LUISS ⫙

Degree Program in Policies and Governance in Europe

Course of Heritage, Tourism And Sustainable Economic Development Policies

Cultural Tourism in Italian Historic Villages: A Study within the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan

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Academic Year 2023/2024

INDEX

Chapter III - Historic Villages as Laboratories of Sustainability: The Cases of Monticchio Bagni and Borgo Castello

Introduction

Tourism represents a fundamental pillar of economic and cultural development, offering opportunities for territorial regeneration and heritage preservation. Among the various forms of tourism, cultural tourism has gained increasing relevance, responding to visitor demand for an immersive experience rooted in local traditions, hospitality, and social engagement. Unlike large urban centres, small villages (*borghi*) preserve a material and immaterial heritage of great value, consisting of landscapes, historical sites, artisanal crafts, and unique identities.

The growing interest in small villages is evident from recent trends. In 2017, Italy declared it the Year of Villages, significantly increasing tourism flows. Data from the Association of the Most Beautiful Villages in Italy indicate a 7.5% growth in tourist arrivals compared to previous years, with foreign tourists accounting for 45% of overnight stays. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated this shift, reinforcing the appeal of less crowded, sustainable destinations, with proximity tourism reaching 72% of total movements in 2020 (Touring Club Italiano & Hertz, 2021).

Despite this positive trend, small villages face significant socio-economic challenges, including depopulation and economic stagnation, as their survival is closely linked to an ageing resident population. Thanks to cultural tourism, traditional ways of life can be sustained while creating economic opportunities for local communities. In response to these challenges, Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) introduced the National Borghi Plan, a core initiative aimed at revitalizing historic villages through cultural and tourism-led strategies.

This thesis seeks to address the following research question: how can small villages be revitalized and made economically self-sufficient while preserving their unique identity and sustainability?

To explore this question, the First Chapter provides a theoretical and historical overview of tourism, tracing its evolution from an elite-driven activity, exemplified by the Grand Tours of the 16th century, to the rise of mass tourism in the 20th century. While acknowledging the economic benefits that tourism has brought, the discussion also

highlights critical challenges such as cultural homogenization, resource depletion, and environmental degradation. Within this framework, the concept of cultural tourism emerges as a viable alternative, offering a way to safeguard heritage while fostering meaningful interactions between visitors and local communities.

This section also examines the concept of sustainability itself, drawing upon key definitions such as the Brundtland Report's emphasis on meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own. Applying these principles to tourism, the discussion highlights the necessity of balancing economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Through this lens, the study articulates a conceptual framework for sustainable tourism practices.

Building upon this foundation, the Second Chapter contextualizes the analysis within broader policy frameworks, particularly the European Union's sustainability and recovery initiatives. The COVID-19 pandemic created unprecedented challenges for global economies and societies, prompting the EU to launch the NextGenerationEU initiative. This recovery plan aims to enhance resilience and future-proof member states' economies through investments in digitalization, green transitions, and social cohesion. A central component of this initiative is the NRRP, which aligns closely with sustainable development goals.

Within the NRRP, the National Borghi Plan seeks to revitalize small historic towns through culture-driven regeneration. This initiative presents a unique opportunity to combat issues such as depopulation, economic stagnation, and the decline of cultural heritage. However, its implementation also raises concerns, particularly the risk of 'touristification', where excessive tourism erodes the authenticity of local communities. Furthermore, strict European funding deadlines pose additional challenges. This chapter critically evaluates these factors, exploring how the plan aims to balance tourism's economic potential with the imperative of preserving community identity and heritage.

The Third Chapter offers a detailed examination of two pilot projects under the National Borghi Plan: Monticchio Bagni in Basilicata and Borgo Castello in Liguria. These case studies illustrate different yet complementary approaches to sustainable tourism and cultural regeneration. Monticchio Bagni's strategy focuses on leveraging its biodiversity, environmental assets, and historical heritage to create an immersive model of experiential

tourism. Key interventions include the development of slow mobility networks, such as pedestrian and cycling trails, and the establishment of environmental education and cultural engagement centres. By contrast, the Borgo Castello project harnesses advanced technologies, such as augmented reality, to enhance the accessibility and appeal of its archaeological and cultural heritage. This initiative seeks to attract diverse audiences while ensuring the site's historical authenticity remains intact.

A crucial factor in the success of tourism initiatives in small villages is the active participation of local communities. Engaging residents in the planning and management process ensures that tourism projects align with their needs and contribute to long-term sustainability. The case study analysis underscores the importance of tailoring strategies to each village's unique characteristics, avoiding generic solutions that fail to address local realities.

When managed effectively, sustainable tourism can serve as a powerful catalyst for socio-economic regeneration, fostering cultural preservation, environmental protection, and community resilience. The comparison between Monticchio Bagni and Borgo Castello demonstrates how different strategies can achieve common objectives, offering valuable insights for policymakers, researchers, and industry practitioners.

This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on sustainable tourism by bridging theoretical foundations, policy frameworks, and practical applications. By linking theory and policy analysis, it highlights how tourism can be reimagined as a catalyst for sustainable development, ensuring that economic growth aligns with the preservation of natural and cultural heritage in small villages.

Chapter I

Understanding Cultural Tourism: Evolution, Impact, and Sustainability

1. Introduction

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the evolution, impact, and sustainability of cultural tourism. Beginning with an exploration of the historical roots of tourism, the chapter traces its development from the early Grand Tours of the 16th century to the advent of mass tourism in the 20th century. By examining these stages, the chapter highlights the shifts in the motivations and practices associated with travel, particularly focusing on how tourism has transformed from an elite pursuit to a widespread social phenomenon.

As tourism has expanded, so have its impacts - both positive and negative - on local communities and environments. The chapter delves into the consequences of mass tourism, emphasizing the social, economic, and environmental challenges it presents, such as the strain on local resources, the loss of cultural authenticity, and the disruption of traditional livelihoods. These issues set the stage for a discussion on the emergence and definition of sustainable tourism, a concept developed in response to the negative effects of unchecked tourism growth.

Further, the chapter introduces cultural tourism as a subset of sustainable tourism, exploring its potential to preserve and promote cultural heritage while contributing to the economic well-being of local communities. The phenomenon of tourism in villages is examined in detail, providing insights into how small communities have adapted to and benefited from this trend. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the key actors involved in promoting sustainable tourism and the roles they play in balancing the demands of tourism with the need to protect cultural and natural resources.

2. Evolution of Tourism

Tourism is a social, economic, and historical phenomenon that dates to ancient times. Although it was much more limited and took different forms in past centuries, its roots can be traced far back in history.

In ancient times, people travelled primarily for trade and business. However, since the 16th century, a new form of travel emerged with an educational purpose, known as the *Grand Tour*, which is considered the first form of tourism in history (Ueli, 2010). It was reserved for the male offspring of English nobility and the upper bourgeoisie, who would travel to continental Europe and spend several years visiting various European states. The purpose of their journey was to enhance their education while studying history, art, and culture, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of their roots. One of the main destinations of the Grand Tour was Italy, thanks to its rich heritage and as the birthplace of great artists and historical figures. Over the years, this practice spread to other states, although it remained limited to a select elite.

In the 19th century, travel became less focused on cultural education and more oriented towards recreation. The duration of the journey shortened to a few months, and even the middle class began to participate, albeit in a limited way, as only those with the financial means to support themselves without working could undertake the trip (Rodrìguez, 2020).

It was only in the mid-19th century that travel became an activity accessible to almost everyone. The granting of one day off per week by industries marked a decisive turning point for the tourism sector, which relies heavily on leisure time. In 1841, the English pastor Thomas Cook decided to organize train excursions for families on their day off. This initiative was so successful that he started a business, Thomas Cook and Son, which became commercial within a few decades and spread worldwide (*ibidem*). This is considered the first example of a travel agency, in a socio-cultural context that was changing the patterns of travel.

In the 20th century, economic, social, and technological advancements made tourism accessible to all social classes. Transportation became faster, safer, and more comfortable, working hours were regulated, and paid vacations became a right.

From the mid-20th century, the tourism phenomenon grew exponentially, marking the beginning of what would be called 'mass tourism'. After World War II, a process of reconstruction and industrialisation emerged, driven by a strong spirit of solidarity and peace, along with a desire for global recovery and revitalisation. Tourism benefited greatly from this relaxed climate. During this period, a social context developed in which travel was seen as a rightful reward for a life of work and sacrifice (Ueli, 2010). The increase in transportation options, especially the spread of the automobile, along with the economic boom in Europe and the United States, led to an exponential rise in travel among the wealthier countries. Later, the development of low-cost flights further boosted this phenomenon. The most popular destinations were seaside and mountain resorts. Especially beach tourism exemplified the 'democratization of tourism', as it became accessible to middle-class families for the first time, no longer being a privilege reserved for the affluent (Rodrìguez, 2020). During this period, traditional standardized accommodation facilities were established, aiming to make guests feel at home by offering standard services and comforts akin to those in their daily lives. Hotel chains and holiday resorts provided uniform services across locations, ensuring international travellers felt comfortable wherever they stayed.

2.1 Mass Tourism

Mass tourism refers to the significant influx of tourists that often overcrowds major tourist destinations today. It is characterized by standardized travel experiences that are similar for everyone, typically taking place during peak seasons and focusing on the same popular destinations. These destinations are usually the world's most well-known cities or places that have gained fame from films, local news, or fashion trends (Del Bò, 2017). Yearly, these places are overwhelmed by tourists far exceeding their sustainable capacity. This type of tourism is often labelled as 'hit-and-run', as tourists typically stay briefly to visit and possibly take photos for social media, departing without significantly benefiting the local population. Unfortunately, this often results in increased pollution and inconvenience.

Then, from the phenomenon of mass tourism arises the phenomenon of overtourism, defined as "the impact of tourism on a destination, or parts thereof, that excessively influences perceived quality of life of citizens and/or quality of visitors experiences in a

negative way" (UNWTO *et al*., 2018). While mass tourism describes a global phenomenon involving millions of people, overtourism is a localised issue that directly impacts the local life of a specific area.

Mass tourism typically impacts the world's most renowned and then appreciated destinations. However, today, an additional driver of this phenomenon is social media. Films, television programs, and social networks influence mass culture, bringing previously lesser-known places into the spotlight and transforming them into destinations for sudden, invasive, and unsustainable tourism. The proliferation of low-cost flights and cruises further exacerbates the rise of this phenomenon (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018).

Mass tourism leads to a range of negative impacts on the social and environmental fabric of host communities. A prominent example is the gradual loss of essential services for residents. Local shops and artisans are replaced by bars, restaurants, souvenir shops, and other businesses catering to tourists due to their higher profitability. The increased attractiveness of cities to tourists also drives up housing and rental prices, further displacing residents. Consequently, many locals are forced to leave, making these areas increasingly unliveable for them.

The absence of residents results in the loss of the area's identity, transforming the destination into a place designed solely for the comfort of tourists, standardised and inauthentic. Environmentally, the large influx of tourists poses a significant threat to the delicate ecosystems on which the destination depends. Pollution is the most immediate consequence, and over time, both flora and fauna suffer from the indiscriminate increase in tourists and their often-disrespectful behaviours.

2.2 Managing Tourism's Impacts on Local Communities

Local administrations have been exploring possible solutions to manage tourism, as its negative impacts often outweigh the positive ones. Strategies include developing new itineraries as alternatives to popular routes and promoting visits during off-peak seasons (UNWTO *et al*., 2018). It is crucial to educate travellers about responsible and sustainable tourism practices that do not harm the environment but instead benefit local residents and the destination itself.

A crucial step towards achieving this goal is to involve the local community in tourism activities, ensuring they benefit from tourism without abandoning their traditional livelihoods. By integrating tourism with their existing activities, local residents can maintain essential services and prevent migration to other cities. Additionally, offering tourists authentic experiences that reflect local life can further integrate tourists into the community. These experiences are more feasible in smaller tourism contexts where visitor flows are controlled. However, promoting this approach could also raise awareness and foster sustainable tourism practices in larger tourist cities.

In recent years, numerous initiatives have emerged as alternatives to mass tourism, particularly outside major and highly popular destinations. These initiatives attract tourists who are conscious of the negative impacts of invasive tourism. They promote lesser-known destinations that are equally, if not more, beautiful. These initiatives offer a potential solution to divert tourist flows away from cities heavily affected by overtourism, thereby alleviating pressure on these areas and contributing to a more balanced distribution of tourism.

2.3 Impacts of Mass Tourism

Every form of tourism inevitably brings consequences to the destination, both positive and negative, but the impacts caused by mass tourism are notably heavier for the community. These impacts affect various aspects: the economy, urban and landscape development, culture, and the environment. The severity of these consequences increases when tourist flows exceed the destination's carrying capacity and when there are cultural differences between tourists and the host community. While these differences can sometimes foster cultural enrichment and exchange, they can also lead to misunderstandings and prejudices, especially when one culture perceives itself as superior to others.

Economically, tourism represents a source of growth and prosperity for local businesses and residents through job creation, infrastructure development, and improved transportation systems accessible to the entire community. However, challenges accompany this growth. Increased traffic often congested streets and transportation networks, causing inconvenience and delays for local residents. Another concern is the

potential overreliance on tourism as a primary economic driver, leading to neglect of other productive sectors. This monoculture exposes communities to economic and social vulnerabilities (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018). Instead, fostering a diversified economy that integrates existing activities with tourism is essential, ensuring sustainable development without displacing traditional livelihoods.

Another serious consequence, with profound negative effects on the local population, is the escalation of prices, cost of living, and housing costs driven by tourist rentals and shop prices (Geoffrey and Ritchie, 1999). Consequently, local businesses may close, or shift focus to cater to the more lucrative tourist market. This trend forces residents to use services tailored for tourists rather than meeting their own needs, leading to their displacement from the city now overwhelmed by unsustainable tourism. As residents leave, the original identity of the city is lost, transforming it into an anonymous place designed solely for tourist purposes.

From a territorial perspective, tourism growth often results in the construction of infrastructure dedicated solely to tourism. However, this decision is often irreversible; once the land is fully developed, it becomes challenging to adapt to changes in tourism trends or economic downturns. A more prudent approach involves planning interventions that allow flexibility for potential shifts in tourism focus and accommodate purposes beyond tourism.

As tourism increases, there comes a point where it may no longer significantly benefit the local economy. The influx of tourists leads to reliance on non-local tour operators, minimizing economic gains for the destination. The rise of 'hit-and-run' tourism means visitors spend little time and money on local businesses, focusing only on major attractions before leaving. Therefore, tourism planning should not solely focus on increasing visitor numbers, as this may not translate into meaningful benefits for the city. Instead, emphasis should be placed on fostering quality, sustainable, and responsible tourism that provides tangible advantages without depleting local resources (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018).

From a socio-cultural perspective, tourism can facilitate personal enrichment through interactions with diverse cultures and contribute to a renewed appreciation and preservation of one's own culture and traditions. However, there is also a risk of losing

authenticity, particularly if the cultural identity lacks a solid foundation. This risk is exacerbated by the commercialization of culture, where cultural elements are adapted and marked to appeal to tourists, often overshadowing authentic cultural representation.

The attitudes of residents towards tourists are significantly influenced by the quantity and quality of tourist arrivals. George Doxey (1975) developed a model known as the 'tourism irritation index', which highlights four phases that local communities typically experience as tourism impacts intensify. Initially, there is euphoria over the arrival of tourists, which gradually transitions to apathy as their numbers increase. In this phase, distinct social spaces for tourists and residents may emerge. As tourist volumes intensify, apathy can evolve into irritation and potentially into antagonism, marked by incidents of discrimination against tourists.

Another critical consideration is the treatment of workers in the tourism sector and the proliferation of illegal practices associated with tourism. While tourism can create job opportunities, many of these positions are seasonal, precarious, or poorly paid, and some may involve illegal activities. The heightened demand from tourists also correlates with an uptick in local crime, including thefts, robberies, extortions and prostitution. Illicit establishments pose a risk not only to tourists but also to the local population.

Environmentally, tourism can raise awareness and foster the protection of destinations, possibly leading to the establishment of protected areas or local conservation associations. However, every form of tourism carries environmental impacts. Fragile ecosystems like beaches, islands, mountains, and historic cities are particularly vulnerable, facing significant environmental consequences. Direct impacts include increased waste generation, pollution, urbanization of natural and rural landscapes, and heightened consumption of essential resources such as water and energy.

Certain types of tourism, such as cruises known for their high waste production and pollution, pose greater risks to ecosystems. However, all forms of tourism, including ecotourism, contribute to environmental changes in the destinations it visits (Del Bò, 2017). Thus, it is crucial to promote responsible tourism that acknowledges and manages these inevitable impacts sustainably.

In conclusion, while tourism brings both positive and negative impacts, the challenges posed by mass tourism require careful management. Sustainable and responsible tourism practices, which involve the local community and protect the environment, are essential to ensure that tourism benefits both the destination and its residents without depleting resources or eroding cultural identity.

3. Definition of Sustainable Tourism

The increasing tourist movements understood as a phenomenon of mass tourism, gained traction in the 1960s and 1970s. This phenomenon was immediately scrutinized by the scientific literature for its potential negative impacts. Initially, concerns centred around the imbalance created by mass tourism between rich and poor countries and the subsequent negative impact on the territory and the local community. Historically, the debate focused on issues related to social and economic aspects. By the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the debate expanded to include environmental issues, such as the protection of natural resources and sites of historical and cultural interest.

The distorted development model, focused solely on concepts such as progress, growth, and modernization, which appeared successful at the time, associated well-being and quality of life exclusively with economic rules. This model viewed the natural environment merely as a resource for production and improvement, neglecting the limitations and degradation of the resources and natural environment.

These critical issues laid the foundation for the construction of the concept of sustainability, defined in the 1987 *Brundtland Report* by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". The Commission emphasized that this process should not be based on static development but rather on dynamic progress to optimize current potential and ensure the availability of needs and aspirations for future generations (WCED, 1987).

Following this initial definition, sustainability was linked to sustainable tourism in 1988 by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) as "sustainable tourism development that meets the needs of present tourists and host areas while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. It must be the guiding principle for resource

management so that economic, social, and aesthetic needs can be met while preserving cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biodiversity, and supporting the improvement of quality of life" (Andriola and Manente, 2000).

The use of the term 'sustainable tourism' thus highlights four forces of social change: growing environmental awareness along with cultural sensitivity; dissatisfaction with existing products; awareness of natural resources vulnerability; and changing tourist habits with the extensive growth of mass tourism.

The concept of sustainable tourism, as structured, aims at the one hand to reduce tensions and frictions arising from the complex interrelations between the tourism industry, tourists, the environment, and host communities, and on the other hand, to establish a process in which human, natural and cultural resources endure without compromising quality. This approach is necessary to meet increasing demand due to the spread of tourism in rapidly expanding countries that were once considered not touristically significant.

The concept of sustainable development associated with tourism has now become a globally accepted term, widely used in common language, political discourse, and among hospitality industry professionals, particularly for promotional purposes. However, over the years, numerous definitions of sustainable tourism have emerged in the scientific literature (Savoja, 2007; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018), and many criticisms have been raised regarding the use of the term 'sustainable' concerning tourism.

These criticisms primarily stem from the association of the concept of 'sustainability', which in a sense implies some form of maintenance, with the concept of 'development', which emphasizes the human process of meeting societal needs. This raises the question among authors about how a sector that directly depends on economic growth can be compatible with sustainability goals, which often conflict with economic growth.

The debate in the literature, starting from the definition of sustainability in the *Brundtland Report*, also focuses on how sustainable development can have implications for tourism and how it can be applied not only to small-scale 'alternative' experiences but also extended to mass tourism.

Since the 1987 definition, conferences, meetings among world political leaders, and political declarations have followed, leading to the establishment of joint agreements between countries and both short and long-term strategies in which the concept of 'sustainability' is highlighted as a solution to advancing environmental, social, and economic issues.

3.1 The Emergence of Sustainable Tourism on the Global Agenda

A significant milestone was the 1992 United Nations Conference in Rio de Janeiro, where 172 countries initiated a path towards sustainable global development. During the meeting, some non-binding international agreements were approved, significantly contributing to the development of sustainable tourism. Among these were Agenda 21, a global action plan for sustainable development aimed at solving problems such as climate change and socio-economic disparities through international cooperation, and the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, a document that establishes, through 27 principles, the rights and duties of nations regarding sustainable development. The latter imposes the obligation to protect the environment, recognizes the right to development, and emphasizes the importance of cooperation between the public, private, and civil sectors in managing environmental resources. These treaties gave significant impetus to the topic of sustainability and sustainable tourism, laying the groundwork for the implementation of future action programs (Ferreira, 2023).

The concept of sustainable tourism gained its first major recognition in 1995 at the World Conference on Sustainable Tourism in Lanzarote, where the Lanzarote Charter was signed. This charter, comprising 18 principles, highlighted the dual nature of tourism as both an economic driver and a potential threat to local economies, societies, and environments. It asserted that tourism development must be sustainable, economically viable, and ethically and socially fair to local communities, emphasizing the involvement of these communities in tourism strategies to preserve their identity and culture (Ferreira, 2023).

In 1997, environmental and cultural conservation became a central theme at the International Conference of Environment Ministers on Biodiversity and Tourism in Berlin, where the Declaration on Biological Diversity and Sustainable Tourism was

drafted. This document acknowledged the rapid growth of tourism and its potential destructive impact on local biodiversity, advocating for the creation of preventive and protective environmental programs and urging tourism businesses and institutions to adhere to sustainable practices (Shi *et al.*, 2019).

The history of sustainable tourism continued in 2001 with the Second International Conference on Sustainable Tourism, where the Rimini Charter was approved. This document addressed the challenges of mass tourism, particularly its impact on environmental and cultural heritage, leading to site degradation and a decline in the quality of the tourist experience. The Rimini Charter called for greater responsibility in creating tourism strategies to mitigate issues such as site congestion, resource depletion, pollution, and the loss of local traditions.

In recent years, the concept of sustainable tourism has been closely linked to global sustainable development. In 2015, at a special United Nations summit attended by 193 countries, the document *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* was approved. This document, consisting of 17 interdependent goals, outlines the objectives and areas of intervention for sustainable development, known as the Sustainable Development Goals (Shi *et al.*, 2019).

Tourism has the potential to influence and contribute to the achievement of all points of the *Agenda 2030*, with particular impact on three goals:

a. Goal 8: *Decent work and economic growth.* Tourism is a major driver of global economies and is recognized as a key sector for promoting decent work and economic development, particularly in developing nations. When managed responsibly and sustainably, tourism can drive job creation, support rural development, encourage economic diversification through the tourism value chain, enhance cultural awareness and inclusiveness, and aid in preserving local cultural traditions, among other benefits.

b. Goal 12: *Responsible consumption and production*. Tools to monitor the impacts of tourism on sustainable development, including aspects such as energy, water, waste, biodiversity, and job creation, will lead to improved economic, social, and environmental outcomes.

c. Goal 14: *Life below water*. Tourism development should be an integral part of managing these environments to help conserve and preserve fragile marine ecosystems. It can also promote a blue economy by contributing to the sustainable use of marine resources. In some destinations, marine resources are the primary source of income, making their protection essential.

One of the latest milestones in sustainable development occurred in Europe in 2019 with the Green Deal, signed by the European Commission committing the EU to a series of policy initiatives aiming to make the continent the first to be climate-neutral by 2050. The Green Deal implements the *Agenda 2030*, addressing goals such as protecting citizens' health and well-being, conserving natural capital, promoting clean business and product development, and expanding businesses in technology sectors. As a comprehensive action program encompassing broad sectors of environmental policies (such as energy, transport, infrastructure, and industries), the tourism sector plays a crucial role in its development.

Building on this premise, on January 22, 2020, the UNWTO reiterated the importance of tourism within *Agenda 2030*, emphasizing its strong interconnection with European economies: 40% of international tourism revenue involves the continent, creating 27.3 million jobs and generating € 407 billion in revenue (UNWTO, 2020 - B). Reflecting on these figures, on January 24, 2020, UNWTO Secretary-General Zurab Pololikashvili stated: "The tourism sector has an obligation to use its unique power to lead the response to the climate emergency and ensure responsible growth. UNWTO is committed to accelerating progress towards low carbon emission tourism, and I am delighted to see that, in this regard, UNWTO and the European Commission are on the same page" (UNWTO, 2020 - A).

3.2 Definition of Cultural Tourism

According to the definition adopted by the UN Tourism General Assembly, at its 22nd session (2017), cultural tourism implies "a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products in a tourism destination. These attractions/products relate to a set of distinctive material, intellectual, spiritual and

emotional features of a society that encompasses arts and architecture, historical and cultural heritage, culinary heritage, literature, music, creative industries and the living cultures with their lifestyles, value systems, beliefs and traditions" (https://www.unwto.org/tourism-and-culture).

Therefore, cultural tourism encompasses more than mere visits to places and monuments; it involves the immersive experience visitors gain through direct engagement with a local culture. This engagement includes encountering attitudes, beliefs, ideas, values, norms of behaviour, and lifestyles, as well as artefacts such as artworks and cultural products. Such activities facilitate the acquisition of new knowledge and experiences. Thus, cultural tourism extends beyond the consumption of historical cultural products to encompass contemporary culture and the 'way of life' of a people or region (Richards, 2001).

This focus of cultural tourism on the destination and its unique identity situates this form of tourism within sustainable tourism. Respect for the territory, traditions, and natural landscape enables the development of tourism that not only preserves the natural, social, and artistic environment but also promotes the growth of local economic and social activities. Consequently, cultural tourism is seen as an opportunity for local communities, which, in addition to experiencing an increase in income − thanks to a higher propensity for spending by this tourist segment − can also fulfil their cultural and recreational aspirations, thereby enhancing their sense of belonging to their land (Rosenfeld, 2009).

Cultural tourism has experienced significant growth over the years, with an exponential increase in the number of cultural tourists and a consequent expansion of destinations. Thus, it has shifted from more traditional tourism linked to art cities to one that also includes the environment, nature, events, and festivals.

The reasons for this trend can be found in a general increase in education, per capita income, and the very nature of cultural objects. Indeed, these objects lend themselves to immediate and repeated consumption thanks to the strong experiential component that characterizes them, allowing visitors to enjoy a unique and memorable experience (Di Meo, 2002; Jelinčić and Senkić, 2017). People are increasingly seeking an experience that falls within the realm of the intangible, exploring new cultures and identities, and allowing the individual to undergo an inner transformation through the stimulation of the senses.

The experience economy and experiential marketing thus become a strategic element of cultural tourism, as they directly involve the visitor in activities that stimulate their creativity, allowing for identification and immersion in the local culture, consequently leaving a positive impression on the consumer's memory, who will be likely to repeat the experience (Jelinčić and Senkić, 2017). In recent years, therefore, cultural tourism has seen an increase in the range and quality of its offerings, with a focus on the emotional, experiential, and cultural aspects.

A tourist destination cannot be considered competitive merely by possessing a cultural heritage; it must succeed in integrating cultural and tourist activities into the local economic fabric and offer services that meet all the visitor's needs to maintain its competitiveness.

Thanks to this new type of tourism, a new kind of tourist has emerged. This tourist seeks trips that offer unique, diverse, and unrepeatable experiences, increasingly avoiding standardized and non-personalized journeys that offer nothing new. The new tourist looks for trips that satisfy their need for novelty, excitement, knowledge, and experience. The desire for innovation is even stronger than in the previous generation, influencing accommodation choices, which are increasingly oriented towards non-traditional solutions, often sustainable, typical, authentic, and widespread forms of hospitality, but still offering certain modern services and technologies (today, for example, Wi-Fi is essential). The new tourist also pays particular attention to the environment, striving to minimize their impact and choosing sustainable and green solutions. Vacations are seen as a quest for original and unique experiences to share, also for the symbolic value that a certain type of vacation bestows upon the traveller. However, they are experienced in a more carefree manner compared to the past, with a less rigid and committed attitude. The choices of new tourists are not tied to a single tourism theme but can adapt to different vacation styles and destinations, even within a short time frame.

4. The Phenomenon of Tourism in Villages

In recent years, rural areas and villages have garnered significant interest in tourism. Strictly connected to cultural tourism thanks to their unique features, they meet the desires of the growing number of tourists seeking new and authentic experiences. This has led to

a renewed appreciation for the rural landscape and the distinctive lifestyle of small towns, which are considered more genuine and original.

Referring to the case of Italy, the country is made up of a dense network of small villages and historic centres that preserve the history and original lifestyles of the population. It can be said that the 'Italy brand' enjoys a strong reputation worldwide, particularly for its culture, art, food and wine, landscapes, and historical heritage, which are present in almost all Italian cities and small towns (Droli and Dall'Ara, 2012). According to the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT, 2024), cities and villages of historical and artistic interest are the preferred destinations for most visitors (84.7% in 2023). In recent years, there has been a significant increase in visitors to smaller art destinations, with a growing number of people staying in smaller towns and travelling to visit the major destinations.

Villages are characterised by their remarkable hospitality, evident in the warmth of their welcome, the quality of their services, and the involvement of tourists in community life. The welcoming atmosphere often becomes a greater attraction for many guests than the presence of numerous historical monuments. In small towns, traditions and the rhythms of life tied to the land often remain unchanged over time, reviving a sense of identity that is often forgotten. To rediscover these hidden treasures, it is necessary to develop proposals that can enhance their beauty, compete with traditional structures, and remain sustainable, to preserve the delicate and rare balance found in these communities.

Tourism in villages has evolved through various phases, influenced by social and economic contexts before reaching its current form. Scholars Giancarlo Dall'Ara and Francesco Morandi (2010) identified four fundamental stages. The first stage, called "magnetic villages", marks the beginning of the phenomenon, when many villages were discovered 'by chance' by tourists due to their history or location; then, these early visitors recommended them to others as tourist destinations. In many cases, tourism was not the result of planned choices but rather an unanticipated development for operators and residents, who found themselves having to adapt quickly to the phenomenon. No tourism development strategies or marketing campaigns were implemented; tourism developed spontaneously, driven by a 'magnet effect'. During these years, prevalent forms of tourism included day trips and short visits. Consequently, public and private

operators, aiming to strengthen the destination's position and attract a more profitable market, began organizing appealing events, such as markets and fairs, along with communication and marketing campaigns.

The second phase of tourism in Italian villages begins with the strengthening of the idea of the need for a distinct positioning from traditional destinations, aiming to attract a different kind of tourism than the spontaneous and excursionist type. Thus, the concept of tourism in smaller centres, or "minor tourism", emerges. Initially, this type of tourism is favoured by a domestic audience, as foreign tourists still primarily visit large cities of art. Italian tourists, on the other hand, start exploring small localities near their residences, rediscovering villages and local culture. Minor tourism is seen as an alternative to mass tourism, which congests cities, and it can improve the seasonality of tourist flows and mitigate significant social and environmental impacts. The promotion of tourist offerings is mainly carried out through media, travel guides, and specialized fairs.

Over time, tourism in villages becomes increasingly important, and these villages are perceived, even abroad, as one of the country's premier tourist attractions (third phase: "tourism excellence"). Villages are no longer seen as an alternative and niche tourism option but as a genuine draw for the Italian territory. Numerous 'network' projects emerge, both among different villages and within them, to offer a rich array of proposals and services. These projects integrate natural, historical, and food and wine resources, creating value chains. The simple visit to a city is replaced by the true discovery of the territory, along with its history and culture, traditions, and distinctive lifestyles, providing tourists with a complete and educational experience, as well as a recreational one. Traditional advertising of the villages begins to be revisited, focusing more on the products offered and innovation.

In recent years, a new phase of the phenomenon has begun, based on the "hospitable village". The distinguishing feature of tourism in villages today, compared to traditional tourism, is the atmosphere within these villages, characterized by a greater sense of hospitality demonstrated by the local population towards tourists, who are treated as equals to residents. In smaller towns, there is no perceived opposition between tourists and residents. In today's village tourism offerings, alongside the natural, historical, and cultural excellences that characterize the territory, there is also a strong emphasis on

hospitality. This is evident in the quality of services offered, sustainability, the involvement of residents in tourists' activities and vice versa, attention to detail, and shared convivial moments. This system of services directed at guests can also be described as community tourism. In this phase, the preferred marketing campaign is conducted via the web, with all the dynamics that come with it, including reviews, sharing, and word of mouth.

4.1 Impact of Village Tourism

A visit to a village is experienced as an immersive journey, as the lifestyle that characterizes these places − rooted in hospitality, engagement, and sociality − has largely disappeared, especially in big cities. The survival of these traditional lifestyles depends on the resident population, which is increasingly ageing. Thanks to village tourism, traditional ways of life can be sustained by new generations, who are incentivized to remain in the village due to the presence of tourists. These tourists help to keep traditions alive and provide economic support for residents. The local lifestyle is complemented by the beauty of the village, where walking through its streets can transport one to another era, far removed from daily life. Visits to artistic works, churches, museums, and historic buildings are combined with convivial moments that allow visitors to savour the local way of life. Villages preserve a material and immaterial heritage of great value, unique to each village, consisting of landscapes, places, traditions, identities, knowledge, and crafts. Village tourism offers an experience that allows people to reconnect with the surrounding environment, a connection that is increasingly lost due to today's hectic lifestyle.

The development of this type of tourism is evident from the related data. In 2017, Italy declared it the "Year of Villages", an initiative proclaimed by the then Minister of Cultural Heritage, Dario Franceschini, which proved to be an exceptional year in this regard. Specifically, data on tourism communicated by the Association of the Most Beautiful Villages in Italy indicate a rapidly growing sector (Associazione "I Borghi più belli d'Italia", 2019). In 2017, the 293 Most Beautiful Villages recorded about 3.7 million arrivals (up from 2.9 million in 2015), marking a 7.5% increase compared to previous years, particularly in foreign tourists. This translates to an average of approximately 12,000 arrivals per year for each village. The number of visitor days increased by 7.9%, and the average stay in accommodations (3.9 days) is higher than the national average

(3.4 days). Foreign tourists account for 45% of these stays. The hospitality offering itself is also steadily increasing. Thus, it is a rapidly growing phenomenon that, despite involving small-scale realities, manages to drive overall national tourism statistics.

The rediscovery of villages received a significant boost following the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused two major consequences: on one hand, the restrictions on freedom of movement led to nearby, less crowded, and lower-risk destinations becoming the primary attractions; on the other hand, all this helped to reinforce the image of the village as a refuge, not far from the city, an ideal destination for slow and sustainable tourism.

Proximity tourism recorded over 72% of total movements in 2020, a trend that continued into 2021, with 68% of tourists opting for short-distance trips (Touring Club Italiano and Hertz, 2021). Thanks to proximity tourism, general attention has turned towards villages, making them particularly attractive tourist destinations.

To promote and support these small areas at risk, numerous initiatives have emerged in recent years, accompanied by targeted public policies. Notably, the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) stands out for its efforts to address the growing territorial disparities exacerbated by the recent health crisis. Key initiatives within NRRP, such as mission 1 (focused on digitalization, innovation, competitiveness, culture, and tourism) and component 3 (dedicated to tourism and culture 4.0), aim to revitalise Italy's cultural heritage. These interventions are designed to restructure critical assets and stimulate the creation of new services, leveraging social participation to promote inclusion and regeneration. The overarching objectives include enhancing the attractiveness, accessibility, and safety of these regions, all while prioritising environmental sustainability principles.

4.2 Diverse Audience and Economic Perspectives

Analysing the tourism that animates Italian villages reveals an extremely diverse audience: from young couples and families with children to hiking and nature enthusiasts, as well as foreigners wanting to explore the Italian territory, including business tourists. In recent years, on-the-road tourism has also seen significant growth, particularly among young people and sports and hiking enthusiasts. Villages provide a convenient solution

for a stopover or overnight stay, as they are often located along travel routes, away from large cities. Many foreign tourists take advantage of their stay in small villages to get to know Italian history and culture more closely, often starting with the local food and wine specialities.

From an economic perspective, villages represent an opportunity for those who today allocate a reduced budget for vacations, as the cost of living in these areas is lower and large displacements and organizational commitments are not necessary. It's not only tourists who are attracted to small villages but also business tourism, as these locations offer quieter places to stay and an opportunity to introduce foreign colleagues to these unique settings.

In a village, the factors that attract potential visitors are not only the scenic and historical aspects, which, while important, do not fully encompass the tourist offerings of the area. Cultural and social aspects are also significant, represented by the presence of a vibrant and active local community that maintains and shares the original lifestyle of the place with interested visitors. Village tourism benefits not only the specific village but also the surrounding areas, highlighting how a more locally rooted policy can provide greater and more widespread development opportunities.

5. Actors of Sustainable Tourism

The inherent logic of sustainable tourism refers to the individual and collective responsibilities towards territories and the necessity of coordinating the interests of various stakeholders. In the tourism sector, these stakeholders form a dense network of individuals whose actions and choices influence the outcome of tourism planning.

It is undeniable that discussing tourism sustainability inevitably involves the practice of planning, a challenging task due to the complexity of this sector, which encompasses a heterogeneous set of activities and engagements. The planning process includes natural and artificial attractions, accommodations − from hotels to second homes − information and agency services, bank branches, social services, various types of infrastructure, and more.

Moreover, the planner must have a precise understanding of the economic role that tourism activities play around intervention and their connection with the supporting

environment. By setting specific objectives, observing and collecting data, and analysing the tourism market, it is possible to formulate policies and development plans that achieve the intended goals. This approach aims to optimize economic benefits while minimizing negative environmental and social impacts (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018).

In particular, the reciprocity and interdependence of stakeholders' rights and duties form the foundation for creating a context where economic actions can be conceived, implemented, and monitored based on fair and shared behavioural models. The mutual dependence of various actors with a legitimate interest in using specific resources can be outlined as sustainable.

In this regard, there is a direct connection to the concept of interdependence on which Stakeholder Theory, proposed by R. Edward Freeman in 1984 (Savoja, 2007), is based. This theory stems from the realization that it is not only the shareholders who should be the focus of business activities or the only individuals influencing it, as was previously erroneously believed. Other figures, such as public administration, opinion leaders, the local community, consumers, and others, are also considered. These figures can influence and be influenced by the organization. The resulting creation of value occurs by finding the intersection of interests among consumers, suppliers, employees, the community, financiers, and shareholders.

The presence of various stakeholders who must agree and harmonize their interests represents a fundamental issue stemming from the asynchronous development of tourism awareness among public administrators, private operators, and tourists. These asynchronies make it difficult to realize a form of tourism that can quickly deteriorate as soon as the interests at stake become conflicting or discordant (*ibidem*).

First and foremost, the development of sustainable tourism requires a certain "tourism education", aimed not only at sector operators but also at all other involved actors. There is a need for a comprehensive process of education, awareness-raising, and information dissemination to transform the now-established cultural models of leisure consumption into vacation modes based on sustainability. Additionally, there must be a strong synergy among all actors involved in tourism activities (*ibidem*).

Tourism enterprises must be characterized by a corporate culture and a value system based on full awareness of the very meaning of sustainability. This understanding is essential to implement operational policies accordingly, such as supporting seasonal adjusting policies, sustaining stable tourist flows, and combating the phenomenon of overtourism. A sustainability-oriented enterprise fosters new types of social behaviour related to the use of tourism services, making it more responsible. It also promotes technological and organizational changes aimed at enhancing the quality of the offer, the value of the experience, and, consequently, visitor satisfaction.

The local community, along with the natural environment, is the entity most affected by tourism, experiencing both positive and negative impacts. Therefore, its participation in decisions regarding the destination − and by extension, the lives of its members − is essential. A successful destination is, first and foremost, a good place to live. Involving the resident population is a crucial prerequisite for discussing sustainable tourism. This involvement is necessary to protect the environment, preserve local traditions and culture, and meet the needs of the community.

Tourists, generally more focused on the quality of services provided, not only represent the primary source of income for the destination but also have the power to express opinions and provide information on aspects related to the sustainability of the visited area. This input influences the shared responsibility of stakeholders and their integration into the organizational and productive strategies of tourism businesses. Tourists can contribute to the sustainable development of the destination by becoming aware of the consequences of their tourism consumption choices and taking responsibility for them (Savoja, 2009).

However, this dynamic of rights and duties is particularly controversial: there is a conflict between the responsibility to maintain the integrity of tourism resources and the legitimate interest in enjoying them. When the preservation of an asset becomes an act of tourism consumption, the relationship between the consumer and the object of consumption changes. The relationship evolves from a unidirectional one, where the consumer derives satisfaction from consuming the asset, to a bidirectional one. In this new relationship, the consumer derives part of their satisfaction from consuming the asset,

which becomes complete only when they take an active role in protecting the very asset they enjoy. Thus, the consumer becomes more aware and prudent.

In this context, it is also possible to introduce the concept of the 'implicit stakeholder', represented by collective goods (environmental, cultural, artistic, etc.) that serve as the factors of tourist attraction in a locality. These goods are simultaneously the object of other stakeholders' interests and bear specific interests themselves, such as maintaining their integrity to continue serving as tourist attractions and being available for equitable and democratic enjoyment by all visitors (*ibidem*).

Although it may seem self-evident, the formulation of policies and implementation of interventions by the stakeholders aimed at environmental, socio-cultural, and economic sustainability will result in economically effective development, a more balanced use of resources, and a more inclusive management of social processes. This approach can be carried forward into the future for the benefit of new generations.

6. *Final Considerations*

In conclusion, this chapter has traced the evolution of tourism from its historical origins to its current status as a global industry with far-reaching social, economic, and environmental impacts. The transition from exclusive Grand Tours to mass tourism has brought about significant challenges, particularly in managing the negative effects on local communities and ecosystems. These challenges have led to the rise of sustainable tourism as a necessary framework for balancing the benefits of tourism with the need to protect cultural heritage and natural resources.

The chapter has also highlighted cultural tourism as a key component of sustainable tourism, offering a way to preserve and celebrate cultural identities while fostering economic growth. The exploration of village tourism illustrates how smaller communities can successfully integrate tourism into their local economies, providing visitors with authentic cultural experiences while safeguarding their unique traditions and way of life.

Overall, this chapter underscores the importance of a holistic approach to tourism management - one that involves all stakeholders and prioritizes sustainability to ensure that tourism continues to enrich both visitors and host communities without compromising future generations' ability to enjoy these experiences. The insights gained

here will provide a foundation for the subsequent chapters, which will delve deeper into the specific strategies and practices that can support sustainable tourism development.

Chapter II

The Italian National Plan in the European Recovery Framework

1. Introduction

This chapter provides an in-depth exploration of the European Union's response to the unprecedented economic and social challenges brought about by the COVID-19 (CoronaVirus Disease 2019) pandemic. The global crisis led to widespread disruptions in healthcare systems, economies, and societies and required coordinated national and European actions. In this context, the European Union introduced the NextGenerationEU (NGEU) initiative, a comprehensive recovery plan designed to support Member States in recovering from the pandemic's severe impacts while laying the groundwork for a resilient, future-oriented economy.

The core of this recovery effort is the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), the most substantial component of NextGenerationEU, with an allocation of €723.8 billion in grants and loans. The RRF is aimed at helping Member States not only to recover from the immediate economic downturn and implement reforms that will make their economies more resilient and competitive in the long term. These reforms focus on key areas such as digitalization, the green transition, social cohesion, and economic modernization. The chapter highlights how NextGenerationEU, through the RRF, seeks to promote sustainable recovery by encouraging investments in future-proof sectors such as clean energy, technological innovation, and healthcare resilience.

A significant portion of this chapter is dedicated to the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), which has emerged as one of Europe's largest and most ambitious. Italy, severely impacted by the pandemic, saw its economy shrink by 8.9% in 2020, and its recovery is crucial for its stability and the broader EU economic recovery. The chapter examines the structure, goals, and resources of Italy's NRRP, emphasizing the central role of the plan in addressing longstanding structural weaknesses in the Italian economy, particularly in terms of productivity, regional inequalities, and public sector efficiency.

In addition to detailing the NRRP's structure, governance, and reform agenda, the chapter critically examines the National Borghi Plan (*borghi* are small historical centres), one of the flagship projects within Italy's recovery strategy. This initiative focuses on the regeneration of small historic towns, aiming to counter depopulation and promote socio-economic revitalization through sustainable and culture-driven interventions. By investing in Italy's vast but often overlooked network of historic villages, the plan seeks to leverage these areas as engines for local development and alternative tourism.

However, the implementation of the National Borghi Plan has sparked intense debate. Critics have raised concerns about the tight timelines imposed by the NRRP, the potential for overly competitive project selection processes, and the risk of 'touristification', which could strip these towns of their unique identities. This chapter explores these issues, assessing whether the plan's ambitious objectives align with the realities and needs of the territories it targets and whether its design effectively supports long-term resilience and equity.

2. Europe and the NextGenerationEU

On December 31, 2019, Chinese health authorities reported an outbreak of unusual pneumonia cases in the city of Wuhan, in Hubei province. That day began a new SARS-CoV-2 epidemic, which would soon become a pandemic due to its rapid and widespread transmission. No one could have imagined the scale of this infection which, according to data updated on June 9, 2024, by the World Health Organization (WHO) COVID-19 Dashboard (https://data.who.int/dashboards/covid19), has recorded 775,615,736 infections and 7,051,323 deaths. In Europe, according to WHO data, the COVID-19 pandemic has killed 2,272,656 people and infected 279,448,904. These staggering numbers depict a pandemic of devastating magnitude that has challenged the most resilient healthcare systems worldwide.

The rapid spread of the virus forced governments and public authorities worldwide to adopt extraordinary measures for our time, including the closure of schools, factories, and public spaces. Border closures were imposed to contain peaks in infections, hospitalisations, and deaths.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic changed the global economic, social, and budgetary outlooks. The crisis required an urgent and coordinated response at the European and national levels to address the significant economic and social consequences that affected all Member States.

In the first week of March, Charles Michel, President of the European Council, organized two videoconferences attended by all leaders of the then twenty-eight Member States, as well as European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Central Bank Christine Lagarde, and then President of the Eurogroup Mario Centeno. The objective of the European Union was to coordinate the efforts of the Member States to effectively respond to the health, economic, and social consequences of the worsening pandemic.

During the meeting, European leaders identified four priorities for action: limiting and combating the spread of the virus; ensuring the supply of medical equipment to hospitals; promoting science and research to develop new therapies; and addressing the severe social and economic consequences of the restrictive measures decided by national governments (European Council, 2020). The European Council unanimously supported that the measures adopted by each State should be proportionated and balanced to avoid excessive consequences for societies.

NextGenerationEU was the decisive response of the European Union. This instrument was proposed on May 27, 2020, by the European Commission and structured as a package of measures and funds, with the main function of assisting the economies of Member States struggling with an increasingly foreseeable economic recession (European Commission, 2020).

The financing modalities devised by the Commission were to be divided between grants and loans, the latter repayable no earlier than 2028 and by 2058 (*ibidem*). The resources provided by NextGenerationEU are aimed at enabling large-scale investments to be carried out swiftly and on the necessary scale, including substantial public and private investments at the national level.

The agreement reached between the European Commission, the European Parliament, and EU leaders to develop the recovery instrument is structured around three main pillars. The first focuses on supporting Member States with investments and reforms, aimed at strengthening national economies and ensuring a sustainable recovery. The second pillar is centred on relaunching the EU economy by incentivizing private investment and driving growth and employment. Lastly, the third pillar is about learning lessons from the crisis, with an approach that seeks to improve territorial cohesion and prevent future crises (Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale, 2021).

The NextGenerationEU is a temporary instrument valued at over €800 billion (equivalent to €750 billion at 2018 prices), to be placed within the framework of the EU's long-term budget and supplemented by new funding from financial markets (https://next-generation-eu.europa.eu/index_en). The funds raised, channelled through EU programs under the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework, aim to support urgent measures planned for the 2021-2023 period, which are essential for designing livelihoods, revitalizing the economy, and promoting sustainable and resilient growth (Monti, 2021).

The financial support provided under this instrument, established and regulated by the EU Regulation 2020/2094, focuses on several key areas. First, it emphasizes the labour market and social protection, aiming to enhance sustainable growth potential and employment. Another priority is the healthcare system, ensuring its resilience in future crises. It also promotes cohesion between Member States and the development of improved responsiveness at the European level to enable swift and effective reactions to emergencies. Support is extended to enterprises impacted by the COVID-19 crisis, with particular attention to small and medium-sized enterprises. Additionally, the instrument fosters sustainable growth within the Union, encouraging the transition to a green and digital economy. Research and innovation in response to the pandemic are further prioritized, alongside the transition to a climate-neutral economy for the future energy system. Lastly, the support encompasses agriculture and the development of rural areas, ensuring a comprehensive and inclusive recovery (Council of the European Union, 2020).

Overall, the NextGenerationEU resources represent over 40% of the entire financial package for the 2021-2027 programming, totalling €1.8 trillion, the majority of which has

been distributed over the three years from 2021 to 2023 (European Commission, Directorate-General for Budget, 2021).

The resources made available by NextGenerationEU are divided among several programs: the European RRF (already mentioned), REACT-EU, Horizon Europe, the InvestEU Fund, Rural Development, the Just Transition Fund (JTF), and RescEU.

The core of NextGenerationEU is the Recovery and Resilience Facility, which allocates €723.8 billion (at current prices) in loans and grants to support reforms and investments outlined by Member States.

For REACT-EU, funding of €50.6 billion is allocated to expand response and recovery measures from the pandemic crisis, creating a bridge to the long-term recovery plan. The program supports investment projects contributing to the development of a green, digital, and resilient economy, including employment retention support, short-time work schemes, and support for the self-employed. Additionally, it aims to support job creation measures, particularly youth employment, as well as health systems, working capital, and investments for small and medium-sized enterprises.

Horizon Europe is the EU's primary research and innovation funding program, designed to address climate change, contribute to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and strengthen the EU's competitiveness and growth. The program facilitates collaboration and enhances the impact of research and innovation on the development, support, and implementation of EU policies while addressing global challenges. It supports job creation, economic growth, industrial competitiveness, and the optimization of the impact of investments while fostering the creation and dissemination of cutting-edge knowledge and technologies. NextGenerationEU has allocated €5.4 billion to support this program.

InvestEU, which has been allocated €6.1 billion, is part of the European strategy to increase investment in Europe, support recovery, and prepare the economy for the future. The rationale behind this program is based on the success of the European Investment Plan, which mobilized over €500 billion between 2015 and 2020. The main objective is to generate a new wave of investments worth over €372 billion in the 2021-2027 period,

promoting innovation and job creation in Europe, providing and attracting long-term financing in line with EU policies, and contributing to economic recovery. InvestEU will mobilize significant public and private funds protected by an EU budget guarantee, based on the effective implementation of the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI).

The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), with a budget of €8.1 billion, finances the EU's contribution to Rural Development Programs (RDPs). These RDPs consist of measures and projects aimed at the European goals of improving the competitiveness of the agricultural sector; promoting sustainable management of natural resources and climate action; and achieving balanced territorial development of economies and rural communities.

The Just Transition Fund (JTF), to which NextGenerationEU allocates €10.9 billion, is a new financial instrument within the framework of the cohesion policy aimed at providing support to regions facing severe socioeconomic challenges due to the transition towards climate neutrality. The fund seeks to facilitate the implementation of the European Green Deal, which aims to make Europe climate-neutral by 2050.

Lastly, €2 billion is allocated to RescEU. The general objective of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism is to strengthen cooperation among a group of European and non-EU states in the field of civil protection to improve prevention, preparedness, and response to disasters.

3. *The Recovery and Resilience Plan: Purposes and Objectives*

At the European Council meeting on 23 April 2020, the idea of an emergency fund was introduced. Initially called the Recovery Fund, it was envisioned as a €500 billion initiative to supplement European investment funds aimed at promoting economic, social, and territorial cohesion for the 2021-2027 period. However, it was never put into action (Monti, 2021).

The proposal, advanced by French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, aimed to create an instrument that would support EU budgetary spending in the sectors and regions most affected by the crisis. This would have been done based on European budgetary programs, improving resilience, convergence, and

competitiveness of European economies, increasing investment, particularly in the green and digital transitions, and strengthening research and innovation. Therefore, it was a tool that required national efforts towards sound economic policies and an ambitious reform program for each Member State.

However, Europe ultimately decided not to create a true recovery fund but rather an instrument dedicated to supporting recovery and resilience, embedded within the broader NextGenerationEU program. The rationale behind this decision was that the recovery and resilience instrument should be functional to the overarching goal of the European program: laying the foundation for a better world for future generations, rather than pursuing a specific goal like a fund would have done (*ibidem*).

The National Recovery and Resilience Plan thus developed around three strategic pillars shared at the European level:

1. Digitalization and innovation;

2. Green transition;

3. Social inclusion.

Moreover, the ultimate purpose of the instrument was not only to support European recovery but, above all, to promote resilience by setting goals, reforms, and specific policies for each country. Following the pandemic crisis, it became essential to develop and enhance the capacity to withstand future systemic crises, alongside the need to assist Member States and their citizens in the green and digital transitions.

Within the European Council, the goal arose to promote transformative resilience, primarily through the RRF for launching supportive policies. Other instruments of NextGenerationEU, like EU4Health for prevention and REACT-EU for protection, also contribute to this effort.

The cornerstone of the NextGenerationEU measures package is therefore the Recovery and Resilience Plan, established and regulated by the EU Regulation 2021/241 of the European Parliament and the Council, which came into force on February 19, 2021

(https://commission.europa.eu/business-economy-euro/economic-recovery/recovery-and-resilience-facility_en).

The Plan has allocated resources totalling €723 billion, of which €385 billion are loans and €338 billion are grants. The EU Regulation 2021/241 establishes the modalities for the distribution and allocation of loans: the support is concentrated in the early years, which are crucial for the recovery, with 70% in the years 2021 and 2022 and 30% by the end of 2023.

The instrument, which provides unprecedented financial support, is meant to help implement and achieve national policies aimed at mitigating the economic and social impact of the pandemic, making each Member State – and consequently our continent – more equitable, greener, and inclusive, with a more competitive, dynamic, and innovative economy.

Slightly less than half of the instrument involves subsidies rather than loans, in order not to burden younger generations with the repayment of loans contracted by beneficiary Member States. In keeping with this principle, there was also a desire to align various interventions with the objectives set by the 2030 Agenda.

As the name of the Plan suggests, resilience plays a key and fundamental role alongside recovery. Resilience is defined as "the ability to face economic, social and environmental shocks or persistent structural changes in a fair, sustainable and inclusive way" (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2021). In practice, this principle – the ability to respond to difficulties – has become the compass guiding the Union's decisions and policies, also aimed at achieving the goals set by the 2030 Agenda.

Specifically, resilience is broken down and analysed into four interconnected dimensions: socioeconomic, geopolitical, green, and digital (https://commission.europa.eu/business-economy-euro/economic-recovery/recovery-and-resilience-facility_en).

Socioeconomic resilience is the ability to anticipate and invest in future skills, while fostering a broader dialogue with society to strengthen the social contract. The pandemic has worsened inequalities, deepened demographic imbalances and poverty, accelerated automation, and severely impacted jobs in the services sector

The health crisis has highlighted the European Union's excessive dependence on third countries, particularly in the import of essential raw materials needed to promote and achieve a digital and zero-carbon society. In this context, developing geopolitical resilience means contributing to identifying possible scenarios and defining strategic options to strengthen the Union's autonomy.

Acquiring green resilience involves exploring and fully understanding the causes of global changes, understanding future structural transformations in the labour market, and directing the retraining of people who lost their jobs during the crisis or are at risk of losing them in the future due to technological developments and automation.

Finally, the pandemic crisis has inevitably accelerated the digitalization process that had already begun several years ago due to the widespread and urgent need for greater hyper-connectivity and integration of new technologies, which affect our way of living. Digital resilience involves being able to anticipate how major emerging technologies might develop, their impact on all areas of life, and how to seize future opportunities (*ibidem*).

Despite the asynchronous spread of the pandemic, it resulted in an exogenous and symmetrical shock across the involved economies (CONSOB, 2020), affecting all Union Member States and contributing to the development of significant disparities in terms of its impact and the recovery potential of individual countries.

Regions and sectors that were less resilient, whose economies depend on customer-facing services, exports, or a high number of small businesses, were hit much harder than others and consequently faced greater difficulties in coping with and responding to the crisis (Monti, 2021). This is evident in the poor resilience of national health, protection, and social assistance systems, which immediately demonstrated and suffered from the crisis' impact. Or in sectors where businesses usually offer customer-facing services or operate in crowded venues, such as tourism, social economy, and creative and cultural ecosystems.

The differing resilience capacities of individual States within the EU had significant repercussions, exacerbating divergences and disparities and impacting social, economic,

and territorial cohesion, as well as convergence within the euro area and the effectiveness of the single monetary policy.

Due to the pandemic and related containment measures, the purpose of the instrument is twofold: concerning recovery, it aims to ensure that this happens as quickly as possible to mitigate, in the short term, the social and economic damage caused by the crisis; in line with the principle of resilience, an additional goal is to support the development and adoption of reforms that address the structural weaknesses of national governance, increasing productivity and competitiveness in individual States and making them ready to face future challenges.

These are essential measures to steer national economies in the right direction and reduce inequalities and divergences within the Union.

The reforms outlined in the Plan address the specific challenges of each Member State while contributing to six key European intervention areas, designed to create a more resilient and forward-thinking Union. These pillars include fostering the green transition by promoting renewable energies and sustainable resource management; advancing digital transformation to enhance digital infrastructure and innovation; and supporting smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth by improving economic cohesion, employment, productivity, and the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Additionally, the Plan emphasizes social and territorial cohesion, aiming to reduce disparities between regions and social groups, ensuring that growth benefits are broadly shared. Another critical area is strengthening health, economic, social, and institutional resilience, enhancing preparedness for future crises, and modernizing public health systems. Finally, the Plan prioritizes policies aimed at future generations, focusing on education, skill development, and equipping youth with the tools necessary to thrive in a rapidly evolving global economy (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2021).

3.1 The Resources of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan

The NextGenerationEU funds present a significant opportunity for the growth and development of various EU Member States. Whether these funds come in the form of

grants or loans, they must be directed toward well-planned initiatives that minimize market disruptions. Priority should be given to investments in radical innovation and projects with high technological and industrial relevance.

The economic and social policies guiding these investments must ensure fiscal sustainability in the medium term so that future policymaking is not compromised.

Investments can be made directly, such as through publicly funded projects, or indirectly by providing incentives for private sector investments, like upgrading buildings for energy efficiency or supporting the digital transformation of small businesses.

Additionally, financial instruments like guarantees, loans, equity investments, venture capital, grants, and other forms of support may also be used – provided they target specific market gaps and align with the overarching objectives of the NextGenerationEU initiative (Monti, 2021).

Lastly, investments can also have a multinational scope and projection: Member States are encouraged to work together to develop technologies and systems for a clean and functioning hydrogen market and to support the circular economy; to expand and incentivize strategic sectors such as space, defence, and secure connectivity (*ibidem*).

Each country must, therefore, focus its efforts on supporting the sectors primarily protected by the Recovery and Resilience Facility, such as those related to prevention, retraining, upskilling, green acceleration, and modernization. In particular, the guidelines for the implementation of National Plans align with the four dimensions at the heart of the European Semester: environmental sustainability, productivity, fairness, and macroeconomic stability. These dimensions were identified by the 2020 Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy (ASGS) and reaffirmed in the ASGS 2021.

Proper governance of the funds from the instrument and, consequently, efficient implementation of the projects outlined in individual Plans are necessary to address and transform the challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic into a long-term opportunity for Europe.

To access support from the instrument, Member States had to draft and submit their respective Recovery and Resilience Plans to the European Commission. Each Plan was required to outline and define the reforms and investments to be implemented by the end of 2026, as well as the specific challenges and issues being addressed, structuring a national program aligned with EU policy objectives, focusing on the green and digital transitions.

Moreover, each country's efforts had to effectively strengthen its social and economic system, increasing growth potential, and necessarily, job opportunities.

The milestones and targets set by each country had to be clear, realistic, well-defined, verifiable, and directly determined or at least influenced by public policies. Each Plan had to adequately and promptly address the challenges identified in the European Semester, particularly the 2019 and 2020 country-specific recommendations adopted by the Council (https://commission.europa.eu/business-economy-euro/economic-recovery/recovery-and-resilience-facility_en).

To implement and concretize the reforms, each nation receives funding in line with the budget allocations and consistent with the monetary resources agreed upon, with the Recovery and Resilience Facility built on performance-based measures.

Twice a year, after achieving the pre-established milestones and targets, the Member State submits a duly motivated request to the Commission for payment of the financial contribution or loan. Subsequently, the Commission preliminarily evaluates, assisted by experts, whether the respective milestones and targets have been met satisfactorily without invalidating previous ones. Article 2 of the EU Regulation No. 2021/241 stipulated that "'milestones and targets' mean measures of progress towards the achievement of a reform or an investment, with milestones being qualitative achievements and targets being quantitative achievements".

If the evaluation is positive, the Commission sends its conclusions to the Economic and Financial Committee and requests its opinion, which it considers. If the committee issues a positive evaluation, the Commission authorizes the disbursement of the financial contribution or loan.

Conversely, suppose it is determined that the indicated milestones and targets have not been correctly and appropriately achieved. In this case, the payment of all or part of the financial contribution is suspended (*ibidem*).

4. *The Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan*

The COVID-19 pandemic hit the Italian economy harder than other European countries. In 2020, the gross domestic product shrank by 8.9%, compared to a 6.2% decline in the European Union (Italia Domani, 2021). Italy was among the first and most severely affected by the shock of the health crisis and is one of the nations with the highest number of deaths in the EU, with more than 195,000 fatalities (https://opendatamds.maps.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/0f1c9a02467b45a7b4ca12d8ba 296596). Even before the crisis, Italy was a fragile country with significant social, environmental, and economic imbalances, and its productivity growth was much slower than in the rest of Europe. For these reasons, the opportunity to access European funds represented a fundamental chance for growth and development in the country.

On April 30, 2021, the Italian government officially submitted the text of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan to the European Commission, which gave a generally positive assessment on June 22, 2021. On July 13, 2021, the Italian NRRP was definitively approved by the Council's Implementing Decision (Italia Domani, 2021), which adopted the proposal of the European Commission. The Decision was accompanied by an annex (Council of the European Union, 2021) that defined specific goals and milestones for each investment and reform, with a timeline for their achievement. The allocation of resources was scheduled semi-annually, with a total of 10 instalments (Italian Chamber of Deputies, 2022). The Commission found that the Plan:

a. Complied with the pillars mentioned in Article 3 of the RRF regulation and enhanced Italy's growth potential, labour market conditions, and social resilience;

b. Did not significantly harm the EU's environmental objectives;

c. Included measures to support: the green transition with 37.5% of the total allocation, the digital transformation with 25.1%, and 40% of the resources for the southern regions;

d. Was structured to implement lasting structural changes to Italian society and economy;

e. Presented reasonable, plausible costs, commensurate with the expected social and economic impact (European Commission, 2021 - B).

Under the NextGenerationEU, Italy was allocated resources amounting to approximately €235.1 billion, making it the largest beneficiary, in absolute terms, of the two main recovery instruments: the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe, which specifically allocated €14.4 billion (https://politichecoesione.governo.it/it/politica-di-coesione/strategie-tematiche-e-territoriali/strategie-tematiche/strategia-per-il-contrasto-all-emergenza-covid-19-con-le-politiche-di-coesione/react-eu/). The government requested the maximum available RRF resources for Italy, amounting to approximately €191.5 billion: €68.9 billion in the form of grants, the so-called non-repayable contributions, and the remaining €122.6 billion in loans, representing more than one-fifth of the total Recovery and Resilience Facility budget (Italia Domani, 2021).

These resources are distributed based on specific criteria outlined in the EU Regulation No. 2021/24162, with 70% allocated during 2021 and 2022, and the remaining 30% of grants to be committed in 2023, estimating a GDP growth of 3.1% by 2026. Italy, reaffirming its commitment to recovery and aiming to finance all necessary investments within the NRRP strategy, supplemented the Plan with additional national resources through a Complementary National Fund amounting to €30.6 billion for the years 2021 to 2026, for a total of €222.1 billion in resources (Law No. 101, 2021).

With the decree of the Ministry of Economy and Finance of August 6, 2021, No. 229, Italy incorporated the projects outlined in the Plan, the allocation of resources to each administration, and the timeline for the milestones and targets spread out by semester (Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2021). Subsequently, on August 13, 2021, the European Commission provided €24.9 billion to Italy as pre-financing, of which €8.957 billion in non-repayable grants and €15.937 billion in loans, amounting to 13% of the total (Italian Chamber of Deputies, 2022), as provided by Article 13 of the EU Regulation 2021/241.

4.1 The Structure of the Italian National Plan

Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan is notable for its scope, being the largest in the European context. The legislator's choice was to intervene in a vast number of sectors to overcome the country's numerous structural weaknesses (Italian Court of Auditors, 2022). The national plan is coherently structured to address the specific national challenges and priorities identified within the framework of the European Semester; it also aligns with the guidelines outlined in the National Reform Programs, the National Energy and Climate Plans, the Territorial Just Transition Plans, the National Youth Guarantee Implementation Plans, and the Partnership Agreements (Italian Chamber of Deputies, 2022).

Additionally, the national strategy aims to promote gender equality and equal opportunities, contributing to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (European Parliament, European Council & European Commission, 2017). Within it, the NRRP defines intermediate and final targets, a tentative timeline for implementing reforms and investments, and monitoring and implementation methods using indicators. To date, the plan outlines a comprehensive package consisting of 307 measures, including 72 reforms and 235 investments, with the so-called 85 "sub-investments" and 6 "sub-reforms" (Italian Court of Auditors, 2024).

The reform strategies follow the three main cross-cutting pillars of the plan: gender equality; the enhancement of skills, capacities, and job prospects for young people; and the territorial rebalancing and development of Southern Italy. The reforms are structured into three categories:

a. *Horizontal or context reforms*, which cut across all six missions of the plan and aim to introduce structural innovations into the legal framework, while also creating the conditions for the effective management of the plan, characterized by high complexity. The first reform is that of the public administration, aimed at developing stable administrative capacity within public administrations to provide goods and services tailored to the needs of citizens and businesses and to promote a generational renewal capable of effectively managing the progressive digitalization of public services and the set of rules and procedures that

characterize the national administration. The second reform concerns justice, aimed at simplifying and reducing the duration of trials to make the enforcement of national legislation more efficient (https://www.italiadomani.gov.it/it/Interventi/riforme.html);

b. *Enabling reforms*, aimed at reducing administrative, regulatory, and procedural delays and challenges to ensure the effective and timely implementation of the plan. Key among these are the protection and promotion of competition, with the approval of the annual law for the market and competition, aimed at promoting economic efficiency and competitiveness, protecting consumer interests, and creating greater social equity by improving market access and functioning (*ibidem*);

c. *Sectoral reforms*, which accompany the investments of individual missions and consist of regulatory innovations relevant to specific areas of intervention or economic activities, aimed at introducing more efficient regulatory and procedural frameworks in their respective sectors. Examples include the adoption of national programs for air pollution control under the Green Revolution and Ecological Transition Mission, reforming the school system under the Education and Research Mission, and the national plan to combat undeclared work under the Inclusion and Cohesion Mission (*ibidem*).

All the plan's measures, investments and reforms, are accompanied by an implementation schedule and a list of deliverables to be met, *a conditio sine qua non* for the disbursement of funds. Each reform and investment is associated with a description of the measure's objectives and the indicators that reflect its goals and serve as the benchmark for evaluation. These indicators are divided into two groups: milestones and targets, which detail the progress and outcomes of the reforms and investments they aim to implement. Milestones generally represent substantial phases of implementation, administrative and procedural. They refer to qualitative achievements to be reached through a given measure of the plan and typically indicate a sequence of activities tied to achieving the goals. Targets, on the other hand, are estimated by quantitative indicators, as they represent measurable results. Unlike milestones, targets are achieved through specific measures of

the plan, such as increasing staffing levels or the number of businesses benefiting from certain incentives.

The measures outlined in the NRRP are based on a philosophy of environmental sustainability, strong digitalisation, and cooperation between public and private actors, thereby defining the six missions and the sixteen associated components.

Mission 1 – Digitalization, Innovation, Competitiveness, Culture, and Tourism
[41.34 billion euros - 21.26% of the funds]

M1C1 – Digitalization, innovation, and security in public administration;
M1C2 – Digitalization, innovation, and competitiveness in the production system;
M1C3 – Tourism and culture 4.0.

Mission 2 – Green Revolution and Ecological Transition
[55.52 billion euros - 28.56% of the funds]

M2C1 – Sustainable agriculture and circular economy;
M2C2 – Energy transition and sustainable mobility;
M2C3 – Energy efficiency and building retrofitting;
M2C4 – Protection of land and water resources.

Mission 3 – Infrastructure for Sustainable Mobility
[23.74 billion euros - 12.21% of the funds]

M3C1 – High-speed/capacity rail network and safe roads;
M3C2 – Integrated logistics intermodality.

Mission 4 – Education and Research
[30.09 billion euros - 15.48% of the funds]

M4C1 – Strengthening the provision of education services from early childhood to universities;
M4C2 – From research to business.

Mission 5 – Inclusion and Cohesion

[16.92 billion euros - 8.7% of the funds]

 M5C1 – Labour policies;

 M5C2 – Social infrastructure, families, communities, and the third sector;

 M5C3 – Special interventions for territorial cohesion.

Mission 6 – Health

[15.62 billion euros - 8.03% of the funds]

 M6C1 – Proximity networks, healthcare facilities, and telemedicine for territorial healthcare;

 M6C2 – Innovation, research, and digitalization of the National Health Service.

The implementation of each reform and investment is placed within and closely linked to a broader framework aimed at a common European strategy and action plan. Indeed, structured in this way, the Plan is fully aligned with the six pillars of the NGEU and largely meets the parameters set by European regulations on green and digital project quotas (Italia Domani, 2021).

4.2 The Governance of the Italian National Plan

The governance of Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan, as defined by Decree-Law No. 77 of May 31, 2021, and converted into Law No. 108 of July 19, 2021, is a multi-level system designed to manage the complex reforms and investments outlined in the plan. Its purpose is to ensure the efficient use of resources, timely implementation of projects, and alignment with the objectives set by the European Union.

At the top level, the governance structure is led by the Steering Committee, chaired by the President of the Council of Ministers and composed of ministers and undersecretaries responsible for the relevant sectors. Representatives from regional and local administrations, as well as economic and social stakeholders, are involved when necessary. This body provides political direction, monitors implementation, identifies critical issues, and coordinates actions across various levels of government. The Steering Committee is supported by a Technical Secretariat, which assists with reporting,

monitoring, and addressing implementation challenges. Periodic updates on the NRRP's progress are submitted to the Parliament to ensure transparency and accountability (Italian Chamber of Deputies, 2022).

A key component of the governance is the Central Service for the NRRP, established within the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF). It acts as the national contact point with the European Commission, overseeing the monitoring, reporting, and control systems for reforms and investments. The service is also responsible for managing financial flows through the NextGenerationEU - Italy Revolving Fund. To support this function, each central administration involved in implementing NRRP projects has established coordination offices to liaise with the Central Service (Italian Chamber of Deputies, 2021).

The governance framework also includes mechanisms for overcoming bureaucratic and legislative barriers. The Unit for the Rationalization and Improvement of Regulatory Efficiency, under the Presidency of the Council, identifies and resolves regulatory obstacles that could hinder the timely completion of NRRP projects. This unit proposes legislative simplifications and regulatory experiments to accelerate project delivery (Decree-Law No. 77, 2021).

To ensure broad participation, the Permanent Table for Economic, Social, and Territorial Partnership includes representatives from local governments, civil society, academia, and the private sector. This forum provides consultative input and raises concerns about the implementation of the plan (Italian Chamber of Deputies, 2022).

Oversight and auditing functions are assigned to several bodies, including the Italian Court of Auditors, which evaluates the efficiency and effectiveness of fund usage. Additionally, the monitoring system is supported by the ReGiS platform, an IT tool developed by the MEF to track the progress of milestones and targets, ensuring alignment with EU requirements (Law No. 178, 2020).

At the operational level, individual implementing bodies – central administrations, regions, and local authorities – are responsible for carrying out specific projects. These bodies operate based on specific institutional competencies or according to the different ownership of interventions defined in the NRRP. Each central administration is

responsible for coordinating the management activities, as well as monitoring, reporting, and control. To support coordination, the State-Regions Task Force was established to facilitate collaboration between national and regional authorities (Italian Chamber of Deputies, 2022).

Overall, the governance of the NRRP is designed to balance central oversight with decentralized implementation, fostering collaboration across levels of government and sectors. While ambitious, this structure must overcome challenges such as bureaucratic inertia and regional disparities to deliver on the plan's transformative goals by 2026.

5. *The NRRP Between Urban Regeneration and Sustainable Development*

The missions outlined in the NRRP aim to accelerate development or address critical challenges in social, economic, and cultural sectors identified as strategic by the Italian government. These missions encompass, within their components and areas of investment, the priorities Italy intends to focus on in the coming years, supported by substantial and immediate financial resources – the largest since World War II (Italia Domani, 2021).

Among the most significant principles within this framework are the concepts of reuse and urban regeneration, the latter included in the Decree-Law No. 152/2021, later converted into Law No. 233/2021. Article 21, concerning Integrated Plans (M5C2 Investment 2.2), states that "to promote better social inclusion, reducing marginalization and social degradation, integrated plans aim to promote urban regeneration through the recovery, restructuring, and eco-sustainable re-functionalization of buildings and public areas, energy and water efficiency of buildings, and soil consumption reduction". Furthermore, paragraph 7 mandates that "financed projects must ensure, in the case of buildings subject to reuse, re-functionalization, or restructuring, an increase of at least two energy classes" (*ibidem*; translations by the author), underscoring the focus on ecological transition. Thus, these investments not only provide metropolitan cities with the financial resources needed to renovate and recover peripheral areas but also aim to integrate a strong element of sustainability for the future.

Beyond urban peripheries, the NRRP also targets internal areas, implementing comprehensive measures to address overarching issues related to the development of these territories. Mission 5 - Inclusion and Cohesion, Component 3 (M5C3), specifically focuses on special interventions designed to enhance territorial cohesion. Overseen by the Minister for European Affairs, Southern Italy, Cohesion Policies and the NRRP, this component seeks to reduce disparities across different areas of the country. Key objectives include addressing demographic imbalances and service inequalities stemming from the geographic isolation of rural, mountainous, and peripheral areas, thereby ensuring equal access to essential services and revitalizing specific productive vocations. Additionally, it emphasizes skill development within an innovation-driven framework involving businesses, research centres, and public institutions. Finally, it tackles socio-economic disparities and directs investments towards Southern Italy, a region where the economic crisis has exacerbated vulnerabilities in supply chains and labour markets (Italia Domani, 2021).

Within this mission, several interventions focus on internal areas and qualify as initiatives for regenerating small towns, encompassing infrastructure development and social facilities.

Beyond the inclusion and cohesion measures, other areas of intervention within the NRRP hold significant potential, including ecological transition, proximity to healthcare (community houses), and the National Borghi Plan.

Delving deeper, Mission 1 - Digitalization, Innovation, Competitiveness, Culture, and Tourism (M1) incorporates investment measures aimed at regenerating, enhancing, and promoting Italy's architectural, historical, and artistic heritage as a driver of economic growth and social cohesion The mission is divided into 3 components and includes 146 milestones and 262 targets.

In particular, Component 3 - Tourism and Culture 4.0 (M1C3) has been entrusted to the Ministry of Culture, which has outlined four investment areas aimed at revitalising two critical economic sectors in Italy: culture and tourism. These sectors are considered the expression of the country's image and brand (Italia Domani, 2021).

The planned interventions aim to restructure Italy's main cultural assets to facilitate the creation of new services, leveraging social participation as a tool for inclusion and regeneration. The goal is to enhance the attractiveness, accessibility, and safety of these areas while adhering to the overarching principle of environmental sustainability.

Consequently, the initiatives aim not only to valorise metropolitan or major cultural and historical sites but also to regenerate peripheral areas and recognise the significance of smaller sites (e.g., *borghi*), rural areas, and fragile zones, including smaller islands. This is intended to foster new forms of responsible visitor flows more sustainably across the territory, mitigating the effects of overtourism. Resources will also be allocated to improve tourism and hospitality offerings to elevate the overall attractiveness of Italy, leveraging advanced technologies and digitalization in these sectors.

All interventions will feature robust social participation, emphasizing collaboration between public and private entities, citizens, and communities. The Faro Convention and the European Framework for Cultural Heritage Action advocate for integrated and participatory approaches to generate both social and cultural benefits.

Within Component M1C3, Investment Area 2 - Regeneration of Small Cultural Sites, Religious and Rural Heritage (M1C3.2) allocates €2.72 billion, distributed across four investments (Italia Domani, 2021). This thesis focuses specifically on Investment 2.1 - Attractiveness of the *Borghi* (M1C3.2.1).

Given the risk of overuse and degradation faced by cultural hubs due to the influx of international visitors, Investment 2.1 seeks to redirect these flows to other locations of high artistic and cultural value, such as rural areas and *borghi*. The objectives include countering depopulation, preserving landscapes, traditions, and crafts, and revitalizing the socio-economic fabric of these areas.

5.1 The National Borghi Plan

The National Borghi Plan refers to the program through which all interventions under Investment 2.1 - Attractiveness of the Small Villages are implemented. The Plan focuses on the tourism revival and the socio-economic development of these small, often overlooked and fragile Italian historic centres, which hold significant potential for the

promotion of sustainable and alternative tourism. This type of tourism emphasizes cultural heritage, history, and local traditions.

The main actions outlined in the Plan include the restoration of historic architectural heritage, the creation of small cultural facilities for tourism purposes, the redevelopment of public open spaces, the establishment of new itineraries, and the revitalization of local economies. These efforts aim to enhance traditional techniques, knowledge, and artisanal and agri-food products.

The Plan identifies two intervention lines:

a. **Line A**, which is the focus of this thesis, allocates €420 million to fund exemplary pilot projects for the regeneration of small villages based on socio-cultural and economic criteria.

b. **Line B** directly finances local activities, for the cultural and social regeneration of at least 229 small historic villages, each receiving €1.65 million for a total of €380 million.

Under the first intervention line, each Region or Autonomous Province was allowed to select a pilot project to receive a €20 million investment, resulting in 21 interventions across the national territory. Adding the 229 interventions from Line B, the Ministry of Culture had to oversee the selection of 250 villages characterized by significant social and economic decline and requiring substantial revitalization efforts.

Within the framework of the National Plan, *borghi* are defined as "small historic settlements that have retained the recognizability of their historic settlement structure and the continuity of historic building fabrics" (translation by the author). Additionally, in the case of small and very small municipalities, they "may coincide with the urban centre of the municipal territory. In all other cases, they are to be understood as historic cores, predominantly isolated and/or separated from the urban centre, and therefore not coinciding with the historic centre or portions of it" (Italian Ministry of Culture, 2021; translation by the author).

The key idea of Line A of the call for proposals is stated by the Italian Minister of Culture, Dario Franceschini:

"In the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, villages play a central role and have been allocated a historic amount of funding, equal to one billion euros. Now we need to act quickly, but we must set a clear direction: 'no' to scattershot funding; we want projects that demonstrate that, with concrete intervention in a small village, it can be repopulated and regenerated by giving it a specific vocation. The goal is to create jobs through projects of cultural, social, and economic regeneration. Regions, municipalities, associations, and businesses are and will continue to be key players in this process" (Ricostituito al MiC il Comitato Borghi, 2021; translation by the author).

The criteria for selecting small historic villages, jointly established by the Ministry of Culture, Regions, ANCI (*Associazione Nazionale Comuni Italiani* - National Association of Italian Municipalities), and internal areas, include statistical indicators such as demographic size (municipalities with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants), population trends, tourist flows, the strength of the tourism offer, cultural participation levels, the density of cultural, creative, and tourism enterprises, and the number of residential units in the village (typically not exceeding 300 units; (*ibidem*).

Project proposals were required to enhance tourism attractiveness and increase cultural participation. Each project was expected to implement a unified initiative encompassing the following:

a. The establishment of new functions and services in the fields of culture, tourism, social welfare, and research, with a significant employment impact, particularly for young people;

b. The promotion of new residential attractiveness, both for local residents and external populations;

c. The improvement of quality of life through the valorisation of culture, landscapes, and traditions, leveraging new technologies and green economy principles;

d. The active involvement and participation of local communities through co-design initiatives;

e. Synergy and collaboration between public and private entities.

It is important to note that any planned restoration interventions must go beyond mere preservation purposes and include activities aligned with the overarching initiative's goals. To ensure the long-term sustainability of these projects and consolidate the economic development of the territories, management plans are also required.

Regions and municipalities were required to submit proposals for the social and economic regeneration of a historic village by March 15, 2022. These submissions were reviewed by a technical committee composed of representatives from the Ministry of Culture, Regions, ANCI, and associations within the National Borghi Committee. By May 2022, the committee assessed the coherence of project proposals with the processes and timelines outlined in the NRRP (*ibidem*).

To apply for the funding provided by the National Borghi Plan, municipalities were required to prepare a feasibility study that demonstrated the technical-urbanistic, economic-financial, and legal-administrative viability of the proposal, as well as its economic and social benefits, particularly in terms of employment impact.

5.2 Criticism of the Borghi Call and the Ongoing Debate

The design phase of the small historic villages call was carried out under extremely tight deadlines, driven by the European Commission's timeline and the necessity to allocate all NRRP funds by the strict deadline of June 2026. This urgency is one of the key factors fuelling the intense debate surrounding the call, particularly concerning Line A. From the outset, several organisations, notably *I Borghi più Belli d'Italia* (The Most Beautiful Villages in Italy), Legambiente, the Italian Touring Club and UNPLI – National Union of Pro Loco of Italy, have openly opposed the approach adopted by the Ministry of Culture to allocate NRRP funds through this intervention line (https://borghipiubelliditalia.it/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/COMUNICATO-STAMPA-LItalia-dei-Borghi.pdf).

The primary objections to this intervention line have come from municipalities excluded from the selection process. The decision to designate a single winner per region has been widely criticized as questionable. According to Minister Franceschini (Ricostituito al MiC il Comitato Borghi, 2021), the intent behind this approach was to avoid 'scattergun' funding, yet it inadvertently fostered intense competition among small municipalities.

This competitive framework contradicted the principle of inter-municipal collaboration, which policymakers have long sought to promote. Consequently, municipalities found themselves in a competitive rather than cooperative environment, with no provisions or incentives for neighbouring municipalities to jointly develop shared projects – an option not envisaged under this funding line.

The strongest arguments against Line A, however, have come from associations. The President of UNCEM - *Unione Nazionale Comuni Comunità Enti Montani* (National Union of Mountain Municipalities, Communities, and Authorities) labelled the call a 'lottery', arguing that the 21 selected *borghi* were chosen based on entirely discretionary criteria that varied from region to region. This approach has exacerbated asymmetries and widespread inequalities (https://uncem.it/bando-borghi-del-pnrr-lettera-aperta-del-presidente-uncem/)

Similarly, the President of *I Borghi più belli d'Italia* sided with the excluded municipalities, echoing UNCEM's call for the Ministry of Culture to fund all projects deemed eligible by the evaluation commissions, even in future years.

The association *Riabitare l'Italia* (Reinhabit Italy), drawing on its experience with the SNAI - *Strategia Nazionale Aree Interne* (National Strategy for Inner Areas), outlined these concerns in the book *Contro i borghi* (Barbera, Cersosimo, De Rossi, 2022). The study argues that allocating €20 million to a single small municipality or *borgo* per region has limited impact if the selected community remains isolated. True revitalization, it contends, requires extending efforts beyond the village itself, fostering integration and networks with nearby urban centres and surrounding areas.

The size of the allocated funding has been criticized as excessively high, given that small villages often lack the human resources and technical expertise to manage such substantial sums, forcing them to depend on external actors. This creates two potential risks: first, the spending capacity of these municipalities may be uncertain or problematic; second, neighbouring municipalities excluded from the intervention may remain in precarious conditions. Even if the selected villages succeed in revitalising themselves and become the envisioned 'anchor towns', what will happen to the many other small municipalities in inner areas? A more modest allocation, distributed across a greater

number of municipalities – though not as diffusely as Line B – might have better addressed the pressing challenges faced by these communities.

Another major criticism concerns the selection process for the winning projects, particularly the lack of transparency at regional and provincial levels. This issue is exacerbated by the inaccessibility of documentation, as municipalities seeking access to ranking lists were denied. UNCEM's President highlighted this concern, stating:

> "No one knows how the projects were evaluated, what criteria were used for scoring, or how municipalities were funded or excluded. The documentation for all funding lines must be public and published, and municipalities cannot be left with a denial of access" (ANSA, 2022).

This lack of transparency is particularly troubling in the context of public tender processes, as it has exacerbated tensions both between municipalities and between municipalities and their respective regions.

Given this framework, the policy risks two potential outcomes: the selected municipalities may thrive, becoming what Giovanni Semi (2022) describes as "*borghi* for the bourgeoisie" (translation by the author) or they may fail to manage the funds effectively, squandering a rare opportunity. Importantly, such failures may not result from shortcomings of the municipalities themselves but rather from the policy's rigid guidelines, which prohibit municipal aggregations, hinder partnerships, and impose tight deadlines for application submissions.

Despite significant criticism from municipalities and associations, the funding structure has remained unchanged.

6. Final Consideration

The National Borghi Plan, described by former Minister of Culture Franceschini as "a unique opportunity to relaunch small towns and the artistic treasures spread across the lesser-known areas of the country, and even more so to transform a dispersed heritage into a widespread one" (Ricostituito al MiC il Comitato Borghi, 2021; translation by the author), holds great potential for revitalizing Italy's historic villages. However, the limited timeframe of the plan, spanning from 2021 to 2026, raises concerns about the

feasibility of designing and implementing interventions of such scale and complexity within this period. It remains uncertain whether stakeholders have sufficient time to develop projects that are both thoughtful and aligned with the unique needs of the territories involved.

A further challenge lies in the administrative and technical capacity of the small towns targeted by the plan. These local entities, often grappling with depopulation and resource constraints, are suddenly tasked with managing unprecedented levels of funding, despite lacking the necessary expertise and preparedness. This mismatch between the scope of the opportunity and the readiness of those tasked with its implementation underscores the need for stronger support structures and capacity-building measures.

Moreover, the multifaceted challenges these small towns face – rooted in historical, social, and economic contexts – require careful, context-specific analysis and long-term planning. The risk of over-planning under tight deadlines looms large, potentially leading to superficial or hasty interventions aimed at utilizing all available funds. Such an approach could undermine the plan's intent, steering efforts toward excessive touristification of historic centres. This not only risks eroding the authentic character of these towns but also limits the benefits to surrounding areas, perpetuating existing inequalities.

As the plan unfolds, it is imperative to adopt a critical and reflective perspective, ensuring that its goals are realized in ways that uphold local identities, promote sustainability, and generate meaningful, long-lasting benefits. Without careful monitoring and adaptive strategies, the transformative potential of the National Borghi Plan could fall short, leaving these communities vulnerable to the unintended consequences of poorly executed regeneration efforts.

Chapter III

Historic Villages as Laboratories of Sustainability: The Cases of Monticchio Bagni and Borgo Castello

1. Introduction

In this chapter, a comparative analysis is conducted on two design interventions included in the Italian NRRP under the National Borghi Plan, which was described in the previous chapter. The primary objective is to understand how these projects interpret the initiative's guidelines, implementing operational strategies that enhance cultural and natural heritage while simultaneously promoting inclusive and sustainable development models. The two case studies selected – the Monticchio Bagni Pilot Project located in Rionero in Vulture (Potenza) in the Basilicata region, and the Borgo Castello Pilot Project in the municipality of Andora (Savona) in the Liguria region – represent distinct yet complementary approaches to the regeneration of historic villages.

This comparison thus provides an opportunity to explore not only the peculiarities of each project but also their overall contribution to the strategic goals of the initiative. The analysis will examine several aspects, including the strategic vision of the two interventions, the role of local communities, the adoption of innovative technologies, economic and environmental sustainability, as well as implications for the tourism system. Particular attention will be paid to the impact that each project aims to generate, both in terms of enhancing cultural and natural heritage and as a stimulus for economic and social growth in the territory.

The choice of these two interventions stems from their ability to offer diverse perspectives on the theme of sustainable cultural tourism. On one hand, the Monticchio Bagni project stands out for its focus on biodiversity, environmental education, and slow mobility, proposing a model that integrates nature, culture, and innovation to create an experiential tourism system. On the other hand, the Borgo Castello project emphasizes the importance of enhancing archaeological heritage and historical landscapes through advanced technologies such as augmented reality, demonstrating how new technologies can enrich the cultural experience and expand heritage accessibility.

An additional aspect that shapes the analysis is the differing nature of the documentation submitted for the funding applications. The Borgo Castello project is supported by a comprehensive and cohesive report, including detailed historical analyses, statistical data, intervention descriptions, and long-term objectives. This transparency not only facilitates public understanding but also enables a more structured exploration of the project's vision and impact. The Monticchio Bagni project, on the other hand, relies on fragmented documentation consisting of multiple independent documents. While thorough, these materials lack the cohesion of Monticchio Bagni's report and are less readily accessible to the public. This distinction reflects differing planning and communication approaches: Borgo Castello's documentation emphasizes a unified narrative, while Monticchio Bagni demonstrates adaptability by addressing specific components of the project individually.

This difference also influences the analytical lens applied in this chapter. Borgo Castello's holistic framework supports a deeper analysis of its overarching strategic vision, whereas Monticchio Bagni's fragmented materials require synthesizing diverse elements to understand its priorities and methods. While this may present challenges in comparing the projects directly, it also offers unique insights into how different documentation styles can affect project implementation and stakeholder engagement. Acknowledging these distinctions allows for a more nuanced and transparent evaluation of both initiatives.

The comparison between these two projects provides an opportunity to explore how villages can serve as laboratories for sustainability and innovation, effectively integrating heritage preservation, social inclusion, and economic development. By examining these emblematic cases of territorial regeneration, this chapter seeks to offer a critical and in-depth contribution to the academic and practical discourse on sustainable cultural tourism and the pivotal role of historic villages in shaping innovative and respectful development models for local territories.

2. Borgo Monticchio Bagni Project

Nestled in the heart of the Basilicata region**,** Monticchio Bagni stands as a hidden gem of natural beauty and cultural heritage, offering a unique combination of pristine landscapes and historical significance. As a hamlet of Rionero in Vulture, Monticchio Bagni is surrounded by the scenery of Mount Vulture and the Monticchio Lakes. This small village

of 130 inhabitants has long been known for its millenary history embedded in the landscape, on which the economic and entrepreneurial story of the Lanari family is set between the 19th and 20th centuries.

The Monticchio Bagni regeneration project seeks to build upon this legacy, revitalising the village and its surroundings through a series of interventions that integrate cultural preservation, environmental sustainability, and community engagement. By leveraging its historical and natural resources, the project aims to transform Monticchio Bagni into a model of compatibility between heritage conservation and innovative tourism. This section delves into the unique characteristics of Monticchio Bagni, exploring its geographic, cultural, and historical context while highlighting its central role in the regeneration initiative.

2.1 History of the Village

Monticchio Bagni, a hamlet of the municipality of Rionero in Vulture, stands out as a unique example among the villages of Basilicata due to its rich millennia-old history and its close relationship with the surrounding landscape. While its natural beauty has always been central to its identity, the village's history is deeply intertwined with significant entrepreneurial and economic developments that occurred between the 19th and 20th centuries under the leadership of the Lanari family.

The Lanari family originate from the province of Ancona, the capital of the Marche region in Italy. They brought transformative changes in Monticchio Bagni, turning it into a model of agricultural and industrial innovation. Establishing a sharecropping-based estate, they introduced experimental practices in cereal cultivation, chestnut nurseries, and silk production through mulberry cultivation. Additionally, they diversified agricultural activities to include sugar beet, maize, and tobacco, while advancing animal husbandry with the introduction of Yorkshire pigs and Merino sheep. These advancements positioned Monticchio Bagni as an agricultural hub and a centre for experimentation in the practices of its time.

The family's entrepreneurial vision extended beyond agriculture. They developed a thriving mineral water industry, which gained national and international recognition. The

Lanari family also expanded the village's thermal baths, adding a hotel to attract visitors seeking relaxation and wellness. Their contributions included the construction of critical infrastructure such as roads, a hydroelectric power plant, tobacco processing facilities, warehouses, and dozens of homes for settlers, all facilitated by the Zanardelli Special Law of 1904, which supported rural development in southern Italy.

Figure 1 - Promotional postcard of Monticchio Lanari mineral waters at the Milan Expo of 1906 (Rionero in Vulture, 2022)

Monticchio Bagni also became a symbol of modernity during the Belle Époque. Around the Lanari family palace, the main settlement of the village coalesced, marked by progressive advancements such as the arrival of a cinema shortly after the invention of the Lumière brothers. The strategic location of the village along the Ofanto River and the newly built railway, featuring steel lattice bridges constructed by the same craftsmen behind the Eiffel Tower, further solidified Monticchio's connections to broader markets. This infrastructure allowed the village's mineral waters to reach European exhibitions, establishing its reputation far beyond regional borders.

Beyond its economic and industrial achievements, Monticchio Bagni remains a testament to the harmony between human activity and its natural surroundings. Nestled in a landscape shaped by the volcanic origins of Mount Vulture, the village is surrounded by forests, vineyards, and mineral springs, which continue to define its identity. Its historical development reflects the enduring importance of its natural resources and the vision of those who sought to harness them sustainably.

Figure 2 – Tborgo cahe lakes of Monticchio and the forest banks (Rionero in Vulture, 2022)

2.2 The Decline of Monticchio Bagni

In recent decades, Monticchio Bagni has experienced a sharp demographic decline, with its population decreasing by 36% between 2001 and 2011, from 209 to 133 residents. This reduction is further complicated by discrepancies between official statistics and actual residency, as many individuals maintain formal addresses in the village while living elsewhere. This depopulation has been accompanied by the abandonment of both residential and non-residential buildings, including former tourist, agricultural, and industrial facilities. Over the same period, the village's-built heritage has diminished by 30%, further limiting its resilience.

The local economy is equally precarious. The remaining economic activities consist of basic services, such as retail food outlets, a pharmacy, a post office, and a few agritourism businesses. However, even these essential services have come under threat, with the closure of the general practitioner's practice and the precarious status of the post office and pharmacy. While larger employers, such as the mineral water bottling plants Gaudianello and Toka, operate on the outskirts of the village, they primarily employ workers who commute from surrounding areas. Most working-age residents of Monticchio Bagni commute to Rionero in Vulture, Melfi, or the San Nicola industrial area for employment, leaving agriculture – mainly cereal cultivation – as a supplementary activity for a small fraction of the population.

2.3 Vision and Objectives of the Project

The regeneration project for Monticchio Bagni aims to reverse the nowadays trends through a comprehensive strategy that revitalises the village as a centre for sustainable tourism, cultural innovation, and community development. The vision for the project rests on two main pillars: attracting students, researchers, entrepreneurs, and remote workers through co-working spaces and innovation hubs and enhancing Monticchio Bagni's appeal as a destination for leisure, wellness, and cultural experiences. This dual focus aligns with the broader objective of reconnecting the village to its natural and cultural landscapes while fostering economic and social growth.

The project envisions Monticchio Bagni as an attractive and sustainable destination, blending the preservation of cultural heritage with contemporary needs for accessibility, technology, and economic development. At the heart of this vision lies the redevelopment of the Lanari village, accompanied by the creation of a network of pathways and infrastructures that promote slow mobility. Pedestrian trails, routes for pedal-assisted bicycles, and a platform on the Lago Grande will enable respectful and conscious exploration of the area's diverse landscapes, rich biodiversity, and cultural landmarks.

Operationally, the project encompasses three main interventions: the Exhibition Space and Nursery Centre, the Village and Sant'Ippolito Museum, and the Village Trail. These pillars form an integrated strategy that combines biodiversity conservation, cultural preservation, and sustainable mobility.

In addition to these pillars, the project introduces spaces dedicated to innovation and creativity, such as thematic workshops, cultural parks, and facilities for digital and editorial production. It also plans to host cultural events, including an annual festival celebrating the village's revival, and activities to digitize and preserve the area's historical and cultural heritage. Social animation initiatives will further strengthen community cohesion, ensuring that local residents play an active role in the village's transformation.

A key element of the project is the involvement of the local community in the design and implementation of the proposed interventions. Using participatory methodologies led by universities and expert organizations, such as Basilicata Creativa and Novalab, the

initiative aims to foster a sense of ownership among residents. This approach not only bridges generational and cultural divides but also ensures that the village remains an active, living space for its inhabitants. Residents will take on roles in hospitality, cultural activities, and heritage preservation, positioning Monticchio Bagni as a model of inclusive development where the community itself drives the regeneration process.

The Municipality of Rionero in Vulture plays a pivotal role in planning and managing the project, working in collaboration with a regional steering committee involving the Department of Environment and other stakeholders. This coordinated approach ensures that resources and expertise are aligned to meet the planned deadlines, with construction initiated in September 2023.

By leveraging its historical legacy, natural beauty, and cultural potential, the Monticchio Bagni regeneration project aims to reconnect the village with its past while envisioning a sustainable future. The interventions aspire to address the challenges of depopulation, economic decline, and social fragmentation by transforming the village into a vibrant destination for sustainable tourism and cultural innovation. This project is not merely a response to immediate challenges but a forward-looking attempt to redefine Monticchio Bagni's role within the broader territorial and cultural framework of Basilicata. Through careful planning and community participation, the village has the potential to become a thriving example of renewal, where history, nature, and modernity coexist harmoniously.

2.4 Key Interventions

Exhibition Space and Nursery Centre

The Exhibition Space and Nursery Centre has been conceived as a key element for enhancing the natural and cultural heritage of the Monticchio Bagni area. This intervention aims to promote environmental awareness, biodiversity conservation, support for the agricultural and gardening industries, and stimulate innovation, green tourism, and research in the sector. Located along the path that skirts Lago Grande in Monticchio Bagni, the project follows the model of a "distributed nursery centre", integrated into the landscape and accessible through trails that connect the main points of interest in the village.

The centre will serve as the endpoint of a system of pedestrian paths that traverse or originate in the village of Monticchio Bagni, restoring sections of trails currently compromised by overgrown vegetation or the absence of sidewalks. This network of walkways is designed to encourage sustainable and conscious exploration of the area, improving accessibility to the archaeological site and enhancing the natural landscape, with particular attention to local biodiversity.

Figure 3 - Lakeside walk of Lago Grande nowadays
(Città di Rionero in Vulture & Ministero della Cultura, 2024)

The innovative aspect of the project lies in the creation of an open-air nursery, conceived as an integral part of the landscape and enriched by immersive sensory experiences. Thanks to the lakeside walk, visitors will be able to explore the surrounding environment by engaging their primary senses – sight, hearing, touch, and smell – and immersing themselves in a journey that evolves with the changing seasons. The design of the pedestrian path follows the natural curvature of Lago Grande, aiming to create a harmonious and environmentally respectful experience. Along the way, panoramic viewpoints will offer spectacular vistas of the lake and surrounding mountains, highlighting the striking contrast between the blue waters, green vegetation, and the sky's reflections.

Visitors will be able to admire a variety of natural scenes, from wooded landscapes to wetlands rich in wild flora. The presence of wildflowers, water lilies, and native plants, combined with light filtering through the trees, will create a magical and evocative

atmosphere. Informational totems will be installed along the route to provide details about the tree and plant species present, enhancing the botanical heritage and stimulating curiosity and learning.

At the end of the pedestrian path, a fully equipped area will host activities closely related to biodiversity conservation and environmental education. These include the collection, packaging, and sale of seeds from forest and naturalistic species; the conservation and propagation of forest, agricultural, and naturalistic germplasm, both *in vivo* and *in vitro*; and the implementation of a vegetative germplasm bank. Collection fields and demonstration and experimental activities will also be developed to promote scientific research and knowledge dissemination in botany and agronomy.

Particular attention will be given to environmental education, with the organization of educational workshops and training activities primarily aimed at schools. Following the principles of modern exhibition space philosophies, the centre aims to highlight the deep connection between humans and nature while maintaining the rigor of scientific research. These spaces will be designed to stimulate critical reflection on the importance of biodiversity and the need to adopt sustainable practices for its conservation.

The main objectives of the project are articulated around three fundamental areas: nature, well-being, and culture. Firstly, the project seeks to promote environmental education through sensory experiences, interactive workshops, and thematic paths that provide information about the local ecosystem, sustainable agriculture, and biodiversity. Secondly, it aims to support biodiversity conservation through the cultivation and distribution of rare and endangered plant species and to showcase the latest technological innovations and sustainable practices in the agricultural and nursery sectors. Thirdly, the centre is configured as a platform for knowledge exchange among professionals, academics, and visitors, fostering networking and dialogue among various stakeholders.

The project also aims to stimulate green tourism, offering visitors a unique opportunity to immerse themselves in nature. The lakeside walk and visit to the nursery centre represent an opportunity to showcase the beauty of the local landscape and plants while simultaneously supporting the region's economy. Through collaboration with experts and

researchers, the centre will promote research and development activities to improve plant cultivation, increase disease resistance, and foster the development of new varieties.

Finally, the Exhibition Space and Nursery Centre is envisioned as an innovative model of integration between sustainable tourism, biodiversity conservation, and environmental education. This project not only enhances the natural and cultural heritage of the area but also strengthens the bond between communities and their environment, fostering collective reflection on the importance of harmonious and sustainable development.

The Village and Sant'Ippolito Museum

The Village and Sant'Ippolito Museum represents a central project for enhancing the historical and cultural heritage of the Monticchio Bagni area. This museum will be housed in the ancient stables of Palazzo Lanari, a historic building located in the main square of the village. The structure, consisting of two levels, preserves valuable architectural elements that reflect the economic and social past of the local community: the lower floor, with large, vaulted spaces, was historically used as stables, while the upper floor, partially collapsed, served as a grain storage area.

The intervention includes the architectural restoration and repurposing of the spaces, with the aim of transforming the pavilion into a museum hub that narrates the history of the Lanari family, the village of Monticchio Bagni, and the archaeological excavations of the Abbey of Sant'Ippolito. The project is oriented towards the preservation of both tangible and intangible heritage, while also adopting an innovative approach to cultural engagement that combines scientific rigor with an engaging and accessible experience for the public.

One of the central elements of the museum will be the narration of the entrepreneurial history of the Lanari family, who played a fundamental role in the economic and cultural development of the village. Through the exhibition of documents, artefacts, and testimonies, visitors will be guided to discover the family's history and their connection to the territory. Alongside this historical dimension, the museum will include a section dedicated to the archaeological excavations of Sant'Ippolito, offering a detailed presentation of the discoveries made in the area, including artefacts, architectural

structures, and traces of ancient human activities. Thematic exhibitions will be accompanied by descriptive panels, interactive videos, and virtual reconstructions to make the content accessible to a diverse audience.

Figure 4 - Archeological Park of the Sant'Ippolito Abbey nowadays
(Città di Rionero in Vulture & Ministero della Cultura, 2024)

The museum will not only conserve and present heritage but will also serve as a place for education and cultural dissemination with a strong educational focus. Educational programs will be developed for schools, families, and visitors, including hands-on workshops, thematic tours, and interactive activities aimed at conveying historical and archaeological knowledge. This educational approach seeks to stimulate critical thinking and encourage a deeper understanding of the historical and cultural dynamics of the area.

The museum aims to become an attractive hub for visitors interested in history, archaeology, and local traditions. Its strategic location in the heart of the village of Monticchio makes it a reference point for the entire community, contributing to the revitalization of the historic centre and encouraging local economic development. The museum will be integrated into a network of tourist routes connecting the main points of interest in the area, fostering a slow and responsible form of tourism.

One of the project's most innovative aspects is the active involvement of the local community in the creation and management of the museum. Residents of the village will be invited to participate in the collection of materials, testimonies, and historical artifacts, thereby contributing to the creation of a shared heritage. This participatory process

strengthens the sense of belonging and cultural identity within the community, increasing awareness of the importance of preserving and enhancing their roots.

The restoration of the building will be carried out in compliance with criteria for environmental sustainability and architectural compatibility, using materials and techniques that ensure the preservation of the building's historical value. Special attention will be given to accessibility, with the creation of barrier-free internal pathways, elevators, and multimedia devices to make the museum accessible to people with varying abilities.

Figure 5 - Palazzo Lanari in the early 1900s (Rionero in Vulture, 2022)

Figure 6 - Palazzo Lanari nowadays (Rionero in Vulture, 2022)

The Village and Sant'Ippolito Museum will also play an important role as a research centre. It will serve as a reference point for scholars, archaeologists, and researchers

interested in the history of the Lanari family, the excavations of Sant'Ippolito, and the broader history of the Vulture area. The museum will promote collaborations with universities and research institutes by organizing conferences, workshops, and scientific publications.

Finally, the museum will contribute to greater social cohesion by fostering intergenerational dialogue and strengthening the cultural identity of the village. Through cultural events, temporary exhibitions, and participatory activities, the museum will become a lively and dynamic space capable of attracting visitors and generating a positive impact on the territory.

Village Trail

The Village Trail serves as both a physical and social connector among the main points of interest in the territory, integrating into a single route the Lago Grande, Lago Piccolo, the archaeological area of Sant'Ippolito, and the village of Monticchio Bagni. This approximately five-kilometre-long path is designed not only as a way to experience the area but also as a tool for landscape regeneration and the reconnection between communities and their environment.
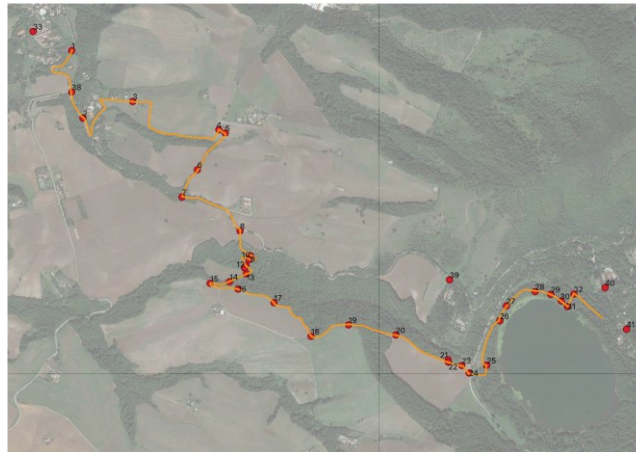
Figure 7 - Path of the Village Trail
(Città di Rionero in Vulture & Ministero della Cultura, 2024)

The trail has been conceived according to the principles of slow mobility, an approach that prioritizes walking and cycling to encourage an immersive and sustainable

experience. The concept of slow tourism is translated here into a landscape narrative that guides visitors on a journey through the nature, history, and cultural traditions of the territory.

The trail develops along a route that traverses a variety of landscapes, from lake shores to wooded areas, from archaeological remains to the historic streets of the village. This itinerary is designed to respect and enhance local biodiversity through the adoption of low-impact design and construction practices. Consolidation and safety measures will be implemented with particular attention to soil protection and minimizing the impact on the local ecosystem. The path will also include infrastructure to ensure accessibility for hikers of different physical abilities, with the installation of steps, walkways, handrails, and rest areas.

From a cultural perspective, the Village Trail functions as an open-air museum, enriched with informational signage and thematic panels that narrate the history and unique features of the territory. Visitors will delve into topics such as the volcanic geology of the Vulture area, the botanical and faunal richness of the region, the history of the Lanari family, the archaeological excavations of Sant'Ippolito, the phenomenon of brigandage, and the construction of the railway. Each segment of the trail becomes an opportunity to explore different aspects of local culture and nature, offering an integrated experience that combines learning and leisure.

Figure 8 - Design suggestion of the Village Trail
(Città di Rionero in Vulture & Ministero della Cultura, 2024)

From a tourism perspective, the project aims to promote a model of sustainable and responsible tourism, aligned with the objectives of sustainable cultural tourism. Attracting visitors who are passionate about nature, history, and local traditions will help support the village economy by encouraging the development of tourism services, such as accommodations, restaurants, and shops selling local products. This approach supports a circular economy, enhancing local resources while promoting respect for the environment and host communities.

The project is also notable for its strong involvement of the local community, which is considered a fundamental resource for the initiative's success. Residents of the village will be invited to actively participate in the creation and management of the trail, contributing to the collection of historical testimonies, the maintenance of trail sections, and the promotion of local traditions. This direct involvement strengthens the community's sense of belonging and creates a lasting bond between the project and the territory.

Planned interventions along the trail include the stabilization of areas affected by erosion, the restoration of ancient pedestrian paths, and the creation of spaces for rest and contemplation. The trail will feature strategic panoramic viewpoints from which visitors can admire the landscape in its entirety, including the lakes, the slopes of the Vulture, and the surrounding dense forests. These observation points will be complemented by descriptive panels that guide visitors in understanding the natural and historical phenomena that have shaped the territory.

The Village Trail ultimately aims to offer visitors a transformative experience, allowing them to engage with the landscape not merely as passive observers but as integral parts of a network of ecological, historical, and cultural connections. This experiential dimension translates into tourism that not only respects the environment but enriches it, fostering awareness and promoting a new relationship between humans and the territory.

In conclusion, the Village Trail represents a paradigmatic project of sustainable cultural tourism, capable of combining the enhancement of local heritage with the promotion of development models that respect the environment and communities. It becomes a symbol

of how sustainability can be integrated into tourism practices, transforming the territory into a living laboratory of culture, nature, and social innovation.

2.5 Timeline

The regeneration of Monticchio Bagni is structured as a complex and multi-phase process, guided by a detailed timeline that ensures its effective implementation and continuous progress monitoring. The planning phase, initiated in 2021, began with a preliminary study and co-design activities involving over forty partners, including public entities, universities, cultural institutions, and local businesses. Throughout the following two years, the Municipality of Rionero in Vulture developed strategic intervention guidelines, culminating in 2023 with the completion of the Technical and Economic Feasibility Project, a crucial document for securing funding through the NRRP, Investment 2.1 "Attractiveness of the *Borghi*". Simultaneously, feasibility studies and environmental assessments were conducted to define intervention methods, while, from mid-year onwards, administrative procedures for tendering and contracting works were progressively initiated.

As of early 2025, the project has reached a critical phase, with the implementation of interventions progressing at varying paces depending on the specific works underway. Some construction sites are already in an advanced stage, while others are still finalizing executive procedures. Among the most significant completed works, the Visitor and Welcome Center is nearing completion, with the upcoming setup of exhibitions and the definition of interactive visitor itineraries. The restoration of Palazzo Lanari, designated to house the Village and Sant'Ippolito Museum, is proceeding according to schedule, aiming for full operational status by the end of the year. At the same time, significant progress has been made in redeveloping sustainable mobility infrastructure, with the reinforcement of certain sections of the Village Trail and the development of the Monks' Raft route. The Sant'Ippolito Archaeological Park, a central element of the project aimed at preserving and enhancing the region's historical heritage, has also entered its initial phase of intervention, with actions focused on improving accessibility and promoting historical tourism.

Despite close attention to maintaining the planned schedule, some logistical and administrative challenges have caused slight delays in more complex projects, such as the Research and Training Hub and the Experimental Agricultural Center for Enology and Olive Cultivation, whose completion is now projected for the second half of the year. Alongside the development of physical infrastructure, 2025 marks a decisive year for the digitalization of Monticchio Bagni's cultural heritage. Ongoing activities include the creation of interactive platforms and digital tools aimed at promoting the region, with a particular focus on immersive technologies and dedicated applications to enhance tourist experiences.

Looking ahead, the project envisions the consolidation of completed interventions and the finalization of infrastructure by mid-2026. With the opening of exhibition spaces, the activation of naturalistic trails, and the full operation of hospitality and training facilities, the village's regeneration will enter a new phase characterized by the management and promotion of the redeveloped assets. From 2026 onwards, a territorial marketing strategy will be implemented, positioning Monticchio Bagni as a key destination for sustainable cultural tourism. During this stage, economic and environmental impact assessments will play a crucial role in evaluating the project's ability to generate long-term benefits for the local community and the broader regional tourism network.

The current state of progress reaffirms the project's ambition to establish Monticchio Bagni as a model of territorial regeneration, driven by the enhancement of historical and environmental heritage, sustainability, and innovation. Adhering to the planned timeline will ensure the village develops a renewed identity, positioning it for a future where culture, nature, and economic growth coexist in a harmonious and sustainable balance.

2.6 Local Partnership

For the regeneration of Monticchio Bagni to become a sustainable and long-lasting process, it is essential that the project goes beyond the mere construction of new infrastructures and is instead based on a solid and participatory network of collaborations. The involvement of local institutions, businesses, cultural associations, and the community itself plays a fundamental role in ensuring the success of the initiative, fostering a continuous dialogue between public and private stakeholders. This approach not only optimizes financial and logistical resources but also promotes shared strategies

for the long-term enhancement of the village, transforming Monticchio Bagni into a benchmark model for participatory governance of cultural and environmental heritage.

A central role in this process is played by the Municipality of Rionero in Vulture, the project's main promoter, which oversees the administrative and financial management of the interventions, supported by the Basilicata Region, the Province of Potenza, and the Vulture Regional Natural Park. The coordination between these institutions ensures a well-defined regulatory framework and a coherent planning strategy, enabling access to funding from national and European sources. The contribution of universities and research centres is also crucial, particularly the University of Basilicata and the Polytechnic University of Bari, which provide scientific support for the study and preservation of cultural heritage while promoting training activities and applied research in the fields of urban regeneration and sustainability. This collaboration with academia also translates into opportunities for activating educational workshops, internships, and specialized training programs for students and professionals, thereby fostering the development of new skills within the local area.

Alongside public institutions, the project actively involves local businesses and the economic fabric of the region in a vision of integrated and circular development. Among the most relevant partners are the Consorzio di Tutela Aglianico del Vulture (Consortium for the Protection of Aglianico del Vulture), which supports the promotion of local food and wine heritage, and companies in the mineral water sector such as Monticchio Gaudianello and Toka, whose contribution is key in building a recognizable and competitive territorial identity. These are complemented by organizations from the cultural and creative industries, such as Novalab and Basilicata Creativa, whose expertise is essential for the development of innovative tourism experiences and the design of communication and marketing campaigns for the area.

A fundamental aspect of the regeneration strategy is the direct involvement of the local community, which is not merely a beneficiary of the interventions but actively participates in their design and implementation. Since the early stages of the project, Monticchio Bagni's residents have been engaged through public meetings, consultations, and co-design workshops, ensuring that the decisions made reflect the actual needs of the population. The organising committee of the Pro Loco Monticchio have played a crucial

role in coordinating these activities, acting as key intermediaries between institutional bodies and citizens. This participatory approach has not only facilitated the collection of valuable ideas and suggestions but has also strengthened the sense of ownership among the community, transforming the project into a shared initiative rather than one imposed from above.

Beyond decision-making processes, the local community is directly involved in the management and animation of the redeveloped spaces. Residents will play a key role in tourist reception services, the promotion of cultural and gastronomic traditions, and the maintenance of natural trails. The project aims to create employment opportunities for locals through the establishment of cooperatives and social enterprises responsible for managing cultural, hospitality, and environmental services. This participatory model not only ensures the economic sustainability of the regeneration process but also reinforces the connection between the village and its inhabitants, helping to counteract the risk of depopulation and the loss of territorial identity.

At the associative level, the support of civil society and cultural and environmental organizations plays a significant role in promoting the area. Groups such as the Club Alpino Italiano - Sezione di Melfi, the Fondazione Francesco Saverio Nitti, the Fondazione Giustino Fortunato, and the Condotta del Vulture Slow Food contribute to the development of experiential itineraries, landscape preservation, and the promotion of local traditions. The Archeoclub d'Italia plays a particularly important role in supporting the Archaeological Park of Sant'Ippolito, ensuring a knowledgeable and sustainable management of historical heritage.

Another innovative element of the project is the integration of technological and digital partners, thanks to collaborations with companies specializing in the creation of tools for the interactive enjoyment of cultural assets. Organizations such as Onirica Srl, CET Imagery Srl, and Labirinto Visivo are working on the development of immersive experiences, digital maps, and interactive routes that will allow visitors to explore Monticchio Bagni in an engaging and modern way. This digital approach not only enhances the tourist experience but also promotes the village on a national and international scale, facilitating its inclusion in high-quality cultural tourism circuits.

Thanks to this extensive network of collaborations, Monticchio Bagni is not merely undergoing physical redevelopment but is emerging as a model of sustainable and participatory development. The variety of skills involved, and the diversity of interventions establish a long-term strategy capable of transforming the village into a leading destination for cultural and sustainable tourism. In this context, the role of partnerships extends far beyond the construction phase, taking on strategic significance in the future management of redeveloped spaces and the creation of a strong and shared territorial identity. The long-term success of Monticchio Bagni's regeneration will depend not only on the quality of the interventions but also on the territory's ability to maintain this network of collaborations, fostering a model of participatory and sustainable governance that ensures the full utilization and enhancement of restored resources over time.

2.7 Expected Results and Conclusions

The Monticchio Bagni project stands as a compelling example of how a historic village can be transformed into a vibrant hub of sustainable cultural tourism. By integrating environmental conservation, cultural regeneration, and community engagement, the initiative demonstrates the potential for revitalizing abandoned territories while fostering economic, social, and cultural renewal. Through a structured and collaborative approach, the project does not simply seek to restore a forgotten village but to create a new model of territorial development based on long-term sustainability and shared governance.

At the core of this transformation is the ambition to create a synergy between tradition and innovation. The initiative introduces new functions, infrastructure, and services that not only enhance the area's cultural and natural heritage but also serve as a powerful driver of employment and opportunities for younger generations. This compatibility between development and environmental stewardship reflects a forward-thinking approach that prioritizes long-term sustainability while preserving the village's unique identity. The project's success is built upon a broad network of partnerships, including local institutions, academic bodies, private enterprises, and cultural associations, whose continued collaboration will be essential in ensuring its sustainability beyond the initial implementation phase.

A key component of this vision is the active participation of the local community, which has been involved since the early stages of the project through consultation meetings, workshops, and decision-making processes. Unlike traditional top-down approaches, the regeneration of Monticchio Bagni is co-created with its residents, ensuring that the village's transformation reflects the real needs and aspirations of those who live and work there. This participatory model not only strengthens social cohesion but also provides the basis for the future management of the area. The community will play a direct role in the governance of key infrastructures, including the Village and Sant'Ippolito Museum, the Nursery Centre, and the experiential tourism initiatives, ensuring that these spaces remain active and well-integrated into the social and economic fabric of the village.

At the same time, Monticchio Bagni's renewed attractiveness is expected to generate ripple effects beyond the village itself, positioning the Basilicata region as a destination of cultural and environmental significance. The project aligns with broader regional objectives aimed at reinvesting in small historic settlements, demonstrating that abandoned villages can become laboratories for sustainable development and cultural innovation. By strengthening links with regional and national tourism networks, Monticchio Bagni has the potential to establish itself as a model for the regeneration of rural Italy, attracting further investments and creating opportunities for new businesses and creative enterprises.

However, the initiative also faces challenges that must be addressed to fully realize its potential. Balancing visitor impact with the preservation of sensitive ecosystems, ensuring accessibility for diverse audiences, and maintaining the authenticity of the village's cultural and natural heritage will require ongoing adaptive management and continuous investment. Moreover, the seasonal nature of tourism in the region poses a challenge in creating year-round economic opportunities. To address this, innovative business models and cultural programming will be needed, along with efforts to position Monticchio Bagni as a centre for research, training, and creative industries. The role of academic institutions, already central in the planning phase, could become even more significant in this regard, helping to develop new strategies for sustainable tourism and heritage conservation.

Ultimately, the Monticchio Bagni project illustrates how historic villages can reclaim a central role in contemporary society, not as static museum-like spaces but as dynamic hubs of cultural production, education, and sustainable living. The rediscovery of heritage is not only an act of preservation but a strategy for shaping a vibrant and forward-looking future. By maintaining strong institutional and community partnerships, Monticchio Bagni can evolve into a model of compatibility between development and environmental preservation, setting a precedent for how rural heritage can drive regional and national progress.

3. Borgo Castello – Remembering the Past to Build the Future

The Pilot Project of Borgo Castello, located at the summit of the municipality of Andora, in the far western part of the Savona area, represents a unique initiative for a place distinguished by its charm and historical value. The ruins of medieval houses rise amidst olive terraces, creating a landscape as evocative as it is threatened by abandonment. As of 2021, the *borgo* housed only 14 households and lacked services or economic activities, apart from a single restaurant.

Despite its high landscape value and the presence of significant monuments such as the Paraxo castle and the Romanesque-Gothic church of Saints James and Philip, Borgo Castello is part of a context of socio-economic decline. This contrast becomes particularly evident when compared to the nearby locality of Andora, which records nearly 200,000 annual tourist visits. While Andora benefits from a thriving tourism sector, Borgo Castello struggles with challenges such as a declining and aging population, low employment rates, and limited economic activities.

Faced with such challenges, the local community has undertaken an ambitious regeneration project that combines an interdisciplinary approach with co-design processes. The goal is not only the physical and structural recovery of the *borgo* but also its transformation into a model of innovative, sustainable, and technologically advanced cultural tourism, capable of valuing the past with a forward-looking perspective.

3.1 History of the Village

Andora, located at the mouth of the Merula River, has ancient origins dating back to the 8th century BC when it was founded by the Phoceans as a harbour for the salt trade from Corsica. During the Middle Ages, the settlement shifted around the castle erected on the hill overlooking the valley. However, the fortified settlement was gradually abandoned in favour of the area along the Merula and, after World War II, coastal urban development.

Borgo Castello in Andora still preserves the urban layout of the medieval *castrum*, characterized by a network of streets and blocks intertwined with the natural landscape. The ruins of medieval dwellings, integrated with olive terraces, create a setting of high historical and landscape value.

Figure 9 - Borgo Castello nowadays (Regione Liguria, 2022)

After a long period of domination, from Roman to Barbarian, the Clavesana family built the Paraxo castle in 1170. Later, the *borgo* came under the control of the Doria family and, in 1252, of the Republic of Genoa. According to some chroniclers of the time, the village was gradually abandoned due to the severe plagues of 1493 and 1524.

Of the *Burgus*, consisting of a dense cluster of medieval houses, today only stone ruins remain, largely overrun by invasive vegetation. However, traces of the network of pathways that, along with the building structures, once formed the settlement's fabric are still visible. The unique coexistence of the monumental value of the historic core, particularly due to the stately buildings, with the marked and widespread rurality of the open spaces adjacent to the built environment, emerges as an original aspect

characterizing this human-made environment over time. In this sense, the elements found in the terrain, such as expertly crafted dry-stone walls that delimit paths and support terraced fields, and the cobbled pavement along stretches of pedestrian alleys, take on a decisive significance.

The decline of the *borgo* was accompanied by the progressive loss of vitality in its structures, including agricultural and social ones. However, these testimonies, if adequately recovered, can offer a unique key to understanding the historical development of the territory.

3.2 The Territorial, Tourist, and Cultural Context of Andora Municipality

The Municipality of Andora stands out for its highly valuable territorial context, characterized by a hilly and wooded landscape that encourages outdoor activities such as hiking and biking. This peculiarity has made Andora a popular destination for tourists and hikers, although the territory's use is predominantly seasonal. Among the main points of interest are the church of Saints James and Philip, open only once a month, and the archaeological area of Borgo Castello, freely accessible but with closed structures, a factor that limits the full enhancement of its historical and cultural heritage.

Borgo Castello is currently in a state of abandonment that risks irreparably compromising its peculiarities. The ruins of medieval dwellings, while crucial testimonies of past life, are fragile and vulnerable. The already compromised wall structures suffer further damage due to the uncontrolled advance of invasive vegetation.

Even the network of historical pathways, characterized by cobblestones and dry-stone walls, is in an advanced state of degradation. These pathways, which represent a distinctive feature of the *borgo*, frequently suffer from collapses and damage. The open spaces of the *borgo*, particularly those surrounding the Paraxo and the church of Saints James and Philip, are affected by erosion and lack of maintenance. These public spaces, once central to the social life of Borgo Castello, need targeted interventions to restore their functionality.

The surrounding landscape, shaped over centuries through terraces for olive cultivation, has experienced progressive abandonment. The lack of maintenance has led to the

collapse of many dry-stone walls and the spread of invasive vegetation, threatening the harmony between architecture and nature. The loss of traces of anthropization risks erasing a fundamental component of the historical memory of the territory.

3.3 Tourism and Culture: Potential and Challenges

Tourism is a fundamental resource for Andora, as evidenced by its tourism rate and density, both higher than provincial and regional averages. The tourism rate, calculated by Istat (2021) as the ratio of days spent in accommodation facilities per inhabitant, places Andora above the regional average. The tourism density, amounting to 27.6 beds/km², significantly exceeds the 15 beds/km² provincial average and the 11.2 beds/km² regional average.

Private accommodations, often catering to medium-high income groups, further attract vacationers mainly from Piedmont, Lombardy, Germany, and the Netherlands. However, Andora's tourism is highly seasonal, with flows concentrated in the summer months. In 2019, the municipality recorded 188,873 tourist presences, which dropped to 85,880 in 2020 due to the pandemic and rose to 120,291 in 2021. The foreign component, representing over 23% of presences in 2019, saw a significant decline during the pandemic, standing at 13.8% in 2021 (Regione Liguria, 2022).

Conversely, cultural enjoyment shows fewer striking data. The cultural demand index, measuring the number of museum visitors per institution, indicates that the province of Savona records a value of 1.2, below the regional average of 2.1. Despite the presence of significant institutions such as the cultural centre at Palazzo Tagliaferro, housing the Contemporary Culture Centre and the Luciano Dabroi Mineralogical Museum, and the organization of prestigious events like the Andorese Musical Summer or the In Castro Andoriae historical reenactments, Andora struggles to position itself as a primary cultural destination.

Culturally, Andora offers a valuable program, including exhibitions by internationally renowned artists, collaborations with the University of Genoa, and the Noir Festival. However, the limited accessibility of some sites, such as the church of Saints James and Philip and the archaeological area of Borgo Castello, is an obstacle to fully enhancing its resources.

Its strategic location along the Roman road Julia Augusta and the 'Cammino di Santiago' route, in addition to its proximity to the 'Ciclovia Tirrenica' and the marine protected area of the Sanctuary of Cetaceans, highlights Andora's potential as an integrated destination combining nature, culture, and tourism. However, to fully exploit this potential, targeted strategies will be necessary to de-seasonal tourist flows and increase cultural enjoyment, also through the use of digital tools and new funding channels.

3.4 Vision and Objectives of the Project

The Borgo Castello regeneration project is characterized by:

a.   Structural and functional recovery of historical and rural heritage;

b.   Recovery of the natural and agricultural landscape;

c.   Experimentation with innovative cultural tourism, integrating technology, sustainability, and the enhancement of sensory perceptions.

The intervention aims to bring life back to Borgo Castello, which in the past was characterized by a densely built fabric and multiple related activities. The goal is to rediscover the strong relationship created over time between the site's orographic structure, built environment, agricultural practices, and green spaces that form the natural frame of Borgo Castello.

The regeneration project will thus begin with the recovery of the settlement fabric composed of minor building ruins, the connective network of pedestrian paths, and the architectural landmarks that bear witness to civil and religious life. This will be accompanied by the recovery of the landscape shaped by humans: terraced fields and traditional crops.

The restored context will serve as a foundation to enable the return of residents, artisans, and merchants who will live and work in an environment combining the *borgo*'s strong historical values with contemporary behaviours aimed at environmental respect and a sustainable lifestyle. In this way, the daily life tapestry that once populated the *borgo* can be reconstituted.

The entire *borgo* will be transformed into a living museum, where visitors can immerse themselves in history through advanced technological tools and enjoy direct contact with local traditions. A smart tourism platform will allow visitors to book visits simply and uniformly, ensuring an immersive and personalized experience. This approach aims to create a powerful tourist attraction for the entire western Ligurian region, contributing to the repopulation of *borgo* and the socio-economic revitalization of the territory.

3.5 Key Interventions

Redevelopment of the Paraxo

Today, the 13th-century castle complex presents itself as an irregular hexagonal enclosure, partially restored. The project, looking to the future, aims to transform this place into a genuine cultural attractor, making it a hub of innovation and culture, where the quality of exhibition and educational projects intertwines with the digital narration of the past. The objective is to create a space where contemporaneity and historical memory blend, offering visitors a unique emotional experience capable of capturing a diverse audience, from young people to adults, and attracting international visitors.

The building, boasting undeniable historical value, will serve two main purposes. On one hand, it will host an exhibition centre dedicated to culture, with exhibitions and projects aimed at raising awareness about the history of the place, stimulating reflection on the present, and projecting into the future. On the other hand, the castle remains will be enhanced through a permanent cultural multimedia pathway accessible in extended reality. This will allow visitors to immerse themselves in a 'time machine' that will take them on a journey from the past to the future, offering an unparalleled narrative experience.

The main objective of the project is to make the castle building the beating heart of the entire historic village, from which discovery routes extend to other attractions of Borgo Castello and the surrounding territory, rich in unique talents. The exhibition centre will be conceived as an emotional place where every detail of the museum layout will be designed to interact directly with the visitor. A flexible environment will be able to host temporary exhibitions while maintaining clarity and transparency in terms of museography and communication.

Figure 10 & 11 - Design suggestions of the Paraxo's redevelopment (Regione Liguria, 2022)

The castle will host temporary exhibitions by local, national, and international artists, focusing on contemporary art and site-specific projects strongly inspired by the territory. The immersive multimedia pathway in extended reality will constitute the access point to the visit to Borgo Castello, which will become a hub of linguistic and technological experimentation. This innovative offering will allow tourists to immerse themselves in an experience that takes them back in time and projects them into the future.

Additionally, the first two temporary exhibitions will inaugurate the site in collaboration with the Cavallini Sgarbi Foundation. The cultural programming will be developed in synergy with the municipal administration and local experts, aiming to create a homogeneous and attractive cultural offering for target audiences. This plan will be closely integrated with the programming of the Palazzo Tagliaferro Museum, creating a cultural network that strengthens the city's identity as a cultural tourism attraction hub.

On the management front, the museum complex's services will be entrusted to a local start-up composed of young professionals, supported in the initial phase with a capacity-building program. This program will include management skills, fundraising, and digital heritage, ensuring modern and effective management of the cultural hub.

The budget allocated for the project amounts to €450,000. Based on data on the average visitors to Italian museums in 2019 (19,000 users), the project's attractiveness, and the analysis of figures recorded in Andora's museums, a progressive increase in visitors is expected in the first three years: 15,000 visitors in the first year, 20,000 in the second, and 23,000 in the third. Considering an average spending of €15 per visitor, the revenues are of €225,000 for the first year, €300,000 for the second, and €345,000 for the third are estimated (Regione Liguria, 2022).

Creation of the 'Orto del Muto' Botanical Garden

Despite the tendency to consider the 'old' as outdated or sometimes weak, it is important to recognize that we are the result of a long journey where what today might seem obsolete was functional in creating the world we know. This applies not only to the history of societies, customs, and lifestyles but also to plants and animals that have disappeared or are at risk of extinction. For these reasons, the project focuses on reviving the *borgo*'s botanical garden, once known as the 'Orto del Muto' (Mute's Garden) in honour of Marquis Umberto Maglione, nicknamed 'The Mute' and known for his passion for exotic plants that he personally collected in Ligurian cities such as Ventimiglia, Bordighera, and Sanremo. Thanks to this passion, the garden was enriched with rare and unique species, which are still documentable today.

Today, within the botanical garden, numerous tall plants emerge from the perimeter wall, drawing the entire hill's skyline. These include species such as *Eucalyptus globulus*, *Cupressus sempervirens*, *Pinus pinea*, *Olea europaea*, and many others. The walkable area is dominated by shrub vegetation, including typical Mediterranean scrub species such as *Pittosporum tobira* and *Viburnum tinus*. Additionally, in various areas, there are *Yucca spp.* plants that have reached significant sizes over the years. Near the main buildings, fruit trees such as *Prunus persica* are also noticeable, along with ornamental plants like *Nerium oleander*.

The recovery of this garden, to prevent the loss of additional plant specimens, involves restoring surviving species, replanting plants that were once present but are no longer found, and studying which species are now irretrievable. The latter will be 'revived' through meticulous documentation and, subsequently, through the creation of augmented reality content that will allow visitors to immerse themselves in the past landscape, experiencing the same sensations as Marquis Maglione. This will enrich their historical and cultural knowledge.

The revival of the 'Orto del Muto' will not be limited to plant recovery but will also include structural interventions and the creation of a multimedia offering in augmented reality. Visitors will be able to discover which plants were present in the past, many of which are now extinct, through an edutainment experience. The botanical garden will be reconstructed following the model of what once existed, covering an area of approximately 2,370 square meters, located in the central zone of Borgo Castello, below the church of Saints James and Philip.

The recovery project will focus on three main areas: the 'Orto del Muto', the recovery of green areas, and the restoration of ruins. The 'Orto del Muto' will be made accessible thanks to photographic and oral documentation preserving its historical memory. The garden, composed of terraced fields, extends northwest of the Marquis Maglione's palace. Currently, the architectural part of the garden is well-preserved and identifiable.

The green recovery involves a detailed survey of the current vegetation to identify living species and assess their conservation status. Subsequently, maintenance and protection interventions will be scheduled. In collaboration with technicians and historians, research will be conducted to identify the plants that populated the garden at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries to define a new planting program. The restoration of the ruins will include the recovery of terraces and water collection channels, as well as the system of perimeter planters on the terraces.

The project will not be limited to this area but will be part of a system of green paths extending along access routes to Borgo Castello and within it. In the evening, thanks to lighting installations, visitors can walk the paths of the 'Orto del Muto' in a fascinating and evocative atmosphere.

The project will be coordinated by the Department of Botany at the University of Genoa, which will collaborate with the Botanical Gardens of Villa Hanbury and PEQAgri Company, engaged in the development and management of the botanical garden. The budget allocated for the intervention amounts to €500,000. Based on the average attendance of botanical gardens in Italy, which has seen significant growth since 2015, a progressive increase in visitor numbers is expected: 15,000 for the first year, 18,000 for the second, and 21,000 for the third. With an average spending of €13 per visitor, estimated revenues are €195,000 for the first year, €234,000 for the second, and €273,000 for the third (Regione Liguria, 2022).

Archaeological and Historical Route

The project aims to redevelop and museumize the archaeological area located outside the castle of Andora, just a few steps from the structure, to uncover a still largely unknown chapter of local history. This integrated intervention, combining physical and digital efforts, enhances the experience of visiting the Borgo Castello, transforming it into an open-air living museum and a laboratory for new cultural models and relationships.

While the hill with the castle, the church, and the tower immediately evokes a medieval past, it is evident that Andora's origins date back to much earlier periods. Despite various excavation campaigns since the 1930s, these have not been systematic. However, the findings confirmed that the settlement of Andora has roots in the Late Antique period. Archaeological investigations revealed that the hilltop housed a settlement from the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, evidenced by the discovery of a large basin, likely linked to a late-imperial rural villa. Subsequent excavation campaigns identified a phase of occupation between the 9th and 11th centuries, during which a bronze foundry was established – an indication of a settlement likely tied to defence against Saracen raids.

In Liguria, archaeology is inextricably linked to castles, with the Andora castle having served for years as the main field school for the University of Genoa's Chair of Medieval Archaeology. Excavations conducted between 1988 and 1994 provided significant insights into the history of the castle and the village. Additional research by the Ligurian Archaeological Superintendency uncovered new information about Andora's abandonment. These excavations revealed that as early as the Roman Imperial Age, the hilltop hosted an agricultural settlement, likely a farm. Excavations showed that the area

was inhabited by farmers and shepherds who cultivated the land and worked metals. A sudden fire destroyed the settlement, which was subsequently abandoned, leaving numerous metal tools behind. The site was reoccupied in the 12th century, coinciding with the phenomenon of fortification associated with the arrival of the Clavesana Marquises. The following centuries, up to 1676, marked a progressive abandonment of the area, reflecting its decline.

Figure 12 & 13 - Design suggestions of the Archeological Area (Regione Liguria, 2022)

The project's objective is to enhance this rich historical, archaeological, and anthropological heritage by connecting the area with the castle of Andora, the main landmark of the region. A systematic campaign of cleaning and excavation will be initiated in the area adjacent to the castle to better understand the quality and extent of the archaeological sites and promote them through a multimedia route developed on the *borgo*'s extended reality platform. The goal is to offer visitors a unique experience that

allows them to explore the layered and still partially unknown history of the site, immersing themselves for the first time in Italy in the life of a medieval village entirely reconstructed in 3D.

Scientific oversight will be entrusted to the University of Genoa, which will also manage the 3D reconstruction of the village's buildings and streets and define the visiting routes for the archaeological site. The area will feature panels providing visitors with information and activating augmented reality scenarios. Using state-of-the-art transparent viewers or their own smartphones, visitors will stroll through high-definition reconstructions of the settlement, encountering historical characters such as artisans, farmers, and knights. They can enter workshops and gardens, listen to the sounds of daily life, and solve small puzzles in an educational augmented reality game, uncovering new details about medieval life.

The University of Genoa, which has conducted numerous excavation campaigns in the area, will again play a key role in the scientific coordination of the project. Excavations and surveys will also provide opportunities for young scholars and researchers to reside in dedicated facilities, bringing the village to life through their work and presence.

The total budget for the project is €600,000. Visitor projections estimate 15,000 in the first year, 20,000 in the second, and 23,000 in the third, with expected revenues of €120,000, €160,000, and €184,000, respectively. These revenues are based on an average visitor expenditure of €8, derived from data on similar cultural sites in Italy (Regione Liguria, 2022).

Experiential Agricultural Park

The project envisions creating an experiential agricultural park aimed at recovering and enhancing traditional rural and artisanal activities. Traditional crafts, such as operating a mill, bakery, olive press, winery, dairy, and kitchen workshop, will be restored, reintroducing ancient agricultural products of the region. Visitors will actively participate in hands-on activities such as making bread, oil, and cheese, offering an immersive experience that combines manual work with cultural immersion in the village.

The medieval village of Andora forms the project's focal point. Targeted interventions will enhance the surrounding fortress and historic village, creating a link between past

and present through advanced technologies. The project aims to provide visitors with a unique experience that synthesizes historical memory and innovation, inspired by the principle of remembering the past to build the future.

The primary goal is to transform the area into an experiential and immersive park that revives values from the past that remain highly relevant today, such as sustainability, environmental respect, biodiversity, and the rediscovery of ancient crafts. Simultaneously, the project aims to integrate cultural and recreational activities, offering a rich and diversified experience that satisfies the need for leisure, cultural enrichment, and anthropological exploration. This modern and engaging edutainment formula combines entertainment and learning in a cultural context.

An additional objective is to create educational and employment opportunities for young people, allowing them to rediscover a lifestyle connected to the land and away from modern-day hustle. Inspired by the 'home and workshop' concept, this model would enable young people to find a balance between work and personal life by practising ancient crafts and living near their workplace.

The area, spanning approximately 23,000 square meters west of the castle, will undergo integrated interventions. The agricultural landscape will be restored through land reclamation and the enhancement of existing olive groves, supplemented by new fruit trees, vines, ancient cereals, vegetables, aromatic and medicinal herbs. The approach will adhere to permaculture and organic farming principles. Ancient ruins within the area will be restored to faithfully reconstruct the traditional activities that once animated the village, such as workshops, mills, ovens, and inns. These buildings will be furnished and equipped with historically accurate furniture, tools, and machinery selected through anthropological research.

The agricultural dimension will be further enriched by small animal farms producing eggs, milk, meat, and honey. Working animals such as donkeys and oxen, along with traditional tools, will be introduced to recreate an authentic historical atmosphere.

The park will feature a 'phygital' mode of operation, blending physical and digital experiences through advanced technologies such as augmented and extended reality, gamification, and innovative lighting installations. These tools will enable virtual

reconstructions of historical environments and characters, allowing visitors to immerse themselves in the life of the medieval village. Using augmented reality viewers, visitors can enjoy interactive and engaging experiences, try their hand at ancient crafts, and interact with the natural and cultural surroundings.

Tours of the park will be organized in small groups, with routes including walking or donkey rides between experiential stations. Visitors will participate in practical activities, listen to historical narratives, and interact with reconstructed environments. Many products made during workshops will be available as souvenirs or for purchase on-site. All products will be certified using blockchain technology to ensure the authenticity and uniqueness of local excellence.

The project has a total budget of €1,491,229.50, with €1,400,000 financed through NRRP funds and the remainder covered by the municipality for land acquisition.

Visitor estimates project an annual average of 33,000, with revenues starting at €600,000 in the first year, growing to €720,000 by the third year, based on an average visitor expenditure of €20 (Regione Liguria, 2022).

3.6 Timeline

The regeneration of Borgo Castello follows a detailed timeline, structured into multiple phases to ensure effective implementation and continuous progress monitoring. This initiative, part of Liguria's broader strategy for enhancing historical and environmental heritage, aims to bring the village back to life by restoring its structures, introducing new cultural functions, and revitalising the rural landscape.

The redevelopment process began in 2022 with the preliminary phase of property acquisition and the definition of the urban regeneration framework. The Municipality of Andora initiated agreements with the owners of the properties involved in the project, signing option contracts to secure the necessary assets for the planned interventions. At the same time, the first archaeological and environmental surveys were conducted to assess the compatibility of the interventions with the village's historical and natural setting.

During 2023, the project took on a more defined structure with the drafting of the preliminary urban regeneration plan and the launch of approval procedures under regional

legislation (Liguria Regional Law 23/2019). This phase also included the integration of archaeological surveys, allowing for a clearer understanding of the existing structures and their conservation status. Additionally, the intervention model was refined to balance historical restoration with contemporary cultural and tourism needs.

In 2024, the project reached a decisive turning point with the commissioning of design work and the drafting of final executive plans. These efforts were accompanied by the convening of a conference of services, a crucial step for securing institutional approval. The planning phase was not limited to physical restoration but also encompassed the development of cultural initiatives and digital platforms to transform Borgo Castello into a hub for immersive and experiential tourism.

The year 2025 will mark the beginning of construction and restoration work, divided into several complementary interventions. These interventions will be supported by the activation of partnerships with public institutions, universities, and local operators, with formal agreements set to be finalized by the end of 2025.

The year 2026 will focus on the testing and launch of cultural activities. With restoration work completed and the opening of the museum and nature trails, Borgo Castello will enter a new phase of management and promotion. The primary challenge will be ensuring the long-term sustainability of the restored infrastructures through participatory governance models, involving local communities, tourism professionals, and cultural operators. The digital platforms, developed in parallel with the physical interventions, will provide interactive experiences and digital tools for enhancing the site's heritage.

The execution of this timeline presents a concrete opportunity to transform Borgo Castello into a reference point for cultural tourism in Liguria, seamlessly blending heritage preservation and technological innovation. Through a structured and phased approach, the project aspires not only to restore the historical and architectural significance of the village but also to establish a new economic and social hub, making it a replicable model for other historic villages facing similar challenges.

3.7 Local Partnership

The regeneration of Borgo Castello is built on a solid network of public and private partnerships, designed to ensure the financial and managerial sustainability of the

interventions while fostering a model of participatory and shared development. The involvement of institutions, universities, businesses, and local associations enables the integration of diverse expertise, creating synergies that go beyond the mere restoration of infrastructure and transforming the village into a model for cultural and tourism management. However, the true driving force behind this transformation is the local community, which has played a central role in the project from its very inception.

The Municipality of Andora, as the main promoter of the initiative, has worked to ensure that the regeneration process is not a top-down imposition, but rather a collaborative effort with the local population. Through public meetings, consultations, and participatory workshops, the project has been shaped to reflect the actual needs of the territory. In collaboration with Regione Liguria, the municipality has activated an extensive network of institutional partnerships to ensure a structured and effective implementation. The Municipality of Laigueglia has also played a key role in signing a collaboration agreement to develop the pilot project.

Academic institutions and research centres are also playing a fundamental role, providing specialized expertise in heritage enhancement and sustainable development. The University of Genoa, through the Hanbury Service Center, is leading the design and implementation of the 'Orto del Muto' Botanical Garden. The University's Department of Antiquities, Philosophy, and History has also committed to supporting the Archaeological Park of Borgo Castello, working on the reconstruction of historical ruins and the development of cultural storytelling for visitors. Importantly, the collaboration with academia extends beyond research: Borgo Castello is set to become a centre for cultural exchange, where educational programs will cater not only to university researchers and students but also to local schools, offering workshops and guided tours that actively engage young residents in the discovery of their own heritage.

In parallel, local businesses are actively involved in developing new cultural and environmental tourism opportunities. The PEQ Agri Andora is responsible for creating the experiential agricultural park, an area designed to offer visitors sensory and educational experiences enriched with extended reality technologies and 3D reconstructions. Meanwhile, Ditta Caruso Quirino will oversee the development of a widespread hotel, a hospitality model fully integrated into the village that will be managed

with a community-based approach, offering employment opportunities for local professionals and young entrepreneurs. The Chamber of Commerce and the Union of Industrialists are supporting the creation of a favourable economic ecosystem, encouraging the establishment of new local businesses, particularly in the fields of culture, hospitality, and craftsmanship.

The active participation of the local community is the cornerstone of this project. From the very beginning, the regeneration process has directly involved Borgo Castello's residents – not just as beneficiaries of the interventions but as key protagonists in shaping and maintaining the village's transformation. The Pro Loco of Andora has continued its commitment to preserving and promoting the village, with a particular focus on safeguarding the church of Saints James and Philip and organizing cultural events. Beyond these efforts, the community is also directly engaged in the maintenance and upkeep of public spaces, through volunteer-led initiatives to care for green areas, restore ancient agricultural terraces, and maintain historical walking paths.

In addition, an extensive training and social inclusion program has been developed in partnership with the Provincial Centre for Adult Education of the Province of Imperia, providing literacy courses and employment support for foreign residents and individuals at risk of social exclusion. The Chamber of Commerce has also launched a youth training program within the project, equipping young locals with the skills needed to work in cultural tourism, including roles as 'cultural animators' and experiential guides. These initiatives ensure that the village's rebirth is not just a physical transformation but also a social and economic revival, creating new job opportunities and fostering a deeper connection between residents and their territory.

The regeneration of Borgo Castello is not limited to the local dimension but is part of a broader strategy for regional promotion and communication, aiming to position the village as a key cultural tourism destination in Liguria. Two dedicated digital platforms – one for smart tourism and the other for integrated communication management – will help optimize visitor experiences by offering a single-ticket access system to all attractions in the village.

To ensure the long-term sustainability of the restored infrastructures, the Municipality of Andora is also exploring public-private management models, in compliance with national

public procurement regulations. One of the solutions under consideration is the creation of a local cultural and tourism start-up, to be run by young professionals selected and trained through a business incubation program. This model seeks to ensure the continued management and economic vitality of the village, preventing the risk of the regeneration process being limited to the construction phase alone.

Thanks to this network of collaborations, Borgo Castello will not only be a restored village but a living, dynamic space capable of attracting new investments and opportunities. The diversity of stakeholders – from public institutions to universities, from businesses to residents – ensures a participatory governance model that enhances the village's heritage while preserving its identity. The long-term success of this project will depend on the ability to keep this network active, transforming Borgo Castello into a leading example of small-village regeneration in Italy.

3.8 Expected Results and Conclusions

The Borgo Castello regeneration project stands as a pioneering model for the revitalization of historic villages, demonstrating how cultural heritage, technological innovation, and sustainable development can intersect to create a living, evolving community. Unlike traditional restoration projects that focus solely on preserving the past, this initiative is designed to ensure the *borgo*'s long-term economic and social viability, transforming it into a dynamic centre for culture, tourism, and sustainable enterprise.

At the heart of the project's future lies its participatory governance model, which will determine the borgo's success beyond 2026. The active involvement of local residents, cultural associations, and young professionals in managing the site's restored spaces will be essential in maintaining the village's vibrancy and economic sustainability. The establishment of a cultural and tourism start-up, supported through incubation programs and collaborations with academic institutions, will enable new generations to take ownership of the site's future. Rather than being a static heritage attraction, Borgo Castello is set to become a hub of creative innovation, where heritage, research, and sustainable tourism converge.

A key factor in ensuring the long-term success of the project is its ability to generate year-round economic opportunities. While cultural tourism remains central to the village's development, diversification will be essential to mitigate the effects of seasonal fluctuations. The integration of experiential tourism, agricultural heritage, and digital innovation offers multiple avenues for economic sustainability. The experiential agricultural park will serve as both a visitor attraction and a space for local food production, reinforcing the *borgo*'s role in the broader regional economy. Additionally, the smart tourism digital platforms will facilitate interactive storytelling and seamless visitor engagement, ensuring that the site remains attractive to both domestic and international audiences.

Beyond economic viability, the regeneration of Borgo Castello also sets a precedent for sustainable cultural management. The commitment to environmental preservation and landscape restoration ensures that the project does not compromise the area's ecological balance. Initiatives such as the 'Orto del Muto' Botanical Garden not only restore historical plant species but also offer a living laboratory for biodiversity conservation. Similarly, the adaptive reuse of Paraxo Castle and the integration of augmented reality in historical storytelling provide an example of how cutting-edge technologies can enhance, rather than replace, authentic cultural experiences.

While the project presents a transformative vision, challenges remain. The long-term preservation of fragile archaeological structures, the management of natural resources, and the need to balance accessibility with historical authenticity require continuous monitoring and adaptive management. Moreover, the *borgo*'s full integration into regional and international tourism circuits will necessitate strong promotional strategies and ongoing investment in infrastructure and visitor services.

Ultimately, the Borgo Castello regeneration project serves as a blueprint for the future of historic village revitalization. By blending tradition with sustainable development, digital technology, and community-driven governance, it showcases how abandoned heritage sites can become catalysts for economic renewal and cultural enrichment. As Borgo Castello enters its next phase beyond 2026, it is poised to evolve into a model of resilience

and innovation, demonstrating that the preservation of the past can be a powerful force in shaping a thriving and inclusive future.

4. Comparison of the two Pilot Projects

The comparison between the Monticchio Bagni Project and the Borgo Castello one highlights how both initiatives while sharing the goal of regenerating historic villages under the Italian NRRP - National Borghi Plan, adopt distinct strategies and approaches to enhance local heritage and promote sustainable cultural tourism. Both projects stand out as exemplary intervention models, reflecting their respective territories' unique characteristics.

Both Monticchio Bagni and Borgo Castello share the ambition of countering the decline of historic villages through initiatives that integrate the enhancement of cultural and natural heritage with the promotion of sustainable development models. In both cases, the projects aim to transform the villages into attractive hubs for cultural and natural tourism, addressing challenges such as depopulation, infrastructural decay, and the loss of cultural identity. A common element is the active involvement of local communities, regarded as key actors in the planning and management of the initiatives. In Monticchio Bagni residents are engaged in educational activities and the promotion of natural heritage, whereas Borgo Castello is envisioned as a social aggregation centre with cultural initiatives that strengthen the sense of belonging and territorial identity. This participatory approach not only increases the social sustainability of the interventions but also fosters a deep bond between communities and their territories.

Another shared aspect is the adoption of solutions aligned with environmental sustainability principles. The Monticchio Bagni project places particular emphasis on slow mobility and biodiversity conservation, with the creation of pedestrian pathways and educational spaces immersed in nature. Conversely, Borgo Castello leverages digital technologies, such as augmented reality, to enhance historical heritage without physically impacting archaeological structures. Both projects demonstrate how innovation can serve sustainability, reducing the environmental impact of tourism activities.

A key distinction between the two projects lies in their partnership frameworks. Monticchio Bagni follows a research-driven model, where universities and academic

institutions play a fundamental role in shaping the project. Collaborations with the University of Basilicata and research organizations such as Novalab ensure a strong foundation for cultural preservation, digital documentation, and biodiversity conservation. Borgo Castello, on the other hand, integrates a broader spectrum of partnerships, combining institutional support from Regione Liguria and the Municipality of Andora with private enterprises such as PEQ Agri and Ditta Caruso Quirino, which focus on experiential tourism and hospitality development. While Monticchio Bagni's model emphasizes knowledge transfer and environmental stewardship, Borgo Castello adopts a revenue-driven approach, ensuring that local entrepreneurship plays a more central role in economic sustainability.

The differences between the two initiatives become evident when comparing their territorial contexts and project priorities. The Monticchio Bagni Project is set in an area where natural landscapes and biodiversity are central elements. The strong connection with the surrounding environment has led to interventions aimed at fostering direct engagement with nature, such as the restoration of a pedestrian pathway traversing the lakeside landscape and the redevelopment of historic buildings to house educational spaces dedicated to environmental conservation. This approach targets a diverse audience, including tourists interested in slow tourism, digital nomads, and students, offering an immersive and sustainable experience.

In contrast, the Borgo Castello Project focuses on the historical and archaeological dimensions, situated in a context deeply rooted in traces of the past and historical landscapes. The redevelopment of ancient structures is envisioned not only as a conservation effort but also as an opportunity to integrate innovative tools, such as augmented reality. This technological element enriches the cultural experience, making historical details visible that are not immediately perceptible to visitors. The use of digital technologies, in addition to enabling interactive engagement, broadens the accessibility of heritage to an international audience and new generations of tourists more inclined towards digitally integrated experiences. This strategy goes beyond preserving heritage, aiming to create a dialogue between the village's past and its future.

The implementation strategies of the two projects also reveals contrasting methodologies. Monticchio Bagni follows a gradual and participatory transformation, where the initial

phases focus on research, feasibility studies, and community engagement before moving into structural interventions. This flexible timeline allows for adaptability and organic development, aligning with the site's ecological and cultural significance. Borgo Castello, on the other hand, follows a structured and milestone-based execution plan, with clear phases for construction, tourism infrastructure, and governance transition. The presence of pre-existing institutional agreements has facilitated a faster and more predictable implementation process, ensuring that key interventions are completed on schedule.

A significant difference between the two projects is the documentation submitted for funding applications, which reflects different approaches to communication and planning. The Borgo Castello project produced a comprehensive and well-structured report, including a detailed historical analysis, statistical data, intervention descriptions, and long-term objectives. This holistic and transparent approach has facilitated stakeholder engagement and ensured that project details are publicly accessible, as demonstrated by the documentation available on the official website of Regione Liguria. In contrast, Monticchio Bagni submitted a more fragmented set of documents, composed of separate reports that, while thorough, appear less cohesive and are harder to access online. This limited accessibility may impact public awareness and academic engagement, making it more challenging to critically assess the long-term feasibility and impact of the initiative. However, this less rigid documentation approach also reflects greater operational flexibility, allowing the project to adapt more organically to evolving needs. The lack of comprehensive statistical data on the projected outcomes of Monticchio Bagni remains a potential limitation, reducing the ability to measure the initiative's long-term effectiveness.

In conclusion, the projects in Monticchio Bagni and Borgo Castello represent two complementary interpretations of the Italian NRRP guidelines under the National Borghi Plan. Monticchio Bagni stands out for its focus on biodiversity and environmental conservation, offering an experiential model that connects people with nature. Borgo Castello, in contrast, is characterized by its emphasis on technological innovation and the enhancement of archaeological heritage, providing an example of how tradition and digital transformation can merge to create a unique cultural tourism experience.

Despite their differences, both projects serve as exemplary models for historic village regeneration, proving that cultural heritage can be an engine for economic development when coupled with innovation and community-driven governance. Monticchio Bagni exemplifies a research-based, environmentally conscious transformation, while Borgo Castello showcases a commercially integrated approach with structured economic incentives. Together, they provide a compelling blueprint for other historic villages across Italy, demonstrating that preservation and development can coexist to create thriving and resilient rural communities.

5. Final Considerations

This chapter has examined two pilot projects, Monticchio Bagni and Borgo Castello, which, despite their differences, represent complementary models for the regeneration of historic villages within the framework of the National Borghi Plan. By analyzing their contexts, methodologies, and projected outcomes, it has been possible to discern how these initiatives interpret and operationalize sustainable cultural tourism principles, offering distinct yet converging approaches to heritage conservation, community engagement, and economic sustainability.

The Monticchio Bagni project is characterized by its integration of natural and cultural heritage, emphasizing environmental conservation, slow mobility, and biodiversity protection. Its strategy aims to create an immersive and educational visitor experience, positioning environmental sustainability at the heart of its long-term development. However, the decentralized nature of its implementation and the fragmented documentation associated with its planning process suggest potential challenges in maintaining a cohesive vision over time. This lack of a fully structured governance and communication framework may hinder stakeholder engagement and long-term strategic alignment, limiting the project's ability to attract further investment and institutional support. Nevertheless, Monticchio Bagni proposes an innovative model for the enhancement of cultural landscapes, reinforcing the connection between territorial identity, sustainable tourism, and environmental education. Its future viability will depend on the capacity to translate these values into economic sustainability, ensuring

that the revitalization process extends beyond cultural preservation to foster lasting community development and economic resilience.

In contrast, Borgo Castello presents a structured and technologically advanced model, in which digital innovation and economic sustainability are central to the regeneration process. The project demonstrates a clear and well-defined strategy, where the application of augmented reality and digital tools serves not only to enhance the accessibility of the site but also to foster an interactive relationship between visitors and historical narratives. This integration of heritage conservation with immersive storytelling suggests a more commercially viable approach, positioning the village as a self-sustaining cultural and tourism hub. Unlike Monticchio Bagni, Borgo Castello benefits from a more cohesive and transparent documentation framework, which facilitates public engagement, institutional collaboration, and structured long-term planning. By embedding cultural tourism within a broader economic strategy, the project offers a scalable model that can potentially be replicated in other historic villages seeking a balance between heritage protection and economic revitalization.

A fundamental theme emerging from this analysis is the role of governance, documentation, and transparency in shaping the perception, engagement, and ultimate impact of such initiatives. While both projects recognize the importance of community participation, their approaches to governance differ significantly. Monticchio Bagni fosters a participatory approach grounded in education and environmental awareness, engaging residents in co-creation processes that promote a shared sense of cultural stewardship. Borgo Castello, on the other hand, incorporates community members directly into the economic fabric of the project, offering employment opportunities and structured pathways for participation in the cultural and tourism industries. These differing methodologies highlight the multifaceted role that local communities can play in heritage-driven regeneration, suggesting that the long-term sustainability of such projects is contingent upon securing meaningful and continuous local engagement.

Beyond their methodological differences, both initiatives must confront shared challenges, particularly concerning the long-term balance between economic growth, cultural integrity, and environmental sustainability. Ensuring that these projects do not

become short-term experiments, but rather lasting models of sustainable development requires careful adaptive management and long-term financial planning. Furthermore, the ability to navigate shifts in economic conditions, demographic changes, and evolving tourism trends will determine the extent to which these villages can sustain a dynamic and self-sufficient ecosystem.

This comparative analysis underscores that the success of such projects is not solely measured by their capacity to attract visitors or generate revenue. Rather, their true impact lies in their ability to foster a sense of place, strengthen local identity, and create sustainable cultural economies that extend beyond tourism. Both Monticchio Bagni and Borgo Castello provide valuable insights into how historic villages can leverage their distinct identities to innovate while maintaining strong ties to their heritage. However, their long-term relevance will ultimately depend on their ability to evolve, address systemic issues such as depopulation and economic disparity, and integrate heritage conservation within broader territorial policies.

By critically examining these two emblematic cases, this chapter contributes to the broader academic discourse on sustainable cultural tourism and the role of historic villages in contemporary development strategies. While there is no universal blueprint for the regeneration of such sites, tailored interventions that respect the specificities of place, history, and community dynamics can offer meaningful and adaptable solutions.

At this stage, both projects remain in development, making it premature to draw definitive conclusions about their long-term outcomes. Their future success will rely on effective governance, adaptability to emerging challenges, and the capacity to balance heritage conservation with innovation and economic sustainability. Future research should focus on assessing their evolution over time, particularly in terms of their ability to establish new paradigms in the relationship between tradition and modernity, ultimately shaping a more resilient and inclusive approach to the regeneration of Italy's historic villages.

Conclusions

This research has explored the role of cultural tourism as a tool for revitalising and regenerating small historic villages, focusing on how these areas can achieve economic self-sufficiency while preserving their unique identity and ensuring long-term sustainability. The analysis has shown that tourism can be a powerful lever for local economic growth if managed with a balanced and thoughtful approach. This is evident in the case studies of Monticchio Bagni and Borgo Castello, where sustainable tourism initiatives have played a crucial role in economic revitalization by attracting visitors while preserving local heritage. However, it cannot be regarded as the sole solution for the revival of these territories. Long-term sustainability depends on a combination of interconnected factors, including economic diversification, active community participation, and integration with public policies and broader territorial development strategies.

The evolution of tourism and its impact on fragile destinations demonstrate how mass tourism has often led to processes of homogenisation and uncontrolled exploitation of resources. The concept of sustainable tourism emerged precisely as a response to these phenomena, as demonstrated by the evolution of sustainable tourism policies and international frameworks such as the UNWTO guidelines and the European Commission's Agenda 2030, which advocate for responsible tourism development tailored to the needs of local communities., advocating for a model that prioritizes quality experiences, heritage preservation, and equitable economic distribution. However, to be truly effective, sustainable tourism must go beyond theoretical principles and translate into concrete strategies tailored to the specificities of each territory.

The analysis of public policies has highlighted how the European Union and the Italian government have recognized the strategic value of sustainable tourism by allocating significant resources to the redevelopment of small villages. In particular, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan was introduced as part of NextGenerationEU, the €750 billion recovery program launched by the EU in response to the economic and social crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The NRRP represents Italy's strategy to channel these funds into structural reforms and investments aimed at fostering economic recovery, environmental sustainability, and digital transformation. As part of this strategy, the

National Borghi Plan focuses on enhancing the attractiveness of historic villages, recognizing their potential as cultural and economic hubs. Through investments in cultural heritage restoration, infrastructure improvement, and local economic development, the plan aims to transform small villages into sustainable and competitive destinations.

However, the success of these initiatives relies on their practical implementation and the ability to prevent risks such as overtourism and economic dependency on a single sector. While financial incentives and infrastructural investments are essential, they must be accompanied by well-designed governance models that ensure the long-term sustainability of the projects. Exclusively restoring heritage sites or improving infrastructure does not guarantee economic self-sufficiency; it is equally necessary to develop mechanisms that enable local communities to actively participate in decision-making processes and benefit from tourism-driven development.

The comparative analysis of different revitalization strategies has provided valuable insights into the key factors contributing to successful initiatives. On one hand, the enhancement of natural and cultural assets represents a key strength in attracting a conscious and high-quality tourism flow. On the other, technological innovation offers effective tools for improving the accessibility and usability of heritage sites, broadening audience engagement without compromising the authenticity of the place. When carefully integrated, both approaches can drive the economic revitalization of villages. However, their effectiveness depends on the ability to align them with local needs and expectations.

A critical finding from this study is the importance of community involvement in decision-making processes. As demonstrated by the revitalization efforts of Monticchio Bagni and Borgo Castello, projects that actively engage local residents and regional stakeholders in planning and management are more likely to preserve cultural identity and ensure long-term sustainability. In particular, the collaboration of local partners at both regional and municipal levels plays a crucial role in facilitating participatory planning and aligning tourism development strategies with broader policy frameworks. Conversely, revitalization initiatives that focus solely on infrastructural interventions, without considering the perspectives of local residents, are unlikely to succeed in the long run. When communities are excluded from planning and decision-making, such efforts

risk losing alignment with the cultural identity they aim to preserve, ultimately compromising their sustainability and effectiveness.

The success of sustainable tourism strategies is directly linked to their ability to address the real needs of the local population, create employment opportunities, improve the quality of life, and foster long-term community resilience. In the context of cultural tourism, this connection is even more pronounced, as local traditions, heritage, and creative expressions form the foundation of what attracts visitors. A clear example is the experiential agricultural park of Borgo Castello, where ancient rural and artisanal traditions will be revived, including the restoration of historic agricultural products. This initiative not only safeguards the area's cultural heritage but also provides economic opportunities for local residents, reinforcing the link between tourism and sustainable development.

Without meaningful community engagement, tourism development may lead to cultural commodification, displacement, or a gradual erosion of authenticity. To mitigate these risks, participatory governance models, in which residents actively contribute to the planning and management of tourism initiatives, are essential. By fostering collaborative decision-making, cultural tourism can move beyond being a top-down economic strategy and instead become a driver of social empowerment, reinforcing local identity while promoting responsible and meaningful visitor experiences.

Another key aspect is the need to avoid standardized solutions, as each village possesses a unique historical, cultural, and social identity. This is illustrated by the contrasting strategies used in Monticchio Bagni and Borgo Castello, where different approaches to cultural tourism and local engagement were employed based on the specific characteristics of each village. An effective regeneration strategy must be tailored to the distinct needs of each location rather than relying on pre-defined models. For instance, the Monticchio Bagni project prioritizes biodiversity conservation, slow mobility, and environmental education, integrating pedestrian trails and immersive experiences in nature. In contrast, Borgo Castello embraces a heritage-driven and innovation-oriented approach, focusing on the restoration of medieval structures, digital storytelling, and interactive cultural experiences. Through the integration of extended reality technologies and the revival of traditional agricultural practices, the project seeks to transform the

village into a dynamic hub of historical re-enactment and experiential tourism. These distinct strategies underscore the importance of adapting interventions to local contexts rather than applying rigid frameworks.

A more sustainable approach involves developing flexible, context-sensitive interventions that respond to local dynamics and evolving needs. In this process, fostering strong partnerships between public and private actors is essential. By linking the tourism sector with other economic activities, these collaborations can enhance territorial resilience and promote a balanced, long-lasting growth model that benefits both local communities and visitors.

Ultimately, this research demonstrates that the revitalization and economic self-sufficiency of small historic villages depends on a careful balance between tourism, economic diversification, and active community engagement. The findings from the National Borghi Plan and the projects analysed in this study suggest that investments in infrastructure, technological innovation, and participatory governance significantly enhance the resilience and long-term viability of these communities. While tourism can serve as a valuable resource for the revival of these areas, it should not be regarded as the sole economic driver. To ensure that interventions are both effective and sustainable over time, an integrated approach is required – one that combines targeted investments, innovation, education, and inclusive governance policies.

The implications of this research suggest the necessity of continuous monitoring of the impact of revitalization policies and the exploration of scalable models that can be replicated in similar contexts. Observing the long-term outcomes of projects initiated under national sustainable development strategies, as well as comparing them with international experiences, could provide valuable insights for refining future strategies and ensuring that small villages retain their authenticity while benefiting from the opportunities offered by sustainable tourism. Only through a balanced and forward-thinking approach can tourism become a harmonious development lever, capable of generating lasting benefits for both present and future generations.

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