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# The valorization of Italian “borghi” as a tool for the tourism development of rural areas

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**Abstract:** The paper comes from the need to search for criteria useful for the valorization of heritage towns, located in rural and/or inland areas of Italy, now affected to depression and depopulation process. To this end, the authors point out how territorial identity can constitute the theoretical foundation to influence the development policies and, in particular, the tourism development for sustainability process. It was therefore decided to interview a number of stakeholders who could contribute with their professionalism and expertise to identify possible paths and processes for the enhancement of these areas for tourism development. The methodology was based on to be interviews with open questions, which allowed to identify a SWOT analysis, offering a guideline for a correct governance of these rural areas for their tourist enhancement, in terms of sustainability of development and tourist attractiveness. The study is an observatory that will monitor the implementation of sustainable tourism enhancement of the borghi, heritage town

**Keywords:** “Borghi”; Tourism development; Rural Area; Sustainable tourism

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## 1. Introduction

The paradigm of sustainability, as known in the literature, can be declined in different areas, being directed to hand over to future generations the resources that today we may have available in quantity and quality. The attention, protection and care of resources that is evoked in the international arena, comes from the exploitation occurred and perpetuated in the nineties of the last century and has affected all territories and especially those where there has been a massive urbanization and population density. Other territories, particularly those located in some rural and inland areas, have been neglected by housing policies and consequently abandoned, as they do not possess the typical characteristics of large cities, such as being close to the coast, accessibility, having much more water resources, and being the centre of trade. Just in these areas today, the state of abandonment has made their condition even more worrying both for the purposes of a cohesive and sustainable development of the country, and for the recorded degradation in terms of natural resources but also human resources.

The state of backwardness of these areas, today, has emerged thanks to the spread of the pandemic that has pushed many people to move away from urban centres to find in these places open spaces where they can spend long periods of time and where they can enjoy an authentic and slow lifestyle, away from the hectic life of cities and metropolises.

The demand to stay in these places has made emerge the unexpressed potentialities, but also the limits, especially considering all the houses now abandoned and in a serious degradation state, but if properly renovated, able to welcome not only tourists, but also the new generations. Certainly to make these hospitable places, it is not only necessary to renovate only the houses, but the state of abandonment also concerns a whole series of services and common goods, which are crucial for a stable housing.

The backwardness of these areas, in fact, has very deep roots, derived on the one hand both from the abandonment of these places especially by young people, who having no possibility of high rank training and employment have preferred to migrate, on the other hand by the progressive aging of the population that has remained.

In Italy most of these areas have been identified in the so-called "borghi", characterized by a maximum of 5000 inhabitants and - as written in the MIBACT directive n. 555/216 -, "by a precious cultural heritage, whose preservation and enhancement are factors of great importance for the country system as they represent authenticity, uniqueness and beauty as distinctive elements of the Italian tourist offer".

They constitute, today, the backbone of Italy covering a territorial surface of about 54% of the total Italian territorial surface and reaching in some regions even 70%-80% of the total regional surface. To this amplitude of surface does not correspond the anthropic aspect in how much, the resident population is the 17% of the total of the Italian population and in some regions such average percentage still comes down in comparison to the regional resident population.

These factors have hindered the realization of that community capable of shaping the "territoriality defined by the combination on a given space of a set of situations, extensions, objects, occurrences/presences... [1] determining the ontological loss of territorialization, and consequently of the community, which no longer has the ability to preserve "the interpretative memory of territorial acting,...in project, at both local and global scales, passing through all the intermediate levels"[1].

The complexity of the process of territorialization is not adequately considered, when addressing the policies of the enhancement of "borghi" for purposes including tourism, but in fact thanks to this very process it is possible to transform that memory, that knowledge into a project, since this memorial competence does not concern only the constitutive territoriality but all territorial articulations [1]. The process of territorialization involves naming, reification and structuring, which give shape to that project that the community with its memorial knowledge, identifies.

The paper intends to examine the function of the "borghi" in the Italian context for a new tourist offer, not only describing them in their current context, but proposing a new strategic vision of living sustainable model.

Starting from the concept of territorial identity, as a tool to represent the different values expressed by the "borghi", such as authenticity, beauty and uniqueness, the paper intends to illustrate the fundamental role of resident communities for a new model of development. The depopulation occurred in rural areas, in fact, has reduced the ability to innovate, increasing the development gap with urban areas.

After the pandemic, the "borghi" have attracted many smart workers, becoming temporary residents and changing their communities in part. This new input into these communities has revealed weaknesses, but also opportunities.

To deepen this phenomena, the paper authors have interviewed some stakeholders, trying to verify what are the current sentiments about the "borghi" and the opportunity of overcoming the conservative model, which until now has prevailed in our country, to enhance the "borghi" in terms of attractiveness of new tourist flows. The interest aroused by this mode of study and analysis, has given rise to an observatory, which therefore, will not end with the writing of the paper, but will continue precisely because of the interpretative and trans-sectoral and transdisciplinary fallout that involves the formulation of this new model of tourism in the "borghi".

## 2. Theoretical background

The enhancement of rural areas cannot ignore a new form of territorialization, in which the "borghi" are the main axis from which to start to give coherence and cohesion to the whole Italian system [2]. The gap that exists today between developed and backward areas, in fact, can be traced, in addition to the geomorphological and infrastructural problems, precisely from the need to reform in the "borghi" a community, which has on the one hand the memory [3], and on the other hand is able to interpret the process in place, using the most appropriate tools to finalize the efforts towards a participatory and shared production of resources.

In this direction, the "borghi" should be considered "from the perspective of those who live it, experience it, practice it, as well as those who talk about it cannot disregard"[4] and ultimately cannot disregard the formation of identity, conceived in its processual and dynamic character, with the polysemic implications derived from the different open, complex and transcalar settings, [4] reflecting the peculiarities of the territory itself.

The enhancement of the "borghi", therefore, cannot disregard the formation of the identity itself, as they have been expressed by the existing literature - in particular the geographical - directed to outline the determinants of territorial identity, or those environmental factors, those tangible and intangible cultural assets, those socio-economic trends for which the "borgo" has the ability to produce value thanks to the "localized set of common benefits that produce collective advantages"[5] and the competitive capacity[6].

"It is the case to emphasize, in fact, that the territory, as well as a universe of experiences, feelings, perceptions, as well as conflicting relationships and geometries of power, is also a concrete entity to be organized and managed, and to make a study of territorial identity useful at the moment of decision-making and planning" [4]. Representing territorial identity means identifying the social system that includes people, traditions, culture and landscape, without forgetting the emotional links and connections between inhabitants and territory [6].

Ultimately, territorial identity is constantly evolving due to the external and internal agents of the territory that modify its codification as well as the behavioral traits of collective and private action [7] [8]

Territorial identity is relationship, "social construct" [9] consistently with cultural, political, ideological and ethical processes, being in continuous synergy with cultural heritage, as well as territorial capital [10].

The relationship between cultural heritage and territorial identity [11], in fact, is very close, as cultural heritage and all tangible and intangible tangible assets positively influence local creativity, thanks precisely to its very existence and aesthetic values, as well as the visual qualities of the heritage itself, lending itself to many interpretations and many

meanings and variations, according to the points of view adopted [4] [12] [13] [14] [15] [16] [17].

This same link should find in the “borghi”, the ideal place to express the close relationship that unites the identity with the territorial capital, especially if the territorial capital is defined as “localized set of common goods that produce collective benefits” [5]. Identity and territorial capital constitute, in fact, that set useful to the development of the competitive capacity of a territory [6], as they make clear both the irreproducibility of each place, and their continuous transformation, especially in the “borghi”.

More strong is the link between identity and territorial capital, more it will be possible to generate that process useful for the enhancement of resources for tourism activities - and not only - and for the growth of cultural heritage considered as a common good, creating relationality, common sense of belonging, inclination to innovations, creativity, knowledge, co-production and cooperation for the constant and dynamic improvement of the local reality, influenced by local empowerment [12] and by the different global interferences [18]. This dynamism can also be expressed by the “presence of multiple territorial identities that make places more fluid, future-oriented, open-minded and able to change, positively influencing economic dynamics” [6], but still having a strong co-science and emotional ties between the inhabitants and their space.

In a study by [6], they identified similarity and solidarity as the determinants of identity: similarity defined as the similarity of physical/geographical status and living conditions, solidarity as the coincidence and fusion of private interests with collective ones, originating reciprocity and collective support. Again in the research, which in turn takes up a study elaborated by [6], it emerges how in Italy this identity spirit at the regional level is not very widespread, considering that only 7 regions (Abruzzo, Basilicata, Puglia, Molise, Trentino Alto Adige, Tuscany and Umbria) out of 20 have as their definition an inclusive cosmopolitanism, that is, that model of territorial identity thanks to which the inhabitants, in addition to physical resemblance, have an active and dynamic solidarity so much so as to be an open community without depriving themselves of their roots and belonging to local resources.

The same research shows that 5 regions (Calabria, Lazio, Liguria, Marche and Sicily) out of 20 are characterized by individualistic localism, in which each regional community is united by physical, geographic and institutional similarity, but solidarity is not practiced.

As has already been written, it is good to point out that territorial identity is dynamic and therefore moves from individual awareness and collective sharing of experiences of the place to channel them into activities and projects on the territory always in progress, avoiding an instrumental use.

The recovery of the “borghi” for tourism purposes, therefore, can be undertaken only if it forms a territorial identity capable of reviving an active and dynamic community, both to activate that sense of uniqueness of places, the *genius loci* and the narrative of cultural heritage.

It should be noted, however, that to date, despite the government's plan cd “recovery fund” and all the current measures useful to the development and economic growth of rural areas and “borghi”, there are not enough economic and financial resources for the recovery of all 5000 Italian “borghi”.

It appears, therefore, a priority to adopt a multi-level governance and a multi-scalar approach, in which territorial indicators play a key role in maintaining comparable infor-

mation, in particular, to detect the territorial diversity [19]. In this context it becomes "geographically" relevant the "organizing principle", thanks to which we determine the positional, cultural and functional relationships between biotic and a-biotic elements in a "technical rationality" such as to be interpreted with a horizontal process, that is, participatory and shared production of resources by all stakeholders using the most appropriate tools to finalize the efforts.

This organizing principle can be precisely that territorial identity in which, in addition to environmental, social, geographical, economic, infrastructural and cultural factors, the values coming from the experience of each resident are included, an experience of which the cultural heritage and the Cultural Heritage are part. Both of these latter factors (for a definition see [8]) are a means to configure a reflective citizenship and a high sense of belonging that is achievable when an educational and training process is developed directed to the younger generations, who will thus feel active participants in their own identity in sensory and cultural terms.

Building this consciousness in young people is indispensable to live the territory as a space, in which each citizen becomes not a simple occupant of the space, but an occupant for that space, determined by the conditions offered not only in terms of geography and environment, but also by the historical, social and cultural load that has configured it as such.

If each subject gives its own meaning to the space, it will be possible to transmit diversified narratives, during which the subjective elements are mixed with the objective ones. This narrative becomes, therefore, identity when the images and morphological, spatial, functional, aesthetic and cultural traces are represented, no longer subjective, but objective and thanks to which each component of the local community identifies itself.

Although territorial identity is mainly characterized by social factors - see the previous paragraph - as can be seen from the elaborated scheme, it is achieved when all the environmental, economic and infrastructural elements become an experience belonging to the community. The theory of community-based tourism [20], in fact, is based on sharing and participation in the planning and programming choices of the tourism product: the local community, thanks to spatial proximity, trust and mutual interest, can easily create services and networks using not only natural, environmental and cultural resources, but also human resources and the most appropriate technologies of the area. Solidarity and geographical, economic-social similarity are, in fact, the synthesis of the process of territorialization, spatialization and reification of the community towards space and society itself [1].

In the current state of the "borghi", the exodus of young people has affected most of these "borghi", making fragile the continuation of that territorial identity, formed over the years. To date, therefore, is very compromised the systematization of territorial attractiveness by pursuing other fundamental objectives for the sustainability of development:

- a "smart" growth policy, directed towards efficiency and appropriateness in the use of resources thanks to investments in the high-tech sector and innovation.
- an "inclusive" policy, characterized by the enhancement of local human capital, including those coming from peripheral internal and external areas, economically disadvantaged or with special needs for integration;
- A policy aimed at the development of the "green economy", aimed at an appropriate use of resources through a proactive capacity of regions and cities that develop strategies to support the prevention and protection of the environment.

The development of “borghi” for tourism purposes, therefore, requires the activation of a “continuous process of co-evolution between human society and environmental resources” [1], that “system of rules and attitudes related to local culture and history, aimed at achieving individual and collective goals” [18], and that social capital that enhances the economic and social integration. It is about acting on those “intangible elements, whose endowment presents a precondition for the valorisation, management and transformation of external shocks into opportunities for internal development” [21]

Surely the latter cannot alone, as has already been noted [22] [16], trigger those mechanisms of development, but it requires the convergence of external policies, founded moreover, on the centrality of the person [23] and the needs of the community, realizing inclusion as a model of innovation “through a meaningful participation of the community and respect for the values it expresses [24] [14].

Finally, social innovation can be one of the main components of the transformation of boroughs into smart destinations, so as to tie together sustainable tourism and with cultural tourism, with technologically advanced solutions such as to respond to a tourism, as defined by the World Tourism Organization, “clean, green, ethical and quality at all levels of the service chain” [25] [19] [26].

### 3. Research Method

The empirical research was divided into a desk phase in which documents and information were collected from websites and related to cases of villages that have already undertaken paths of tourism development that have benefited local economies and a field phase in which in-depth interviews were administered to 11 key informants chosen from among academics, professionals and experts on the evolutionary trajectories of the villages.

In the first phase, data were collected by combining documents and semi-structured interviews [27]. Documents used for systematic evaluation as part of the study took a variety of forms, including background documents, brochures, journals, event programs, letters and memoranda, press communications, institutional reports, and information available on the websites of municipalities where revitalization projects were developed.

The second phase, carried out from February to March 2021, consisted of semi-structured interviews with 11 key informants:

- (1) The President of Cultura Italiae (Key Informant 1-KI1);
- (2) The Mayor of Lanusei (Key Informant 2-KI2);
- (3) A Village Innovation Manager (Key Informant 3-KI3);
- (4) An Expert in Digital Tourism Applications (Key Informant 4-KI4);
- (5) A university professor of economic geography with expertise in “borgo” development (Key Informant 5-KI5);
- (6) A journalist and author of essays on “borgo” regeneration (Key Informant 6-KI6);
- (7) The magazine director of Italy’s Most Beautiful Villages (Key Informant 7-KI7);

- (8) An agronomist expert on the recovery of internal areas (Key Informant 8-KI8);
- (9) A former Assessor of Tourism for the City of Syracuse, expert in territorial marketing (Key Informant 9-KI9);
- (10) An expert in tourism and cultural heritage enhancement (Key Informant 10-KI10);
- (11) A financial analyst, expert in the regeneration of "borghi" (Key Informant 11-KI11).

A key feature of semi-structured interviews is that they provide in-depth information about a certain phenomenon covering various issues concerning the study. The informants were selected according to a theoretical sampling criterion [28], looking for the adequacy of the sample rather than its representativeness.

In this regard, we have included in the sample participants who had an in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon of the villages, of the internal areas and of the opportunities associated with the development of tourism.

The objective of the interview was to get the point of view of key informants on the role of the "borghi" in the Italian context for a new tourist offer and as an engine for the valorization of the internal areas of the country.

It should be noted that the interview is a conversation provoked by the interviewer addressed to subjects chosen on the basis of a survey plan with cognitive purposes guided by the interviewer on the basis of a flexible and non-standardized interview guide.

Before to elaborate the interview guide, researcher have analyzed the documents in order to obtain basic information and useful elements for the definition of the questions to be asked during the field research [29]

The interview outline included the following topics: the concept of villages; their role in the recovery of tourism; the possible tourism vocations of the "borghi" and the people interested in using them; the new tourism targets; the possible strategies and actions to be undertaken to revitalize the "borghi"; the tourism services to be implemented; the possibility of using recovery funds; accessibility and the use of new technologies; the threats, opportunities, strengths and weaknesses of Italian "borghi"; and finally, the contribution of the "borghi" to the development of the internal areas of the country.

In order to pursue data saturation: (1) the interviews were structured to facilitate asking the same questions of the participants; (2) we constructed a saturation grid, in which the main issues and topics related to the conceptual framework were listed on the vertical axis and the interviews were listed on the horizontal axis [30]; (3) we relied on triangulation of data across multiple sources [31]

### 3. Results and discussion

The first part of the research is focused on the concept of "borghi", in order to understand if in the operational the definition used by MIBACT could be considered exhaustive.

The Minister of Heritage and Culture and Tourism Directive of December 2nd, 2016 n. 555 "2017 - year of the Italian borghi", in fact, considers the borghi "the Italian municipalities with a maximum of 5000 inhabitants characterized by a valuable cultural heritage, whose

preservation and enhancement are factors of great importance for the Country System as they represent authenticity, uniqueness and beauty as distinctive elements of the Italian offer".

A large part of interviews emphasized that this definition, despite placing emphasis on distinctive factors of the "borghi" such as valuable cultural heritage, authenticity, uniqueness and beauty, it should have emphasized the need for the human and social component, considered the basis of a community representative of the identity of these territories.

The territorial identity becomes substantial in the definition of the "borghi", discriminating history and the distinctive feature of the "borgo" itself, placing it between past, present and future, as a place of life and growth, activity and work.

The elements of landscape, already recalled in the European Landscape Convention, become characteristic of these "borghi". Types of natural green elements and not, methods and agronomic techniques consistent with the geographical and climatic characteristics are those that give the identity of that place.

In a prospective vision, these dimensions to be included are tradition, customs and traditions, as well as all the elements pertaining to the cultural identity of a historicized place, even if recent, but historicized enough to make it "precious".

The historical center becomes one with the surrounding heritage. This is the key to understanding and the community is a fundamental part of it as it unites the historical territory to the innovative one, which is also expressed by new technologies and skills, as well as by the real needs of the "borgo" itself.

A place where tourism can be developed always with a view to safeguarding the territory, understood in its human, historical, architectural, natural, landscape, cultural, social and economic components.

*The theme of "beauty" must be accompanied by historical, cultural and landscape identity (K12).*

In addition, in order to highlight the touristic value of the "borghi", one should have also considered their touristic vocation, measured by the presence of touristic services and a tourism offer system in the area.

Although in the definition there is the word "uniqueness", it is not so clear what it actually means, since the "borghi" are heterogeneous depending mainly on their geographical location. This geographical aspect is not explained at all in the definition, while it represents a distinctive feature and is its origin.

From the interviews it emerges that "borghi" can be anything but unique. There are "borghi" with a tourist value and "borghi" with other vocations. The municipalities that do not have tourist attraction resources should devote themselves to other vocations, for example industrial, agricultural and activities not necessarily dedicated to the tourist aspect. In this way, special vocations should be enhanced.

*The suburb is a cultural work, which lives of pluralisms (K11).*

*They are very heterogeneous entities, because there is a difference between "borgo" and hamlet, because there is a difference between hamlet of proximity and hamlet of internal areas (K15).*

The main limits of the definition provided by MIBACT are found in the identification of a number (5000) of inhabitants that qualifies the village and in the identification of extremely subjective parameters.

*The numerical aspect is certainly not a parameter that qualifies, it has only administrative, regulatory and legislative value (KI4).*

In any case, it must be said that definitions have a temporary value in the sense that they should be historicized, because they photograph a specific phenomenon in a specific historical moment.

*Any definition should always be considered in relation to objectification with the identification of incontestable parameters (KI1).*

With respect to the theme of the role that the "borgo" can assume for the revival of tourism, the participants consider the "borgo" as a reality that grows from local sentiment, and tourism is only a decisive part of this, but one that was introduced later.

*"Borghi" express great potential for relaunching tourism, but tourism cannot be the only economic sector to be relaunched (KI3).*

In this sense, the "borgo" has a strategic role in economic recovery and is a fundamental part of the process of systematically enhancing the country. Therefore, it is necessary to first make these places livable and improve their quality of living.

These municipalities form the Apennine ridge and it is necessary to give them a voice because one of the main risks is the maintenance of the territory itself. It is indispensable to create the conditions to favour the residency. The "borghi" must be repopulated in the genetical values that have formed them and that are that of the "culture of doing" linked to crafts, agriculture, food and wine.

Only then can we think of developing them in terms of tourism. After all, the tourist is nothing more than a temporary citizen and, as such, needs to live a visiting experience in line with the standards of the place he goes to.

*On the other hand, tourism comes when the residents live well, not the other way around (KI10).*

In this historical moment, "borghi" for tourism take on a dual significance. They are, in fact, suitable places for proximity tourism, but also useful in this phase of coexistence with the Covid19 pandemic.

At the same time, once this contingent situation has been overcome, it will be important to bring attention back to these small but valuable places, which have the possibility of distributing tourist flows more efficiently over time (destagionalization) and space (decongestion).

Downstream of the Covid19 pandemic, tourism will be totally disrupted, both on the demand and on the supply side.

The "borghi" are destinations and factors of attraction for a more specific target. Therefore, in a scenario of conspicuous investment in infrastructure and greater sensitivity and entrepreneurial will, many "borghi" can be linked to tourism and enter fully into the world of hospitality.

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*Italy is an open-air museum made up of many small towns of great value and value. The Italy of the "borghi" is a hidden Italy, different from the one that everyone in the world knows (Venice, Milan, Florence, Rome, Naples, etc.) (KI7).*

In order for "borghi" to assume a strategic role in tourism, it is essential to have a systemic vision of the overall dynamics of tourism itself. It is necessary to have an overall strategic approach that flows into a planning of what one wants to achieve over time.

The community that lives in the "borgo" is the engine of this valorization, since it represents the factor of attraction for a tailor-made tourism, not mass tourism, attracted by an innovative offer rooted in the authenticity of the territory and in the quality of life.

In this way, the "borgo" can become the "connection node" of a territorial matrix. The "borgo" is the point of consolidation of an experience that is made by passing through the territory.

*Between "borghi" and "borghi" there is the journey, the narration, the transfer, the visit experience (KI8).*

It represents the part of the tourist experience that guarantees the connection between the practices of handcraft, agriculture, environmental components, food, etc. In this context, even the architectural structures are functional to hospitality and also become an experience.

It would be desirable, therefore, to transmit to the traveler a predominantly human experience that makes the tourist breathe an atmosphere characterized by social relations, food, handicrafts and not necessarily enjoy it in the form of pre-packaged tours.

In the "borgo" it is necessary to find elements that correspond to the resident life. In this way the "borgo" is alive and the tourist is triggered in a mechanism and a place alive in itself.

From this it understand how the "borghi" tourist vocations are linked to health, beauty and well-being, but without neglecting the theme of hospitality.

It is a context that, in terms of visit experience and mode of use has strong peculiarities and is profoundly different from that of the cities of art.

The "borghi" are not places suitable for tourism hit and run, but a slow tourism that allows you to enjoy in addition to the artifacts, the beauty of the works and the landscape, the relationship with a community that welcomes.

That of the "borghi" is a cultural tourism in which the human and relational dimension plays a priority role.

Starting from these, interested actors in enjoying them are transversal. The common characteristics are the interest in wanting to make an immersive experience and a frequentation of proximity.

They are ageless subjects, curious about history and nature. Interested in the discovery of others and that in the moment of the journey they intend, even temporarily, to reset their progress and place themselves in a totally new condition.

*Sportsman, historian, food lover. People ready for any discovery (KI8).*

In a traditional vision, the “borgo” is a place suitable both for a walk-on target, the excursionist, who needs hospitality for a limited period.

However, there is also a target definable as “residential”: a tourism from an average stay of 6, 10 days or at different times of the year, residing intermittently, or even intending to move in permanently.

Both are targets that need to relax, benefiting from open spaces in contact with nature.

Today, the pandemic period associated with the growth of smart working has generated new trends in demand, the so-called digital nomads. People that improve their productivity, enhancing the quality of working life, because they immerse themselves in different rhythms in more welcoming environments (see the farmhouse in a rural area), but at the same time it is possible to set up a space for co-working and co-living, so working in shared spaces (rationalizing costs).

In summary, the possible tourist targets attracted by the “borghi” can be:

- classic tourist, as to say that make the visit of 1/ 2 days, maximum 3 days, also defined as comparative tourist or the excursionist, who stays for a limited time;
- tourist of the roots, usually emigrant, who returns and stays even 3-6 months three months a year and who considers the “borgo” the place of his retirement, finding a quality of life superior to his daily life;
- ageing people, who have more free time and also a greater capacity for spending. Although for these, appropriate conditions must be created to ensure inclusion and accessibility, to avoid confining these people in places where sociability is limited to residents;
- digital nomads, individuals who work in any location as long as they can use technology;
- young families with children, of medium to high income;
- young people who have a very strong power of influence on others (they are the fashion bloggers and the influencers who set the trends) and are the forerunners....at this time they are the only ones who travel without too many security problems.

Strategies to revitalize “borghi” must start from two key words: convenience and culture.

The community must become aware that enhancing the value of the “borgo” is an opportunity for everyone, and this requires a profound cultural change.

Those who live in the “borgo” must understand culturally that visitors and tourists bring both economic and social wealth.

*We need to think of the tourist as someone with whom to share these values (K14).*

At the same time, it is essential to consider that the valorization of “borghi” passes through a sustainable management of the so-called commons.

*Common goods that must be managed as such and not left to those who contribute to the creation of situations of parasitic income (K11).*

There is a need, therefore, to create, first of all, an organizational and governance model that, in addition to being based on public-private collaboration, considers the community as an essential factor. A community that is the humus of this revitalization that is configured as the result of a combination of tradition and innovation, old and new, old and young.

*The elderly who represent memory, the young who have the time and energy to develop the content of the elderly (KI8).*

Much of the interviewees emphasize the importance of a process in which the top-down path meets the bottom-up path.

The regional and municipal governments play a key role in the marketing of the "borghi" and in addition to directing infrastructure investments, they can act as facilitators for those initiatives coming from "below" and from the community itself.

It is important that strategies from above, focused on facilities, the development of access infrastructures, transport, must be matched by strategies from below, contributing to the construction of a common territorial identity.

The logic to be triggered is that of a virtuous circle. If the municipal administration finds that there are a series of initiatives for the purchase of real estate and a frequentation of the place, it can become an active part of the process. It can, in fact, sensitize the local population to understand the importance of this type of development and get them to take part in the "borgo"'s initiatives.

For example, in the form of community cooperatives: the healthy cooperative model can take charge of a vision and recovery of its own "borgo". The basis of a hamlet's development lies in collective planning.

*It is fundamental an action of sensitization towards groups of citizens that in a "passionate" way can dedicate themselves to the recovery of a "borgo" (KI5).*

The municipal administration must act as a driving force and if it is smart it must flank the project of real estate regeneration and cogeneration with a series of initiatives and service activities, also calling on territorial marketing agencies that bring in foreign investors.

*Realize international agreements and then activate residents, who represent the trigger factor in this process (KI9).*

At the strategic level, the role of the central government should not be underestimated, as it can enable the "borgo" to function both as a "museum site" and as a cultural "resource of attraction", and as a site with a cultural value, which, thanks to the dynamism of the activities carried out, can enhance little-known areas of the country.

The development project must be set up and shared with the resident community. The population must be able and willing to accept the development project.

The process must be carefully constructed, with clear objectives and a long-term time horizon.

The actions to be put in place can be summarized in a few key words:

- accessibility

- digitization
- security
- training
- networking
- communication

With regard to accessibility, digitization and security, these actions presuppose infrastructural interventions linked to investments to facilitate accessibility and internal mobility in these places, the installation of broadband and the creation of medical care facilities.

Training is a pivotal dimension of this development process. There is a need for a greater culture of hospitality. The latter must be thought of as an industry, in the positive sense of the term. In this sense, the best practices of Matera or Grottole, where there are real Academy experiences, should be studied.

*The handcraft must be made to understand that if he tells anecdotes or creates a storytelling around the process of making certain products, this would increase the value of the tourist experience (KI4).*

The action of networking concerns the system of offerings in which the opportunity is created to network “borghi”, on the contrary, individual realities will never be competitive. The single “borgo” is not enough for the area to become a tourist destination. A synthesis operation must be made, creating paths between the various “borghi” and making it clear that Italy is the country of “borghi”.

In this sense, the “Cammini project” or the “Via Francigena” represent cases of very successful networking. The return on image of these initiatives is very strong. What arises around them can be useful in revitalizing knowledge of these territories. Further work could be done to network the “borghi” and create specific tours, slow tourism. This applies to both inland and coastal areas.

This would involve a more efficient distribution of resources and activities, but also profoundly change the dynamics of marketing, moving from the “borgo” to the “borghi”.

*We are not thinking only of very fortunate, extremely well-known “borghi”. The discourse must focus on lesser-known realities and the effort is very strong if one wants to emerge in order to make the territory adequately known (see the case of Tropea) (KI7).*

In addition, networking associated with digitization would make it possible to fortify the relational dimension and attract new tourism targets: workers who, in contact with nature and a pleasant environment, can benefit from these elements of diversity.

Communication is also an important action in which to invest. We refer to both territorial marketing aimed primarily at international players interested in investing in the “borghi”, increasing the appeal, and actions of tourism marketing directed to specific targets, both traditional and new.

In terms of tourist services, those interviewed emphasize that the system of tourist services that a “borgo” should be equipped with are, on the one hand, those essential to welcoming a visitor, and on the other, those necessary to support an experience that best connotes that “borgo”.

The “borgo”, at this moment, has two needs: to strengthen the offer of services and to offer the possibility to carry out activities without being in less comfortable situations. All of the actions aimed at increasing services, so that they are on par with the services available in a large center, are actions that go in the right direction.

It seems essential to create a combination of qualitatively homogeneous commodities, in which it is also possible to align or characterize the various services.

Tourists are always looking to combine the enjoyment of cultural resources, the rediscovery of natural itineraries, therefore factors of a reality in which they are daily distant, with the availability of services that they can normally use.

From the point of view of “tourism for all”, it is necessary to foresee interventions to improve accessibility for the various targets of disabled people, studying solutions case by case.

*For those coming from the city, it is necessary to create a sort of continuity of services: it is important to know that the tourist will be looking for services he uses daily and at the same time will benefit from the greater space available (KI4).*

For the purposes of tourism development, accommodation services are essential, but at the same time services aimed at making the potential and peculiarities of the territory known are also indispensable. In this area should be provided maintenance and management services of buildings, with specific reference to those dedicated to residential tourism.

Moreover, “borghi” are often barycentric with respect to a whole series of events that take place in a wider range. Therefore, guides, experts and professionals who accompany you in the fruition of the territory are extremely appreciated.

As already pointed out, connectivity services are also fundamental for development, but equally important is the provision of services useful for creating specific itineraries, respecting time and permanence.

*Ensure a balance between digital services and socialization and assistance services (KI5).*

Assuming that the inland areas have orographic problems, instability, the absence of health care networks, education and recently the growing need for adequate telecommunications networks, in view of the development of the “borghi” the funds allocated by the recovery fund for the inland areas, in the opinion of our interviewees could be used in the implementation of projects that can increase the appeal of the “borghi” to people who could contribute to the repopulation of these places.

*Conditio sine qua non is an approach to planning that takes into account a systemic action between several municipalities that network (KI2).*

Funding, whether public or private, must be managed with a model of good business already thought of by local governments so as to give sustainability to the whole systemic action.

This presupposes a radical change from a perspective that can be defined as a demand for as-sistentialism to an entrepreneurial type of “borgo” management.

This would be the first step towards productive revitalization of the “borghi” and the beginning of a process of sustainable development.

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*The only thing that would need to be accomplished is to make those areas fit for 2050 (KI1).*

In line with these objectives, priority is given to interventions related to the hydrogeological structure to improve road networks and make possible accessibility and mobility, as the “borghi” are mainly located in the Apennines of the country.

Alongside these interventions should be considered the investment in broadband, designed as a necessary condition for travelers.

*Those who visit a place must be able to connect, if this does not happen that area will be penalized (KI4).*

This aspect should not be underestimated since the digital infrastructure for an inland area is totally different from that of an urban center. Technological equipment designed primarily for urban areas is not at all easily transferable, in terms of cost and infrastructure, to inland areas. It takes different planning and structuring to make this transfer happen.

Part of the funds could be allocated to public-private partnership projects to strengthen the systems of supply and develop greater attractiveness at the international level.

Interesting is the opportunity highlighted by some interviewees to direct funding towards the creation of schools. Education in these areas could play a strategic role in outlining the future vocation of the territories. This applies to the entire educational pathway up to the post-diploma level: it would be interesting to be able to establish professional training schools of excellence, capable of attracting young people from all over the world.

*The school in inland areas must be different from the school in the cities. In the internal areas, it is necessary to teach people to know these territories and therefore to understand their advantages and potential (KI10).*

As highlighted several times in this discussion, certainly in the area of “borghi”, a critical issue is that of accessibility.

On the one hand, the need to launch projects aimed at encouraging barrier-free tourism is highlighted. This, however, may encounter some obstacles.

For example, in the perspective of a philological architectural recovery, if on the one hand it might be possible to make the rooms of a historic building accessible, it would be difficult to install slides on period staircases. In this sense, digital technology, in particular through VR and AR solutions, could make the cultural resources present in a “borgo” accessible.

On the other hand, it should not be underestimated that isolation is in many cases an advantage. Therefore, it is necessary to enhance accessibility without affecting the beauty of the places and the elements that make them pristine in the eyes of tourists.

In the process of enhancing the value of “borghi”, new technologies occupy a central position because for many of those interviewed they represent the asset that can speed up the development process and do so by generating multiplier effects.

The application of new technologies improves fruition in terms of services and activities and makes it possible to provide local residents with the same opportunities that residents of large urban centers have, eliminating discrimination.

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Assuming that broadband is the basic infrastructure for using technological solutions, these solutions represent the cornerstone for supporting both technological and ecological transition at the “borgo” level.

*Technologies should be evaluated and considered primarily on the solutions they can provide (KI11).*

There are numerous technological applications in this sense: from electric mobility and sustainable in which there are new-generation vehicles equipped with sensors on board and that can circulate in the entire area village favoring capillary movements between locations (such as in the “borgo” of Lioni), telemedicine and health care at a distance that ras-sicura all elderly people, whether residents or tourists, passing by the energy efficiency of buildings.

*A fascinating world opens up, where “borghi” find solutions that were unthinkable before (KI11).*

Technologies also increase the attractiveness of the area thanks to applications in tourism marketing and mainly in the use of social media.

In the final phase of this research work, the interviewees were asked to summarize, according to their point of view, the threats and opportunities of the “borghi” and the possible strengths and weaknesses.

The following is a summary:

Threats	Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Excessive individualism (KI1)</li> <li>▪ Risk of diverting funds to wrong investments (KI4)</li> <li>▪ Socio-cultural and technological distance (KI5)</li> <li>▪ Depopulation (KI5)</li> <li>▪ Apathy of the public decision-maker (KI6)</li> <li>▪ Excessive anthropization (KI7)</li> <li>▪ Turistification (KI8)</li> <li>▪ Imbalance between supply and demand (KI9)</li> <li>▪ Ignorance and selfishness to hold annuity positions (KI11)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Growing attention towards “borghi” (KI1)</li> <li>▪ Revitalization processes based on territorial identity (KI2)</li> <li>▪ Rediscovery of cultural and social values (K/3)</li> <li>▪ New travel behaviors and opportunities for smart working (KI4)</li> <li>▪ Greater attention in the management of the trade-off between care and recovery of the territory and its enhancement (KI5, KI7)</li> <li>▪ Pervasiveness of the principles of sustainability in tourism (KI8)</li> <li>▪ Greater propensity to create public-private partnerships (KI8)</li> <li>▪ Desire to enjoy a small dimension, which has always been appreciated (KI9)</li> <li>▪ Attention towards technological and ecological transition (KI10)</li> <li>▪ Diffusion of Community Cooperatives (KI11)</li> </ul>
Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Multiplicity of characterizations of the “borghi” (KI1)</li> <li>▪ Presence of a unique cultural, material and immaterial heritage (KI2, KI7)</li> <li>▪ Attractiveness inherent in the “borgo” concept (KI3)</li> <li>▪ Italian style and Made in as key factors in the tourism potential of our country (KI4).</li> <li>▪ Possibility of enjoying a slow visit experience (KI5)</li> <li>▪ Possibility of creating narratives (storytelling) differentiated according to the target of tourism (KI8).</li> <li>▪ Hospitable atmosphere, in which it is possible to rediscover sociality (KI10)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Excessive provincialism (KI1)</li> <li>▪ Processes of standardization in proposing and communicating the “borghi” (KI2)</li> <li>▪ Inadequate promotion of inland areas (KI3)</li> <li>▪ Lack of a culture of hospitality (KI4)</li> <li>▪ Problems of seismic and health safety (KI7)</li> <li>▪ Infrastructural deficiencies (KI9)</li> <li>▪ Lack of adequate professional training (KI10)</li> </ul>

## 5. Conclusions and further research

The “borghi” are the hallmark of Italy, being spread mainly in inland areas and rural areas of the country, and are subject to the phenomenon of depopulation, demographic decline, aging of the population and from an infrastructural point of view in strong degradation and abandonment.

The research wanted, in its first part, to describe this scenario, while in the second part has shown how the pandemic has been for these “borghi” a great opportunity for rebirth and repopulation derived from the practice of both proximity tourism and true domestic tourism in inland areas, both of smartworking, which has offered a great opportunity for people to leave the big cities to work from home in these places, where you can enjoy a different lifestyle from the metropolitan one thanks to the possibility of being outdoors and the general welfare derived from relationality with people for the immediacy of human relationships.

It has been shown that the pandemic, despite the economic and social crisis that has hit the domestic world, has brought a great opportunity for sustainable redevelopment in these places. This goal is clearly not easily achievable if the issue is not addressed from a theoretical point of view, having clear method, criteria and strategies to plan a development related to sustainability. To achieve this result, as has been demonstrated in the course of this contribution, we must start from the paradigm of territorial identity, enhancing for each "borgo" this aspect that becomes a factor of uniqueness, beauty and authenticity. Territorial identity, in fact, is that element that unites the spatial character of the territory to its material and immaterial heritage as well as to its human dynamism. After delineating this criterion, especially for tourism purposes, each "borgo" will have its own dominant character with which to distinguish itself, but also to be able to use the most abundant and usable resources of the territory and preserve the most fragile ones, so that they become increasingly "smart" places, that is, attractive to the well-being of both residents and tourists.

This perspective emerged from the third part of the paper in which the empirical analysis was concentrated. Thanks, in fact, to the interviews of some stakeholders have emerged important and interesting aspects that relate precisely to the future of the "borghi" and their possible tourist valorisation in a sustainable vision. In fact, all the interviewees agree that are necessary, especially for the tourist attractiveness, both a great technological push - in particular the one related to connectivity - and a new infrastructure where mobility - in particular the connections with the big urban hubs - and health safety are the main assets on which to start the sustainable development of these places. These aspects are in fact attractors of certain tourist targets, which, as emerged from the research, can constitute not only a source of added value to the local economy, but also a major social driver that can help these "borghi" to be repopulated.

In conclusion, although the contribution has thoroughly investigated the strengths, opportunities, weaknesses and threats of the "borghi", in view of the changes taking place, further research will be necessary to verify the state of growth and local development of the "borghi". To this end, an observatory will be set up by the same authors that will verify the implementation of sustainable development for tourism in the "borghi", including interviewing other stakeholders involved in this process.

**Author Contributions:** C.B. carried out paragraphs: Section 2 Theoretical background. R.M. carried out the paragraph 3 Research Method. Both the authors carried out the Abstract, the Introduction, the Results and Discussion and the Conclusions and further research. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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