and stimulating co-design processes. It is based on a human-centered design perspective, aimed at actively fostering the ideation and implementation of innovative solutions, and enabling the creative resolution of complex problems through iterative and collaborative processes. The underlying approach of this methodology already marks a first distinction from both the NM and CCD frameworks. Its theoretical foundation rests on a situated and pragmatic epistemology, wherein understanding users' needs and co-defining

meaning constitute the basis for effective transformation. Although DT originated within the conceptual framework of corporate innovation and product engineering, it has undergone a gradual evolution and integration with the social sciences and educational sector. This development has established it as a highly effective methodology for addressing complex problems in contexts characterized by high uncertainty and intricate socio-cultural dynamics (Kimbell, 2011; Johansson-Sköldberg et al., 2013). DT is founded on several core principles that define its epistemological and operational identity: the *centrality of user experience*; *interdisciplinary collaboration* that encourages the integration of diverse knowledge domains; the adoption of an *abductive* and *iterative logic*; an *orientation toward managing uncertainty* and addressing "wicked problems"; and the *strategic use of prototyping* as a dialogical tool for knowledge construction and progressive solution validation. Operationally, it is articulated in five phases - empathy, definition, ideation, prototyping, and testing - which do not follow a rigid or prescriptive sequence, but rather form a dynamic framework within which co-design is nourished through ongoing dialogue between expert knowledge and local knowledge (Plattner et al., 2017). Unlike prescriptive approaches, DT embraces ambiguity and the plurality of perspectives as design resources rather than obstacles. Within the NM process, DT could intervene during the feedback phase to initiate the participatory co-design phase. Once the map has been shared, discussed, and problematized, it can serve as a fertile foundation upon which to envision possible actions and project developments. DT can thus be introduced as a method capable of facilitating the transition from the shared recognition of needs to the collective design of potential intervention trajectories. However, in relation to NM, DT highlights several critical issues, particularly when the focus of design transcends the individual dimension to become rooted in a community context. The human-centered approach of DT risks reducing design to a series of summative solutions that may fail to capture the complexity of community relational dynamics. A second issue concerns the role of the facilitator/researcher, endowed with technical and methodological expertise, which may interfere with a more horizontal dynamic with participants, generating dependency and a perception of the externalization of responsibility, thus undermining authentic local agency.

The methodological challenge, therefore, that we face consists in integrating NM - CCD - DT within an interdisciplinary perspective that goes beyond a mere summation of techniques and tools, but rather knows how to hybridize approaches

and practices in a functional and scientifically coherent manner to maximize the impacts of the research.

5. Case studies

The case studies presented here concern two initiatives carried out in Ortelle (Lecce, Apulia – Italy) in October 2024, within the context of the traditional San Vito Fair. These initiatives represent two components of the action-research program outlined in the preceding sections and illustrate experiences of activation and engagement of local youth and associations through the use of participatory tools, both digital and analog.

5.1. Case Study: "Narratives from the territory for the territory" Workshop

The workshop *Narratives from the territory for the territory* was developed in collaboration with the GAL Porta a Levante and Confartigianato Imprese Lecce, and involved 43 students from the lower secondary school of Ortelle and the "Aldo Moro" Mediterranean Technical Hub in Santa Cesarea Terme. The workshop aimed to explore the knowledge and representations that young people hold of their own territory. A participatory approach was adopted, actively engaging both formal (such as local authorities) and informal (such as citizens) local resources. The main objective of the workshop was to encourage younger generations to explore employment opportunities in the fields of agriculture and craftsmanship, fostering reflection on their local environment and economic realities. The workshop was structured around a series of activities emphasizing intergenerational dialogue and the co-production of knowledge. Students had the opportunity to engage with young farmers and artisans from the area, who shared the challenges, opportunities, and potential of their professions in relation to the local economic and social fabric. Subsequently, farmers, artisans, and students, divided into four groups, participated in a co-creation process designed to encourage reflection on the present, envision the future of their territory, and consider the role each individual can play within it. A *timeline* was used as a tool for shared reflection and participatory engagement.
The evaluation of the artifacts produced (see *Fig. 1*), carried out using a specially designed assessment grid, highlighted two significant findings:

- a limited knowledge among young people of the local context;

- difficulty in perceiving and representing their territory as an integral part of their daily lives.
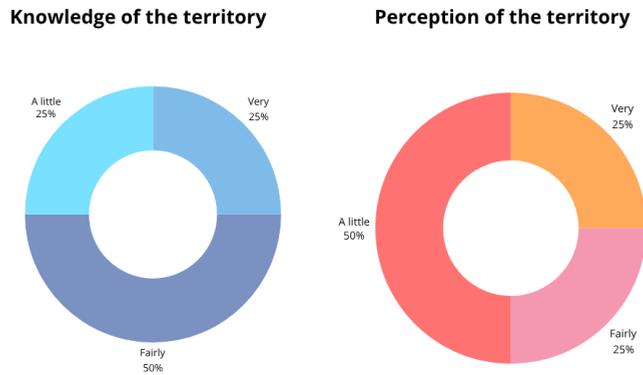
Knowledge of the territory   **Perception of the territory**

Figure 1. Summary Chart of Results for the *"Knowledge of the Territory"* and "Perception of the Territory" Indicators.

In a context such as that of marginal areas—characterized by limited accessibility and scarce opportunities, particularly for younger generations—opportunities for interaction with the territory may be less frequent, contributing to the disconnection between youth and their local environment. This disconnection may also stem from the limited transmission of territorial capital, which affects young people's ability to assign symbolic and cultural value to their territory. As De Rubertis, Mastromarco, and Labianca (2019) argue, in order for value to be attributed, territorial capital must be both known and recognized.

To further investigate the knowledge and representations that young people hold of their reference territory, a semi-structured questionnaire was administered at the conclusion of the workshop. The purpose was to explore the following dimensions:

a) "Context" dimension, referring to young people's perception of their living environment and how they envision the development of their territory;

b) "Territorial knowledge" dimension, in terms of artisanal, cultural, commercial, and other activities;

c) "Future planning" dimension, to examine how young people envision their future and whether they see it unfolding within their territory.

A total of 40 responses were collected out of the 43 workshop participants. The responses were organized into three analytical grids, one for each dimension, allowing for the categorization of data based on themes identified through a careful preliminary reading of the responses. The analysis of the three dimensions revealed several key elements:

1. In relation to the context (see Fig. 2), young people expressed a desire to live in a more accessible and functional territory, capable of providing access to essential goods and a diversified commercial offering, thereby reducing the need to travel to other localities. They also expressed the necessity of spaces for socializing and leisure, and envisioned a territory that: values local culture and traditions while maintaining a dialogue with global modernity; is greener and better maintained.

Young people's preferences regarding territorial development

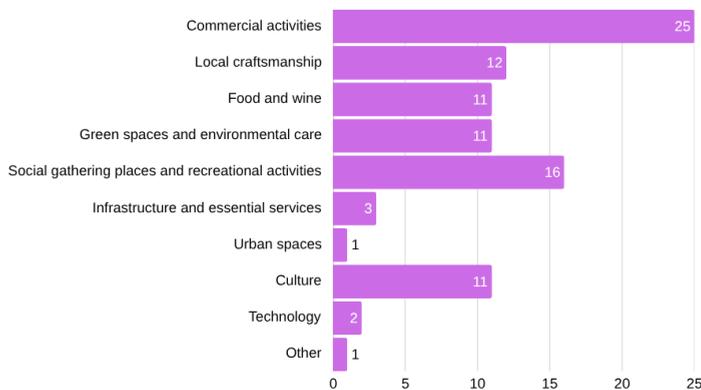| Category	Value
Commercial activities	25
Local craftsmanship	12
Food and wine	11
Green spaces and environmental care	11
Social gathering places and recreational activities	16
Infrastructure and essential services	3
Urban spaces	1
Culture	11
Technology	2
Other	1

Figure 2. Summary Chart – "Context" Dimension.

2. Knowledge of the territory (see Fig. 3) results fragmented and partly uneven, as not all young people have had meaningful experiences at the

local level. This knowledge seems to be tied to everyday life and is primarily mediated through school contexts rather than familial ones. This highlights the central role of the school in creating and promoting opportunities for discovering and understanding the local territory.
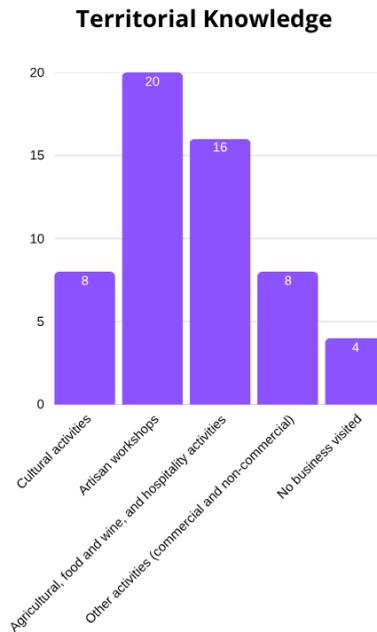

Figure 3. Summary Chart "Territorial Knowledge" Dimension.

3. In the *"future planning"* dimension, the mention of self-employment is of particular significance, indicating a strong interest among young people in entrepreneurship and professional autonomy (Fig. 4). The connection with the territory is largely absent; however, a considerable portion of the youth expresses an emotional and cultural attachment to their local context (Fig. 5), envisioning themselves contributing to its development through the establishment of local businesses or initiatives, and emphasizing the importance of family and social ties. A central theme is the choice between leaving and staying in one's place of origin (Fig. 6). A significant number of respondents expressed a desire to move elsewhere—either for educational reasons or for careers with greater prospects—demonstrating, in line with social mobility theory, a widespread perception of the territory as lacking in adequate professional and educational opportunities, or as a place with

which they feel no connection. On the other hand, some youth expressed a desire to stay, most often citing a strong emotional bond with their territory. These individuals see remaining as an opportunity to contribute to the development of their local area. In some cases, even those who wish to stay show interest in gaining educational or professional experiences elsewhere, with the intention of returning and applying the skills and knowledge acquired. This dynamic reflects the potential of an "enriched return," aligning with the theory of circular mobility. For others, the decision to stay or leave is primarily influenced by feasibility—presumably of an economic nature.
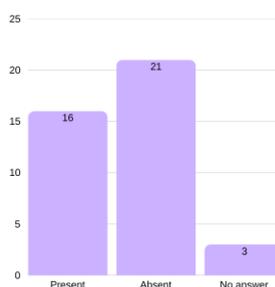
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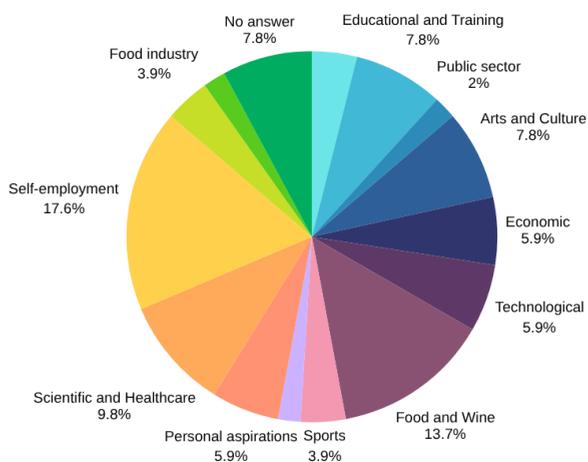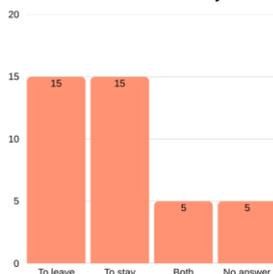
Figures 4; 5; 6 (in order). Summary Charts "Future Planning" Dimension.

The results of the study highlight a limited awareness among the participating youth regarding local opportunities and resources, which affects how they perceive their living environment, employment and self-fulfillment prospects, and their own role within the local context. Consequently, future interventions should aim to address these dimensions by fostering greater and more widespread knowledge of the territory and its assets—particularly among young people. Such efforts should prioritize opportunities for intergenerational dialogue with long-standing local residents and professionals, utilizing experiential, narrative, and creative practices. The ultimate goal is to promote youth entrepreneurship (Morselli & Costa, 2015) and collective agency.

5.2. Case Study: "Towards a Community Ecomuseum: 3rd Governance Meeting with Local Associations"

The third Governance meeting, *"Towards a Community Ecomuseum"*, is part of a broader process initiated in 2023 in collaboration with the Municipality of Ortelle, which was awarded funding under the call *"Support for Municipalities aimed at implementing the governance tools provided for in Chapter III, Title II of the Technical Implementation Rules of the Regional Landscape Plan (PPTR), for the exercise of functions related to the protection and enhancement of the landscape and for the implementation of local-scale landscape planning."* The project, aimed at establishing the Ecomuseum of the Communities of South-Eastern Salento, seeks to enhance the landscape and cultural heritage of the area by promoting sustainable development models based on the active participation of the local community. To this end, between 2023 and 2024, three focus groups were organized, each designed to engage different categories of stakeholders: the first involved citizens, experts, and representatives of local institutions; the second engaged municipal administration; the third —presented here—brought together the governing boards of associations. During this latest session, association representatives, invited as spokespersons of their respective governing bodies, collaborated in the development of a shared work plan aimed at mapping and promoting existing activities within the territory.
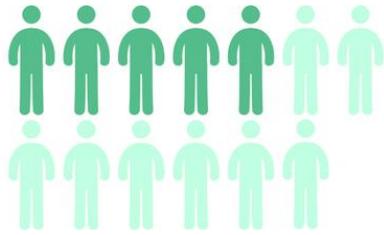
Figure 7. Associations participating in the meeting.

The meeting, convened through official communication in accordance with the Ortelle Associations Council, saw the participation of 5 associations out of 13. To ensure transparency and traceability of the process, the meeting employed various monitoring and data collection tools, including:

- the collaborative platform Miro, projected in real-time to visually present the data collected during the meeting;

- the audio-video recording of the live session through the online platform Stream Yard;

- the production of photographic material;

- a questionnaire administered to participants to gather information on past experiences, expressive potential, and currently available resources;

- the drafting of the official minutes of the meeting.

During the session, the concept of the Ecomuseum clearly emerged not only as a physical repository of memories but also as a dynamic and inclusive tool for social cohesion, aimed at interconnecting local resources and stimulating dialogue among community members.
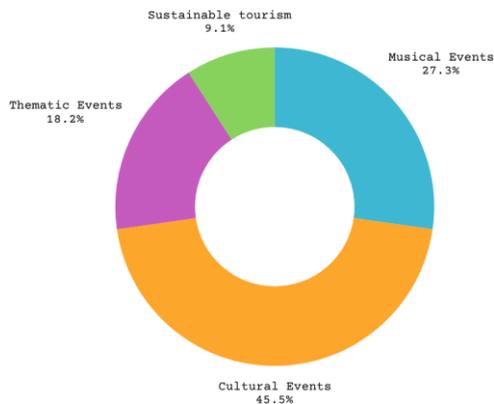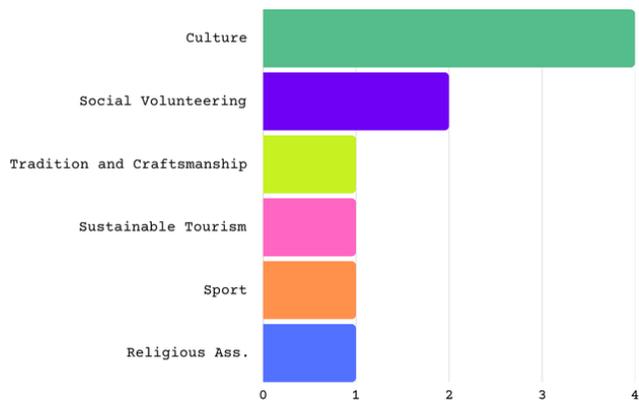
Figure 8; Figure 9. Areas of intervention and projects/initiatives related to the territory

The data collected highlighted a significant heterogeneity in the areas of intervention (fig.8) as well as, albeit to a limited extent *(1 association out of 5)*, some prior experiences of participation in territorial enhancement projects. Particularly noteworthy was the variety of initiatives (fig.9) promoted by some of the participating associations, which represent potential resources for the future Ecomuseum. This diversity of activities demonstrates the richness of the intangible heritage of the Ortelle community and the interest in contemporary issues such as environmental protection, as evidenced by the initiative developed in collaboration with the OdV Plastic Free. This range of practices suggests the possibility of a strong synergy between tradition and innovation, consolidating the Ecomuseum as a dynamic platform for territorial development. However, it should be noted that the

number of responses and attendees was limited (Fig. 7), highlighting the need to strengthen the involvement of local associations. In this regard, the preferences expressed regarding the planning of future meetings underscore the urgency of adopting a flexible and adaptable organizational approach. The overall analysis of the data emphasizes how co-design, particularly for a community-based ecomuseum in marginal areas, promotes the creation of a shared network founded on transparency, accessibility of information, and active participation. The willingness of associations to share their documentary materials – photographs, videos, posters – serves as a significant indicator of openness and adherence to collective connectivity, countering the decline in the sense of community ("we") caused by the weakening of social bonds and the rise of individualism (Romano, 2021). The diversity of associative experiences present in the territory represents an important foundation for the development of a participatory governance model that, through the enhancement of both material and immaterial resources, can influence sustainable development trajectories. These not only foster territorial rooting of actions but, most importantly, promote the agency of communities.

Conclusions

The case studies analyzed highlight the vulnerabilities and the potential of the contexts considered: on the one hand, structural shortcomings emerge—such as the gap between young people and their territory, the lack of public spaces, and the limited coordination and participation among local actors; on the other hand, there are signs of openness, exemplified by young people's interest in pursuing forms of work-related autonomy within their own communities and the willingness expressed by local associations to engage. The implementation of the two workshops demonstrates the effectiveness of participatory practices and purposefully designed educational-experiential and digital tools in fostering the active engagement of local communities and in stimulating their capacity to act as protagonists in the development of their territory. Impacts also underscore the importance of building synergy among key local stakeholders—schools, institutions, the third sector, and citizens—in order to create collaborative networks that support sustainable processes of learning and community development. The overall work conducted has made it possible to illuminate the complexity of marginality, while also revealing the generative potential of the margins themselves—when communities and territories are recognized and

activated as agentive subjects. Within this framework, the possibility of integrating approaches from diverse parts—such as Community-Centered Design (CCD) and Design Thinking (DT)—into the Needs Mapping (NM) model emerges as a promising methodological challenge for structuring governance tools. One such tool is the Community Ecomuseum we are currently developing, conceived as a means of generating a productive link between territory, participation, and social planning.

Author contributions

Despite the authors have shared the whole construction of the paper, Manfreda, A. has written the paragraphs Introduction and 3, Greco, E. has written the paragraphs 1, 2 and 5.1, Boriglione, R. has written the paragraphs 4, 5.2 and Conclusions.

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