



What future for Bënjë?

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Abstract: This final chapter aims to highlight some methodological hypotheses and preliminary considerations for the activation of a comprehensive regeneration process of the village of Bënjë and its territory. Although the ideas presented are focused on a specific territorial ecosystem, they nevertheless have several points in common with many rural areas affected by a process of strong demographic decline.

If every village, in addition to being a physical space, is a dynamic social configuration (Elias, 1982), a collection of people with a certain level of interdependence who share a place, a history, beliefs, rituals, family and social bonds and tensions, we need to ask what the community of Bënjë has become today, and where it is on the inclined plane of its history. What remains of the community's social structure and local identity? (Is it fragmented or cohesive? How is it expressed? How is it perceived?) What is the dialectic between in-group bonding and out-group bridging? What relationship do Bënjë's inhabitants have with their past?

At the start of the century, Viktor Kola, observing the conditions in his village with infinite sorrow, recalled an old Albanian saying: «In the house where there is no fire, there is also no life» (*Në atë shtëpi që s'ka zjarr, s'ka as jetë*). He, however, hoped for a reaction in those who remained. «As long as there are and will be people», he wrote, «life goes on and will continue, but dedication is required from everyone, above all the young, to preserve and maintain the values of the village, to put an end to its ruin and make it more beautiful»¹ (Kola, 2002: 256).

Unfortunately, more than twenty years later, the situation has deteriorated a lot and the young people to whom Kola appealed have almost disappeared from Bënjë.

Depopulation, which weakens the sense of community and territorial presence, is only an 'effect' of the crisis that has struck the village, not the 'cause'. The 'cause', as always in these cases, is a combination of the irrepressible human desire to aspire to a better life and the economic decline of the place where one lives.

¹ Authors' translation from Albanian.



Figure 6.1–
Drawings, possibly
by children, on the
wall of a house in
the village.

Territorial depopulation originates from and depends on a multitude of *push factors* and *pull factors* (Hagood & Ducoff, 1946) both *human* and *environmental*. Among the human factors, we can distinguish between *individual factors* (economic needs, the urge to elevate oneself socially, the desire for revenge on the other inhabitants of the place of origin, the need to achieve the plan for one's life elsewhere, the need to escape forms of discrimination, etc.) and *scenario factors* (misguided or inattentive policies, affirmation of alternative cultural models to the traditional ones, lack/shortage of infrastructure and services, loss of competitiveness of the economic system, etc.). Environmental factors include the hostile nature of the land, the harshness of the climate and natural disasters such as landslides, earthquakes and floods. (see Teti, 2014). Some factors are rooted in a circumscribed territorial area (*local factors*); others depend on *regional events* (such as wars or famines) or *global phenomena* (such as urbanisation or climate change).

What happened in BĚnjĚ is not so different from what has been going on since the second half of the 19th century in many rural areas in European countries, areas that in recent times, in Italy, have been referred to as “inner” (Barca *et al.*, 2014). While each case is unique, their fate is guided by a common factor: comparison, both rational and emotional, with other contexts, relatively nearby geographically speaking, where there is a higher level of well-being. When the differential between real ‘internal’ welfare (that is, the welfare enjoyed in the place of origin) and potential ‘external’ welfare (that is, the level of welfare offered or seemingly offered by the place of choice) increases, the most active part of the population aspires to emigrate, triggering processes of demographic decrease and population ageing (Reynaud & Miccoli, 2016), socio-economic decline, environmental depletion and the desertification of services for people. In practice, the rise in well-being in the ‘competing’ areas, so to speak, entails the concomitant retreat, in relative terms, of well-being in the less developed areas.

In order to strengthen economic, social and territorial cohesion, article 174 of the *Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union* (TFEU, 2012) commits the EU to reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions (rural areas, areas affected by industrial transition, and regions which suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps such as the northernmost regions with very low population density and island, cross-border and mountain regions).

While the reasons why the inhabitants of BĚnjĚ left are understandable (see Chapter 2), it is more difficult to understand the reasons why some of them stayed or returned. Perhaps when they had the opportunity to emigrate they felt or were too old and tired, perhaps they decided to return to the village after a period spent working in Greece or Italy or elsewhere, due to homesickness, to look after their church, out of respect for their dead or other unknown reasons. While each person’s options are fatally limited, each individual story is unique. It would be worth listening to the voices of the inhabitants of BĚnjĚ, one by one. Both those who left for good and those who stayed, and those who one day decided to return (see Abbot & Behrmann, 2006).

Reversing course, in any case, is far from easy. Repopulating a village is not like repopulating a wildlife island; it is naive to think of rebuilding a community based on a traditional economy that no longer exists.

So is there nothing to be done but acknowledge the decline and at best tell its story?

Firstly, it should be said that to meet this challenge, the individual initiative advocated by Kola is a necessary, but not sufficient condition. If spontaneous (*endogenous*) regeneration processes have not yet taken place in BĚnjĚ to date, there must be a reason. The goodwill of individuals, unfortunately, can at best aspire to the goal of a mere testimony if it is not supported by an adequate material and social substrate that enables them to achieve their life goals to some extent.

In a village undergoing abandonment, an attempt to activate regeneration processes often involve outside intervention carried out by public institutions.

These institutions, before engaging in policies aimed at repopulating a village (incentivising the current inhabitants to stay and emigrants to return; attracting new inhabitants) should always ask themselves, sincerely and honestly, whether it is worth it. As a methodological premise, it is necessary to accept the idea that there are ‘things’ that are destined to die and disappear: this has always been the case. This means, for example, that the regeneration of a village should not be considered an action that is ‘normal’ and taken for granted, but rather an exceptional action to be adequately justified. Resources, by definition, are a ‘scarce’ good and public decision-makers must

decide where and how to allocate them. In practice, not intervening can also be a legitimate political choice, perhaps part of a broader plan to allocate available resources to other areas or other uses that are deemed more worthy and more capable of creating value and development for communities.

Moving from the general to the specific, assuming that there is the political will to give Bënjë a future (as there would seem to be from the initiatives mentioned in Chapters 1 and 2 of this book), one must reflect on how to intervene, on *what to do* and *how to do it*.

Public investment, whether from national or international sources (Albania Development Fund, World Bank, Social Development Bank for Europe, National Agencies for Development Cooperation, etc.) aimed at building infrastructure and services and renovating the existing heritage, is essential to boost the village regeneration process. In particular, it is crucial for the future of Bënjë to put an end to its isolation by improving its accessibility. The improvement of the *Rruga e Bënjës* as well as the redevelopment of the path connecting the thermal baths area to the village are, in our opinion, preparatory measures for any development hypothesis (see Chapters 3 and 4). Likewise, there is an urgent need to secure unsafe buildings, carry out a digital survey of the entire village and overcome the digital divide by ensuring information technology is available and can be accessed by its inhabitants and visitors. There is also a need to invest, from a long-term perspective, in services for people with the goal of - as Cardinal Bregantini explained with regard to the inland areas of Calabria - the interventions being effective rather than efficient (cited by Teti, 2014: 312).

The initiatives mentioned are technically defined. Their costs are easy to determine. Theoretically, if the economic resources were there, they could be achieved, but in order to initiate solid and long-lasting development processes, even *exogenous* interventions in the form of public investment alone are not enough. At the same time, the inhabitants need to play a proactive role (Mori & Sforzi, 2018; Lauria, 2022).

Alongside actions geared towards the *material regeneration* of the territory, which consist of the redevelopment of real estate, infrastructures or land assets, it is also necessary to envisage *productive regeneration* actions in a broad sense, based on sustainable activities/processes to be carried out on the assets once they have been redeveloped, and *community regeneration* actions aimed at creating or consolidating in the inhabitants an awareness of the values expressed by the territory and at encouraging them to commit themselves personally to activities involving protection, safekeeping and enhancement² (see Council of Europe, 2005: art. 12, lett. D).

When public interventions focus only on material regeneration while neglecting productive and community regeneration, there is a strong risk of exposing the redeveloped asset to a new decline. This is because although public initiative is the necessary catalyst for regeneration, what makes change possible is *community activism* which allows change to take hold and produce lasting results. As many known regeneration experiences show (MISE, 2016; Burini & Sforzi, 2020), the presence of an active, albeit small, community is crucial for regeneration policies to be successful. It can be said that exogenous interventions can only save a community if it wants to save itself and takes action to do so; public intervention and community activism are, in other words,

² In this regard, it is worth mentioning the experience of CESVI, an Italian non-profit organisation based in Përmet, which over the years has won the trust of the local population through a variety of cultural initiatives, often funded by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation in the Western Balkans (AICS) in Tiranë.

two sides of the same coin, they are the two legs of regeneration processes.³

But who or what in general can make the community ‘active’? This problem is no less crucial than material regeneration, but much less defined and its outcomes are more uncertain. It could be said that ‘active citizens’ are not born but become so. It is objectively difficult to become one without being aware of the purposes, methods and operational tools of the forms of self-organisation that make inhabitants ‘actors’ in the public sphere (Moro, 2013). In other words, in order to have an active community it is necessary for communities to be aware, and awareness must be cultivated.

In a context like Bënjë, where scarce public investment and weak local resources (human, economic, information, etc.) come together, one hypothesis for designing and managing social innovation projects could be the creation of cooperatives and community enterprises (Mori & Sforzi, 2018).

Even a culture of cooperation does not emerge from nothing but must be explained and fostered through appropriate training projects, which in the Albanian socio-cultural context may come up against specific obstacles. In Albania, following the experience of forced collectivisation imposed by the communist regime, the culture of cooperation was not particularly popular. During the communist period - wrote Sokoli & Doluschitz (2019: 191) - «many so-called cooperatives in Albania have been nothing more than organs of the state or projects driven by state agents; the vital elements of self-help and commitment from the members were never part of the scheme.»

This is not the place to examine in detail what ‘community participation’ consists of, that is the reactivation and provision of unused local resources and the active participation of inhabitants in governing the actions in which the regeneration process takes shape. We limit ourselves to mentioning two aspects highlighted in the literature on community enterprises (Mori & Sforzi, 2018; Mori & Sforzi, 2019, Sforzi *et al.*, 2022). On the one hand, the community is a repository of knowledge that public decision-makers usually do not have; on the other hand, it has ‘resources’ that can/must be mobilised to start re-



Figure 6.2 –
Candles lit in the
Church of St Mary.

³ This cultural approach inspires the research project REACT_”Regeneration of the cultural landscapes of inner areas from a people-centered perspective. Historic villages and rural areas of the Casentino region as an ideas’ incubator of creativity and innovation”. See <<https://www.react-casentino.unifi.it/>> (2024-04-05).

generative processes. The resources to be (re)activated include, first and foremost, work in its various forms and levels: voluntary and paid work, executive and managerial work, the latter the control functions of the inhabitants.

Then, there is the problem of numbers: when a community, as in the case of Bënjë, has reached an insignificant size, who should take charge of regeneration initiatives?

Considering the current population composition of Bënjë the gaze should inevitably be broadened to the 'extended community', to that 'conglomerate'⁴ with blurred contours made up of people who have left but who still maintain links (familial, emotional, economic) with the village and people living in neighbouring towns and villages. To those who, perhaps, attend the Feast of St Mary of Bënjë on 21 November.

With reference to the 'extended community', it is necessary to ascertain whether and under what conditions these people could contribute to a regeneration process that would see the village as a single piece of an *integrated cultural system* encompassing all the (tangible and intangible) cultural resources available (archaeological sites, architectural monuments, natural assets, typical agricultural knowledge and products, gastronomic knowledge and products, craft knowledge and products, local traditions and rituals, musical heritage, etc.) (see Lauria *et al.* 2020). Together with them, through patient and loyal dialogue, strategies and priorities for action could be defined. It would also be necessary for the villagers and the 'extended community' to be open to listening and innovation. Since human beings desire what they know, an outside look, if sincere and disinterested, can sometimes point to a new way and broaden the horizon of possibilities.

When thinking about the regeneration of villages like Bënjë, rich in scenic, historical and cultural resources, it is inevitable to think about the key role that different forms of cultural and experience-based tourism could play. Tourism may indeed represent a source of great hope for the village, above all thanks to the highly attractive setting of the nearby thermal bath area and for the beauty of the river landscape created by the Lëngarica (see Chapter 5). Kola himself (2002) saw the connection with the thermal bath area as a ray of hope for the village's future. This hope, however, could be dashed if it were to represent the only vector of regeneration and if it resulted in the musealisation of Bënjë or, worse, its transformation into a kind of holiday village for seasonal tourists.

In other words, for the future of the village, it is necessary to think of a broader regeneration strategy that also aims to activate forms of local entrepreneurship, such as, for example, those aimed at the recovery and marketing of typical food and wine products in which the Përmet area is rich (spirits such as *raki*, compotes such as *gliko*, syrups such as *shurup trëndafili*, cheeses such as *salcë shakulli*, and baked goods such as *byrek*, etc.).

In conclusion, it can be said that Bënjë has a set of qualities that make it a congenial place for experimenting with processes of material, productive and community regeneration according to an innovative people-centred vision. It could become an incubator of ideas and experiences and a pilot case for testing sustainable methods and operational tools for regeneration, which could be replicated in other rural Albanian villages (and beyond) undergoing depopulation.

If supported by policies, active community involvement, and adequate economic resources, could this vision ensure a turnaround? It is difficult to say, but it is a challenge worth attempting.

Perhaps the village's fate is not sealed, perhaps there is a future for Bënjë.

⁴ van Stam (2021) introduces an interesting distinction between two social units: 'conglomerate' and 'community'. The former is defined as «a grouping of individuals to achieve a common goal» (p. 36), while the latter is «a collection of people who subscribe to a common set of values» (p. 38).