

**ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES  
IN THE ITALIAN ALPS:  
A RESOURCE FOR  
LOCAL DEVELOPMENT**

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# «NEW HIGHLANDERS» AND FOREIGN IMMIGRATION

The Alps have been affected for decades by strong depopulation: in recent years however there is an inversion of this trend, started with a movement of migrants by choice („**new highlanders**“), **middle class young people**, leaving the towns for the mountain areas

Recent data show how **labor migrants** (or “migrants by necessity”) and, in the very last years, **asylum seekers and refugees** (“migrants by force”) play an important and increasing role in this process of repopulation: in 2017 there were about 400.000 foreign residents in the Italian Alps and not less than 20.000 asylum seekers (on a total of 125.000)

**The Italian Alps have been largely involved both on the side of foreign labor immigration** (attracted by the job offer in touristic economies, building sector, mountain agriculture, etc.) **and of asylum seekers** (due to a national policy of resettlement, from the big towns to the countryside)



# EMPTY SPACES AND FOREIGN IMMIGRATION

Italian alpine villages, with their **demographic weakness and the abandonment of large portion of the land**, have been offering several “empty spaces”, suitable to be filled by new inhabitants

**Labor migrants** find the possibility to occupy job positions no more attractive for the Italians, together with housing opportunities and a better quality of life with respect to urban areas

**Asylum seekers** are forced by national policies to settle for a period in mountain villages, profiting of the presence of empty buildings and weak social structures, that reduce the risk of conflict



# IMMIGRATION AND INNOVATION

Socio-anthropological studies show how **innovation and cultural creativity** not only develop in the interaction between different cultures, but also **can benefit from space to express themselves.**

Social and cultural spaces provided by a weak and geographically disperse social structure **can favour innovation** more than what happens in communities characterized by strong internal cohesion

Demographic weakness and depopulation might paradoxically provide an advantage by opening wider “**creative spaces**” in mountain regions: foreign immigrants can contribute in reshaping local contexts, also creating the conditions for the **resilience** of the already existing communities. *They can be factors of change.*

# THE CASE OF PETTINGO VILLAGE

Pettinengo is a small Alpine municipality (1.300 residents) in the Alps of Biella (Piedmont region), with the historical presence of a prosperous **textile industry**

Due to the closing of the factories and the previous abandonment of mountain agriculture, over the past two decades the territory has entered a **deep socio-economic and identity crisis**

The population is now characterized by a negative demographic balance and a related process of **aging**. Young people are leaving the village, or daily commuting, to work in the near town of Biella



# LABOR MIGRANTS

In the last decade there has been a **positive net migration**, due to the arrival of foreign immigrants: in 2017 there were 70 foreign residents (5% of the total population), mainly from North Africa and Eastern Europe

The newcomers arrived in the village **attracted** by the possibility to **work** in agriculture/wood cutting, elderly care and building sector, but also due to the low prices in the **housing** market and the good **transport connections** with the main city of Biella



# ASYLUM SEEKERS

More sizable is the **community of asylum seekers**, housed in the village thanks to **PaceFuturo (PeaceFuture)**, an association founded in 2001 and since then engaged in the cultural sector and in the social inclusion of “fragile” people, both Italians and foreigners

PaceFuturo, in agreement with the prefecture of Biella (that was urgently seeking empty spaces in the surrounding of the town), since 2015 has offered **hospitality to a group of applicants for international protection from Africa**

Nowadays about 100 asylum seekers (almost all young males, from different nationalities) are housed in buildings previously abandoned or underused, inside a reception project run by the association and financed by the State



# TAKING CARE OF A COMMON LAND

PaceFuturo launched in 2008 a project for the development of sustainable tourism and the revitalization of the rural area, facing the closure of the textile factories

In collaboration with the municipality and with the active involvement of the local community (volunteers), the project aimed at bringing back to life several kilometers of **old “factory workers’ paths”** (once connecting small high mountain settlements to local textile plants in Pettinengo), creating a touristic attraction and also supporting the opening of some B&B

The project promotes the participatory transformation of the territory through **cultural heritage valorization, sustainable tourism and social solidarity**



# INNOVATION AND SOCIAL NEEDS

What triggered the innovation launched by Pacefuturo was the idea of **combining the local need** for restoring local cultural heritage – and revitalize local community - with the need expressed by asylum seekers for concrete opportunities of inclusion in the community and in its territory through the working dimension

For these purposes, many of the hosted migrants were progressively involved as volunteers in the restoration of pathways and rural architectural artefacts, and they are enrolled as members of the association with the residents

While involved in the project, asylum seekers also receive a particular training, gaining some competences, ready to be spent in the labour market (in Italy asylum seekers are allowed to do paid jobs)



# THE LOCAL IMPACT OF SOCIAL INCLUSION

PaceFuturo, thanks to its commitment in the reception of asylum seekers, is now the **biggest “company” of Pettinengo**

The arrival of foreigners **is a lever to revitalize** the whole area: **about 30 people are employed, all local inhabitants**, in various activities of management, entertainment, education and support (including courses of Italian language, textiles, beekeeping, pottery classes, etc.), with a flow of **almost 100,000 euros per month in the village** (salaries, meals, renting houses, etc.)



# THE CHALLENGE

Foster social and economic inclusion through housing, labor market and welfare services, in order to create **concrete opportunities for the asylum seekers**, once they receive the recognition of their status of refugees, **to remain living and working in mountain territories**

Overcome the dependance of the welcoming local economy by State **funding**, trough the development of entrepreneurial initiatives, involving refugees and local inhabitants (and hopefully, attracting new highlanders, too)



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## **Main objectives**

- Integration of asylum seekers and refugees into the society and labour market in mountain regions;
- Face the social, economic, political and cultural challenges posed by migratory phenomena;
- Strengthening cross-border institutional cooperation in the Provinces of Bolzano and Trento, in the Länder of Tyrol and Carinthia, and in the Regions of Friuli Venezia Giulia.

## **Relevant aspects**

The project involves local, provincial/regional and euro-regional institutions in three different areas: cross-border institutional cooperation, social inclusion and labor integration.

## **Expected Outcomes**

- Cross-border exchange of experience and integration measures between institutions through field trips, the creation of workshops and the development of a series of recommendations
- Training of new professional profiles (civic educators) in the welfare and cultural sector in order to promote European values and civic integration into a multicultural society
- Development of specific tools and training of professional profiles for the integration of asylum seekers and refugees into the labour market (e.g. check of competencies, job coaching, etc.), supporting their permanent settlement in mountain areas

# THANKS!

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