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Abstract

“Social innovation“ has become a buzzword and sometimes it seems that it is the successor of the famous “best practices”. In fact it is sometimes hard to distinguish what is really a social innovation. The presentation argues that hosting migrants in mountain areas is a real social innovation as it is a statement against the current tendencies of isolation and xenophobia in Europe and may help in the long run to stabilize fragile municipalities and regions in its peripheral regions. In this sense, it could counteract increasing territorial cleavages between mountains and plains, and between rural and metropolitan areas. The paper presents three examples from the Italian Alps. Experiences from the other Alpine countries will be added in the oral presentation. The paper concludes that hosting migrants may be favourable for regions and migrants. The new situation may create a laboratory situation to develop new forms of cooperation in sparsely populated areas.

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Keywords

Migrants by force; migrants by poverty; refugees; regional development; social innovation in marginalized rural areas; spatial justice; territorial cleavages; welcoming practices

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This presentation deals with (a) the question whether migrants - by force or by poverty -, coming from the global South to peripheral areas in Europe, might be an opportunity for their hosting regions and (b) how migration may support the efforts of social actors in marginalized areas to develop social innovation with the aim to resist to socio-economic decline. It presents experiences from the H2020 project “Social Innovation in marginalized rural areas” (SIMRA), the COST action EMPOWER-SE and the network “Foreigners in the Alps” (FORALPS).

Social innovation has become a very popular topic with manifold definitions and interpretations. The main difference is whether it is understood in an adaptive or a transformative sense. The difference between both interpretations is, whether new groups of social actors, being disadvantaged before, may make emancipative progress

and will gain influence in society during the innovation process; this points in a transformative way (Moulaert et al. 2005; Moulaert et al. 2013). In contrast to this, adaptive social innovation is a practice known as “early movers” and often hard to distinct from mere economic innovation. I support the transformative approach which aligns social innovation with the aims of new organizational models of solidary economy. However, for pragmatic reasons in the SIMRA project we use a very lean definition: « The reconfiguring of social practices in response to so-cietal challenges which seek to enhance the outcomes on societal well-being and necessarily include the engagement of civil society actors. »

The presentation starts with the question “Why should we host refugees at all?” beyond the moral humanitarian aspect and beyond international conventions in order to find supplementary reasons for welcoming migrants.

1. Why hosting migrants?

It lacks place and time to develop this question in an appropriate depth. But the questions is the result of the fact that humanitarian aid to migrants is under pressure by those classes of people who do not need to migrate any more but are afraid to decline in their social status. Xenophobia has a real material basis even it touches the intangible aspects of capital (social and symbolic capital). A new book, not yet translated, analyses the political economy of populism (“Whoever utters populism, should also utter capitalism”, Manow, 2018). Therefore it is useful to provide some arguments why it should be advantageous for mountain regions to host migrants and receiving by this the precious attribute to be innovative.

The rationale in the contested debate on refugees might be as follows: hosting refugees is derived from the normative aim of social inclusion that can become a practice of social innovation towards the standards of United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. We assume that inclusive societies are more sustainable than excluding societies.

Hosting migrants in mountain areas is under several aspects a social innovation and contributes to the aim of cohesive societies:

- taking the responsibility for the colonial and post-colonial exploitation of the Global South
- residents’ consciousness on their own role in the context of global migration
- universalistic perspective against a partial interest strategy
- enlarging the demographic potential of marginalized peripheral areas
- national and supra-national solidarity to cope with common problems (the counter-model is an identity-dominated ethnically purified Europe)

The advantage for the mountain areas: benefitting from the solidarity of the wealthy urban areas by getting more attention, visibility, qualified jobs etc.

The advantage for the migrants: benefitting from another model of a better life, which might be less exposed to individual competition as it is in urban areas.

2. Case studies: Hosting migrants as part of the solidary economy

The SIMRA project provides a large number of case studies on social innovation, among these are also a case study on hosting refugees in Norway (Bjerck, 2017) and a case study in the Libanon to empower women in a peripheral region. The following boxes show three examples of case studies from the Italian Alps.

Box 1: Territorial revitalization by NGO activities: PaceFuturo in Pettinengo, province of Biella (published in Perlik/Membretti, 2018).

Pettinengo (about 1,500 inhabitants) is a municipality in the periurban fringe of the city of Biella (nearly 45,000 inhabitants) (Piedmont/Italy) which is the center of an industrial district of textile industry. Over the past two decades many of the production sites were closed, which once offered plenty of local employment opportunities. The territory has entered a deep socio-economic and identity crisis, highlighted, on the demographic side, by the persistence of a negative natural balance and a related process of aging of the population.

The last decade net-migration has been positive, primarily because of the arrival of foreign immigrants: in 2017, out of 1,462 inhabitants, resident foreigners are 70 (4.8% of the total population), mostly from sub-Saharan Africa and Romania. Even more sizable is, however, the community of asylum seekers, housed in the village thanks to the work of the NGO PaceFuturo (PeaceFuture), which has been founded in Pettinengo in 2001 and has since then been engaged in the cultural sector and in the social inclusion of “disadvantaged” people, focussing in recent years its activities on welcoming refugees.

PaceFuturo has launched in 2008 the project Sent-ieri, oggi e domani (Pathways – yesterday, today and tomorrow). This initiative, undertaken in collaboration with the municipal administration and with the active involvement of the local community, is aimed at bringing back to life more than 10 kilometers of old “factory workers’ paths”. These were the walkways that connected the farms and the larger neighborhoods of the village and were trodden by the peasant-workers to reach the (now-abandoned) factories while in the meantime they were valorizing the woods and the cultural landscape crossed by these pathways. The project goal is to promote the responsible transformation of an area which is suffering a socio-economic and identity crisis by combining cultural growth, tourist development and social solidarity.

Since 2014 PaceFuturo, by agreement with the prefecture of Biella and close cooperation with the existing units of the textile industry, has offered hospitality to a group of applicants for international protection from Africa; in 2016 over one hundred refugees (almost all young males, from different nationalities) were hosted in buildings rescued from abandonment or previously underused. Most of these migrants have been progressively involved in the restoration of pathways and rural architectural artifacts: they have been enrolled as members of the NGO and contribute, with volunteer work, to the care and maintenance of the territory. At the same time, immigrants are also active in cleaning the woods, in the collection of firewood, which is delivered free of charge to the elderly inhabitants of the village.

Today PaceFuturo is the most important “company” of Pettinengo: about 30 people – all “historic” residents in the village and all hard-hit by the collapse of local production – are employed in various activities of management, entertainment, education and support addressed to foreigners (including courses of Italian language, textiles, beekeeping, pottery classes, etc.). It is the explicit goal to use the arrival of foreigners as a lever to revitalize the whole area. From its beginnings the municipal administration of

Pettinengo has actively supported PaceFuturo. It implanted the principle that every service has to be given in the same way also to the entire population. Therefore, the original residents also profit from the social services which were installed due to the hosting of refugees.

Box 2: Municipal strategies against degradation: founding a social enterprise in the Cadore/Eastern Dolomites (published in Perlik/Membretti, 2018)..

Cadore is a territory of about 32,000 inhabitants in the northernmost part of the province of Belluno (Veneto/Italy). The Cadore Social Cooperative was established in 2008 following the delocalization of the industrial eyewear cluster. The consumer cooperative, an emblematic social institution founded at the end of the 19th century, was about to close down. To avoid the liquidation, the municipality of Cadore (about inhabitants) decided to create a social enterprise in the form of a cooperative to create job opportunities for disadvantaged and weak people and to promote strategies for territorial development.

The new cooperative boasts a heterogeneous social base, being composed not only of individuals but also local authorities, other cooperatives and an association. The sectors of intervention are manifold and range from environmental maintenance against landslides, the recovering of traditional drywall lynchets up to offering services to the municipality, which otherwise would not be able anymore (for example, the management of a ski lift and a cinema).

The reception of asylum seekers begins in 2011, on request of prefecture of Belluno after the arrival of a significant flow of migrants to the Belluno territory. To date, Cadore SC has welcomed about 150 applicants for international protection, of which 60 are currently accommodated by the cooperative in the Cadore territory through a model of micro-reception spread in small structures rented by private individuals. Migrants are normally distributed in homogeneous groups according language and ethnicity. The operative model of Cadore SC, aimed at promoting the autonomy of the beneficiaries, pays much attention to training, such as the Building School and the Consortium Center of Sedico and the Provincial Center for Adult Education, and encourages the beneficiaries to take courses schools for obtaining a lower secondary school diploma. Furthermore, asylum seekers are actively involved in community life.

From the point of view of the human resources involved, the welcoming project permanently occupies six highly motivated and constantly supervised operators. The project also makes use of the collaboration of professionals – nurses, teachers and a dentist – who work as volunteers.

At the end of the welcoming project, a growing number of beneficiaries decided to settle in Cadore and are permanently occupied in various sectors (bakery, restaurant, greenkeeping). In the start-up phase there are also some initiatives aimed at encouraging training in the agricultural sector and some spontaneous collaborations with the inhabitants.

In addition to the commitment of the cooperative in the environmental field, it is important to underline the regeneration of the territory around the former convent of Pieve di Cadore, previously abandoned, where a vegetable garden (for Alpine artichokes), an orchard and a henhouse have been created. The cooperative works to improve the tourist attraction of the area, enhancing and offering the environmental, cultural and rural heritage of this alpine area.

Box 3: Local implementation of state refugee policies: The social cooperative K-Pax in Valle Camonica, province of Brescia (published in Perlik/Membretti, 2018).

Valle Camonica in the province of Brescia (Lombardy/Italy) is a large Alpine valley with about 118,000 inhabitants. It is today a territory in transformation from manufacturing (iron and steel, textile, exploitation of hydroelectric resources) to tourism. The region tries to valorize archaeological sites and mountain resorts around the Adamello Brenta Natural Park and the ski areas of the Tonale Pass and Aprica.

Since 2011, Valle Camonica participates with a project in the frame of SPRAR (Protection System for Refugees and Asylum Seekers). SPRAR is financed by the Italian Ministry of the Interior. It aims to support and protect asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants covered by other forms of humanitarian protection.

The SPRAR project "La valle accogliente" ("The welcoming valley") has been built in the valley, with the participation of the Province of Brescia, the Comunità Montana Valle Camonica (the valley jurisdiction) and 46 municipalities in the area.

The initiative has brought the first hundred asylum seekers to the territory (in 2016: 353), according to a decentralized and widespread reception model, recognized as good practice in various studies and researches in the sector. It is a bottom-up initiative and a counter-model to the first placement action of migrants on the territory, which took place again in 2011 but with top-down modalities. This meant that a hundred asylum seekers (within the so-called "Emergency North Africa ") had been settled in Montecampione (at 1800 m altitude), in a long-abandoned hotel, with severe lacks like missing of essential services, distance from populated centers, overcrowding, etc.). One of the most active promoters of the new project is the social cooperative K-Pax, which operates in Breno, a mountain municipality of about 5000 inhabitants, located in the middle of Val Camonica and the main administrative center of the area. Despite the social climate initially opposed to reception (with serious episodes of racist intolerance, fomented by xenophobic political forces), the cooperative gives life to the restructuring and re-opening of the long-abandoned Hotel Giardino, the only one in the village. The intervention has encouraged the rediscovery of the tourist vocation of the territory, creating jobs for some Italian residents and, at the same time, actively inserting many foreign refugees as hotel staff, but also in tourist promotion activities. K-Pax also promotes the national discussion on migration themes for example by the organization of the "Abbracciamondo" Festival, a review of intercultural events spread throughout the valley.

The hotel, entirely renovated, has thus become the socio-cultural Eco-Hotel "Il Giardino", a structure (unique in Val Camonica) that aims to enhance the use of products at "zero km", while promoting guided tours to the mountain pastures of the area, the organization of cultural events for, cooking classes, but also the bike-sharing and book-crossing services. These activities are always linked with intercultural exchange and the involvement of migrants in various activities. Revenues are invested in social housing projects for refugees.

3. Conclusions

(a) Although it seems to be advantageous to host migrants rather in urban areas because of better infrastructure for integration and administration, and because there are better working opportunities for the migrants within larger labour markets, migrants in mountain areas may get a better support if they become visible and well known by the

locals. Locals may benefit from migrants by raising the number of population, the input of external knowledge, and the multiplied social interactions, which, all together, reduce the lack of agglomeration economies in the mountains. Finally, it helps to reduce territorial cleavages between prospering urban and declining rural societies.

(b) Mountain communities that are involved to host migrants are challenged to respond to this new situation. Certainly, they do not receive those new inhabitants they originally hoped to come (more wealthy, high qualified etc.) but those newcomers coming may stabilize their community if the inhabitants help them. By this, the marginalized community receives a new societal function on state level which otherwise would be in danger. The new constellation may work as a laboratory in inventing new organizational forms of citizenship, governance and value adding.

(c) In a period where regionalism and nationalism has regained Europe, it becomes, again, innovative to withstand exclusion, isolationism and selfishness. When mountain communities demonstrate solidarity with poor migrating people they show that they are courageous and open minded - in short: innovative (and this perhaps more than others). It is an attribute that justifies peripheral communities to be maintained by the support from the people of the urban areas.

(d) Within the SIMRA project we saw a heterogeneous range of cases studies. They focused either more on private initiative (with an entrepreneurial spirit) or a more institutional (public) approach. It is foreseeable that the development path will lead the civil society initiatives either to establish private bodies or to integrate the initiatives into the public administration. Further research should focus on (a) finding institutional forms that make cooperatives remain stabilized in their original organizational form of civil society even under the conditions of economic growth and (b) finding a regional intertwined cooperation between the public, the private and a stabilized solidary economy.

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