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RECOs

Dialogues

Youth workers and youngsters discuss rural Europe



RECOS

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Erasmus+

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Rural areas are constantly evolving, shaped by social, economic and cultural changes. At the heart of these transformations, the younger generations play a crucial role in redefining territorial dynamics. As socio-cultural organizations, it is our job to accompany and empower them.



Introduction

The RECOS project was launched in early 2022 by the French association Collectif Parasites. An association founded by young people from the Avesnois region, and organizer of a music and performing arts festival, the Paradisiac Field eco-festival. Collectif Parasites was looking to meet other rural cultural organizations with similar environmental and social concerns. Contratto Sociale, in the heart of Italy's Abruzzo region, and Green Association, an association working all around the Bulgarian countryside, joined the adventure, the former organizing a communal music festival every year, the latter contributing to the country's most ecological festival.

In the course of initial discussions, the three organizations realized that they had much more in common than their «event» dimension, and that none of them confined their activities to cultural programming alone. All three structures were created by groups of young people, who wanted to facilitate their collective action and the defense of their values.

Today, the three associations are supported by highly committed groups of volunteers. Whether their actions are guided by a desire to contribute to the development and dynamism of their home territory, or to take advantage of all the opportunities offered by rural environments, the three associations' quest for action in rural areas is another important point in common.

Finally, and centrally, it is the interest in the «youth» age group that brings the three organizations together. Through the way in which the structures were created, as through the public with whom they now interact on a daily basis, young people have a special place in the priorities of the participating associations. It's a broad term, and the age groups it covers are open to interpretation. For Erasmus+, youth extends from the ages of 12 to 30 - that's the definition RECOS has decided to keep.

The RECOS project was conceived around these different points of common interest, with one major goal : to take action to improve the environments (cultural and natural) of Europe's rural youth. Three thematic mobility events organized the exchanges.



Mobilities were organized in each participating territory to collaborate on rural habitability, youth and eco events

In November 2022, the first mobility was held in Montebello di Bertona, Italy, around the question of habitability, the attractiveness of rurality for citizens, and in particular for young people.

- What factors influence the attractiveness of a rural area ?
- What services are essential ?
- How can we encourage residents to participate in local life ?
- Why are the younger generations leaving rural areas ?

The second mobility event was held in Landrecies, France, and focused on the broad theme of rural youth. Over the course of a week, participants examined the specific characteristics of young people living in areas far from urban centers.

- Who are they? What do they want ?
- Do they have the same opportunities as urban youth ?
- How aware are they of their territory and their community ?
- What can socio-cultural structures do for them ?

The latest mobility event took place in Bulgaria, between Momin Prohod and Staro Stefanovo. The central theme of the week was the resilience of rural territories and the cultural sector to the challenges of ecological and social transition :

- How can changes in agricultural practices foster a sense of community ?
- Permaculture: a concept exported beyond agriculture
- What responsibility do cultural event organizers have in raising public awareness ?

The three mobilities brought together participants from a wide range of backgrounds : associative employees, founding members, volunteers, local young people and associative partners. All were able to contribute their point of view, their experience and their feelings during the various questioning phases.



The Dialogues magazine aims to tell the story of the challenges and riches of everyday European rural life for the younger generations, through encounters between young people and the associations working to revitalize these three rural areas. The exchanges that took place during the mobilities, and in particular the one focusing specifically on rural youth, brought to light 5 points considered essential to guaranteeing young people in rural areas a context conducive to their development and open-mindedness : international openness, culture and leisure, commitment, the environment and territoriality.

These 5 themes have guided the production of Dialogues magazine, which, in addition to seeking to meet and promote young people and their everyday contribution to the participating territories, aims to share best practices among local associations.





Meet the participating organizations !

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Green association

Green Association was established at the end of 2012 by a group of friends. What connects us is the love of nature in all its aspects. Our main goal is to promote non-standard solutions for environmental protection, and the tools we use strive to preserve our originality, authenticity and freedom. We rely mainly on personal money, donations and voluntary work.

In our quest to present and support sustainable models of social interaction, we have created for a few years now a social center - the Green House in Momin Prohod, aiming at a shared workspace that supports the positive change in each of us.

Momin prohod is a town in Western Bulgaria, Sofia Region, Kostenets Municipality. It is about 70 km from Sofia, located near Sredna Gora and Rila mountains, as well as the Trajanovi vrata pass. The Banshnica river runs through the town. Momin Prohod is known for its 9 mineral springs with a water temperature of 56 °C and radioactivity, second in Bulgaria after Narechenski baths, third in Europe and 25th in the world. The water in Momin prohod relieves and cures diseases of the respiratory, cardiovascular, nervous and digestive systems, as well as problems of substance metabolism and various allergies. As of June 15, 2023, 1,388 people live in the town with a current address and 1,488 people with a permanent address.



The association acts on the accompaniment and support for ecological projects in the Bulgarian rural areas. Every year we welcome many European volunteers, training them in eco-construction techniques and sustainable agricultural practices. We support the organization of a series of events, promoting living in small communities with environmental care.

Events consist of social, educational, artistic, sport, cultural and other outdoor activities, engaging young people to spend their time in a beneficial way closer to nature. Our regret: anchoring ourselves in projects where relationships with young people are ephemeral. In view of our upcoming installation in a new rural territory in the center of the country - architectural and nature reserve, the village of Staro Stefanovo. Staro Stefanovo (Old Stefanovo) is part of Stefanovo village, located in northern Bulgaria, about 20 km southeast of Lovech, off the road to Apriltsi.

In 1982, the old village was declared an Architectural Reserve, and 96 objects were registered as cultural monuments - restored houses built in the beginning and middle of the 19th century with the typical architecture of the Stara Planina region. In the two villages live a total of 100 people, half of them in the new village and half in the reserve.

RECOS helped initiate the relationship with the young people who live here. By sharing our practices and learning from other participants the various techniques for diagnosing and mobilizing young rural people, Green Association acquires concrete tools to attract and federate local young people around our environmental project.

The events in which our organization has experience and desire to develop are related not only to activities in environmental protection, but also with art and culture, because we believe that this is the shortest way to influence

our target group, namely young people. Taking part in activities related to these events our volunteers will have the opportunity to share in an informal environment with their peers with similar interests and principles.

Green Association organizes seminars for young people related to the applied art and hands-on work camps. We are currently a partner in several projects in the field of volunteering and youth exchanges. In addition, our organization is actively recruiting members to present several times on various forums. At the same time, the main activity of the association from his foundation is the reconstruction and restoration of the organization's social center and workshop, where we most often implement our initiatives.

After realizing a number of activities at the local, national and international level, it is extremely important for us to reach as many as possible initiative, curious, pure-hearted and motivated people with whom we can achieve the next level of development together - the cosmic one !

Contratto Sociale

Contratto Sociale is a democratic, participatory and antifascist organization who operates in the Vestina Area, a inner area with several small towns and villages located in the Province of Pescara, within the Region of Abruzzo. It is a cultural association which carries out activities of general interest. At now, it has 26 members and a directive board of five members divided into five areas of expertise : 1. Administrative, 2. Project management, 3. Events and promotions, 4. Research and strategies, 5. Education.

The organization aims to give new social utility to disused rural and urban places through music, arts, culture, sociality and sharing experiences, in the belief that inclusive places are the fundamental prerequisite for a community to grow up. It pursues its mission by providing socio-cultural services; organizing concerts, shows and cultural events in general; promoting an international dialogue, sharing moments, active citizenship activities and horizontal participatory processes with the involvement of young people.

In its early years, Contratto Sociale was a strictly musical association, having been established in 2012 due to the need to create a larger and permanent platform for the organization of the Rock Your Head, an independent music festival born in 2008 which takes place annually in August in Montebello di Bertona. hen, year after year, the organization has developed an increasingly greater awareness of its role within the territory and the community and, consequently, it has considerably increased its objectives, activities and areas of intervention, with a clear goal : provide a social and cultural support to the community, in order to make the area where it operates more attractive for young people; promote a social activism among community, especially between young people.



Since 2022, Contratto Sociale has been managing a cultural space within the historic center of Montebello, restoring new social utility to an abandoned building, which is now available to the community again. A considerable part of the activities of Montebello Community Hub – a project carried out by Contratto Sociale from October 2022 to November 2023, aimed at strengthening citizenship services, increasing cultural participation and encouraging active citizenship among young people – took place within it.

Our territory

Abruzzo is a Region of Central-Southern Italy, knows as “the green lung of Europe” because protect natural areas cover about 37% of its surface with 3 national park within the regional boundaries. Most of its territory is mountainous and hilly. It is one of Italian Region with the lowest population density (about 121 inhabitants per square kilometre, out of a national average of 200) and with fewer inhabitants (less than a million and a half).

A significant part of the Abruzzo Region is characterized by inner areas, which offer a limited accessibility to essential citizenship services despite they have considerable environmental and cultural resources. These areas, which are located far from the main urban centres, undergo a self-perpetuating process of marginalisation, characterized by a quantitative and qualitative reduction in the local offer of public services, population decline below the critical threshold, demographic ageing, decrease in employment and land use, degradation of the artistic and landscape heritage, digital divide.

Inner areas cover two-third of the regional territory, but about 65% of the population lives in the main municipalities, with a particular concentration along the narrow coastal strip and in the metropolitan area of Pescara (about 23% of people live in an area equal to 2% of the entire regional territory). This imbalance is strictly related to a further asymmetry concerning the offer of public services in each sector (health, social, socio-educational, cultural, mobility etc) : in the last few decades, outermost areas have experienced a significant deterioration in the quality and quantity of public services offered (especially health care), with a negative impact on the living conditions of the inhabitants of these territories.

It is estimated that in the peripheral and ultraperipheral areas of Abruzzo, the population decreased by about 31% in the last seventy years (almost 100.000 inhabitants left these areas). A much higher drop than that recorded at national level for territories with the same characteristics (-20% in the same period).



Province of Pescara

The imbalance in population and public services distribution is particularly evident in the Province of Pescara, where Montebello is located. Although Pescara is a seaside town, about two-third of its provincial area is composed of inner areas: only three municipalities out forty-six have outlet to the sea. Nevertheless, about 60% of population live in the metropolitan area of Pescara (in just three municipalities), which constitute just 7% of the provincial area. In this province, there are some inland municipalities that currently have a population of less than 80% compared to seventy years ago. At the same time, the municipalities located in the metropolitan area of Pescara have exponentially multiplied their inhabitants

Montebello di Bertona and Area Vestina

Montebello di Bertona has 883 inhabitants. It has a fair natural heritage and it is part of Gran Sasso and Monti della Laga National Park, one of the three national parks located in Abruzzo Region. Nevertheless, marginalisation processes have strongly affected this

municipality. In addition to the insufficiency of essential citizenship services, depopulation is here particularly accentuated.

In fact, compared to the 1951, Montebello's populations decreased by about 58% (2181 inhabitants in 1951, against 883 inhabitants in 2021). Also due to the L'Aquila Earthquake (2009) and Central Italy Earthquake (2016), which have contributed to making several buildings in the urban core unusable, very few people live in the historic centre, which is in a general abandonment condition, although numerous works have started inside it in recent years. The inhabitants who are over eighty years of age represent 10,05% of the population of the municipality (against a regional average of 7,3%).

Unfortunately, this trend concerns not only Montebello, but also the other municipalities of the "Vestina Area", a geographical and historical sub-region – which owes its name to the ancient Italic people of "Vestini" – of which Montebello is part. It is a inner area where live about 25.000 inhabitants, which includes several inland municipalities (about ten) – mostly small in size – that share a common heritage and socio-economic ties. Depopulation and essential citizenship services deficiency is an "area problem". As regard the youth condition in particular, there is a shortage of social spaces and cultural and recreational services that makes this area unattractive for young people. All this, in addition to the scarce job prospects that the area offers, encourages young people to leave.



Collectif Parasites

Collectif Parasites was born out of a group of young people from the Avesnois region, who came together to organize a music festival in Landrecies. It was the desire to bring contemporary music and later on, performing arts, to the area that prompted these young locals to organize the Paradisiac Field eco-festival, an event still central to the association's activities today.

As the years went by, the actions supported by the Collectif developed and diversified. The young founders and volunteers, through their studies and first professional experiences, contributed to the association's development by bringing their newly acquired skills to bear; some in photography and video, others in cooking, supporting local initiatives, event logistics....

Gradually, the professionalization of the association became necessary to meet the need for coordination of all the volunteers' proposals. Formed by the free experimentation of young people, the association has always focused on promoting youth-led initiatives, particularly in the Avesnois region. Today, the values and methods of popular education are still central to the day-to-day work of Collectif Parasites.

Even today, the association is guided more by the individuals who make it up than by the missions it pursues: this particularity explains the perpetual mutations of its associative project, which reinvents itself according to the members involved in the project, their centers of interest and their availability.

There are, however, a number of constants, translated into 4 major transversal objectives, which provide an initial framework for initiatives : support the creation and development of local collective dynamics, encourage the



development of skills and autonomy in audiences and structures, develop a local cultural offering for citizens and promote individual and collective civic action.

Today, the association, its volunteers and employees, are striving to meet these local objectives by organizing projects around 4 areas of activity:

Cultural Action

Co-management of Le Caméo cinema in Avesnes-sur-Helpe (a multi-disciplinary, participatory and civic-minded cinema), Paradisiac Field Eco-Festival, organization of local events and workshops.

Media

Production and distribution of audiovisual creations, graphic design, Image, Media and Information Education workshops.

Youth

European projects, environmental awareness, school workshops.

Pépinière

A space for experimentation and a springboard for various associative activities, as well as for local eco-citizen initiatives. In 2023, Collectif Parasites is working on the creation of a community health-oriented third-place in the Avesnois region, taking a global view of health (physical, psychological, social, etc.).



The association has strong values, including a commitment to the ecological and social transition. Raising awareness of environmental preservation and protection is a cross-cutting theme in all its actions (cinema programming, workshops, eco-responsible dimension of cultural events...), and local involvement and networking of complementary organizations in the area is one of its priorities. The Collectif Parasites sees itself as a space for social experimentation in the Avesnois region.

The association and its members campaign on a daily basis to promote the Avesnois region and its human and natural resources, but also to play an active part in creating an attractive area for young people and young adults.

Our territory

In the densely populated Hauts de France region, the Avesnois Natural Park is home to the region's largest forest and its inhabitants say that the area's uniqueness lies in its nature. Bordering Belgium and the arrondissements of Cambrai, Valenciennes and Vervins (02), the area's hilly landscapes, pastures and bocages are admired by its 230,000 residents. Three main areas stand out: to the north, the urbanized Sambre basin is home to almost one in every two industrial jobs in the area. To the south, the more rural Thiérache basin is home to 43% of the Park's inhabitants and two major employment hubs, Avesnes-sur-Helpe and Fourmies.

Finally, to the west, the Mormal plateau, which is both urbanized and agricultural, is the only area in the Park to experience continuous population growth. Collectif Parasites is based in Landrecies, in the heart of the Mormal Plateau. Around 3,500 people live in this small town, which boasts a range of local services (elderly home, doctors' offices, various shops, police station, a big school...).

Until the 1970s, the Avesnois was an industrial goldmine, especially in the textile sector. The de-industrialization of the area has been dramatic for this region : poorly served by transport for a long time, the employment basin has taken a long time to recover, and is still struggling to provide work for all its inhabitants: in 2019, 15% of the 15-64 year-olds in the arrondissement are unemployed (registered at the public employment service), and 13.8% are inactive (ineligible to unemployment help). Confronted with the usual problems of rural areas, the Avesnois suffers from the inaccessibility of various services: public transport is very weak, part of the region is considered a «medical desert», training opportunities are very limited...

The Avesnois is one of the most precarious areas in the Hauts-de-France region, thus, one of the poorest in France. INSEE gives us more details. In the district, only 37.9% of households were taxed in 2020, 7 points below the regional average - hardly surprising given a median income gap of almost 2,000 euros. While the poverty rate in France is 17.4%, in the Avesnois it is 22.8%. This precariousness of households, although present throughout the region, is particularly strong on its bangs: not only is the median tax income very low there, but inequalities in access to education, employment and healthcare services are also the most flagrant.





Nevertheless, certain areas of the region tend to have a more comfortable standard of living: the communes surrounding Le Quesnoy benefit from the influence of Valenciennes, and certain areas around Avesnes-sur-Helpe and Bavay are more favored. Among young people who decide to stay in the area, the unemployment rate (as defined by the census) is 42.7% among 15-24 year-olds, and the poverty rate is particularly high among the under-30s: 36.4%. It should be noted that in these cases, women are the category of the population hardest hit by job insecurity (inactivity, part-time work, pay gaps, etc.).

Politically speaking, the Avesnois vote is the result of its history and economic situation. Historically socialist and communist, the Nord region retains values of mutual aid and solidarity between peers, which are strongly reflected in interpersonal relations in the Avesnois. Yet the region's precariousness and isolation are leading a majority of its inhabitants to position themselves in favor of the extreme right. In 2022, the results are indisputable: in the first round of voting, the vast majority of the region's communes are shown in navy blue on Franceinfo's digital maps, indicating a majority of votes for the Rassemblement National. In many communes, the gap was wide: Le Pen won an average of 40% of the vote in the communes that elected her. In the second round, this trend was reinforced: the Rassemblement National gained ground, with votes in its favor averaging 60%.

Despite very difficult living conditions for a large part of the population, the Avesnois region shines in the region, and it is to preserve and bring to life these strong assets that the Collectif Parasites has been working for nearly 12 years. The Campus Rural project, initiated by Collectif Parasites and La Chambre d'Eau in 2020, aimed to meet local young people, and gather their views on their identity, their project, but also their relationship

with the two aforementioned territories. Perceptions of the area, the neighboring area, needs, opportunities, obstacles and levers were collected, and let us observe finer internal dynamics.

For the thirty or so young people interviewed as part of Campus Rural, the Avesnois is first and foremost a territory linked to nature. All participants in the Campus Rural project spoke of nature in the heart of the Avesnois, the Mormal forest, the Regional Nature Park, the eastern valleys, hiking in the bocage. Secondly, the Avesnois is perceived as a radiant, dynamic territory, rich in individual and associative initiatives (there are over 3110 associations in the arrondissement in 2018). The main elements mentioned in this regard are the diversity of the cultural offer: the festive, theatrical and musical events of the summer season are hugely popular and provide meeting points and relaxation for the younger generation. The regret of a real loss of momentum during the winter period is regularly expressed. For them, it's the people and warm interpersonal relationships that make young people feel welcome and at home in the Avesnois, despite the lack of meeting places and joint action.

These impressions and stories paint a portrait of the area that is important for an understanding of the Avesnois experience, and a nuance to the anxiety-inducing statistics. Dynamic, rich in cultural and associative proposals, lively, the Avesnes-sur-Helpe district is a breeding ground for initiatives for those who have the opportunity to take advantage of them; and it is this vision of the territory that the Collectif Parasites seeks to disseminate through all its activities.

Through our collaboration, 5 major themes emerges as fundamental stepping stones for rural youth. Guided by these 5 categories of action, RECOS participating organizations met numerous rural youngsters and youth workers.

01

Europe



02

Culture and leisure



03

Territoriality



04

Involvement

05

Ecology

01

Europe



International openness, and in particular European openness, is at the heart of the Rural ECOSystems cooperation project. The central goal is to enable young and not-so-young people, associations and rural areas to come together to enhance their development trajectories.

While we tend to observe a higher proportion of European projects in urban areas (linked to the concentration of populations and economic dynamics), in rural areas, the EU is present and highly visible, providing significant economic support for territorial development and improving quality of life. Various thematic funds, such as the Common Agricultural Policy, have been influencing and supporting agricultural production areas for decades, while Structural Investment Funds such as the EAFRD and the ESF play a key role in diversifying rural economies, preserving resources and improving daily life in these areas (social assistance, integration, etc.). In addition to the bodies set up directly by the European Union, numerous other cross-border and international programs enable territories to reach their full economic and social potential.

Even though many local industries, businesses and personal services manage to survive thanks to European aid, there is a general lack of understanding of the European question among the population. Familiarity with EU institutions and major EU projects is often a first step, but while the Euro and the Schengen area tend to be identified as the primary markers of this union, their existence is rarely enough to develop a «European feeling», a sense of belonging to a community. A number of associations are therefore taking action to pass on information and knowledge about the various international opportunities available, and to make the schemes and

possibilities offered by the European Union more accessible, particularly to the younger generations. Connecting the EU to young people - it's the first European Youth Goal !

The accessibility of thematic programmes such as Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps opens up the possibility for non-specialist organizations to work with young people to contribute to creating a «European feeling». This enables local authorities to take ownership of the European issue via stakeholders who are firmly rooted in local dynamics and in close contact with the public.

The structures cooperating in the RECOS project do not all have the same relationship with European opportunities and their positive impacts. Green Association is an associative model particularly attached to the European Union and the opportunities it offers. Indeed, their core activity lies in hosting and training European volunteers. Their goal? To pass on and help young people from all over the continent to blossom, by reconnecting them to a way of life that is more in touch with nature. Contratto Sociale and Collectif Parasites, for their part, are more novices in this field. Both associations are first and foremost local organizations, created in the regions in which they operate, acting for and on behalf of the inhabitants, young and old, of rural areas. For these two associations, the RECOS European adventure represented a form of experimentation, a development of their activity beyond the usual boundaries of their actions.

For the three participating organizations, the RECOS cooperation project was born of a strong desire to meet, exchange, compare and pass on their local practices and actions. The project was a real opportunity to approach the European issue from a practical angle, and to highlight the benefits of sharing experiences, both professionally and personally. For the associations, the opportunity to take a step back from the day-to-day realities of our structures was fascinating, and a real driving force for development, bringing to light under-exploited opportunities or actions and ideas to be explored... For the participants, it's the meeting and perpetuation of strong interpersonal links that marks the cooperative experience: brought together around shared values, interests and practices, the mobility weeks were real opportunities to form friendships.

This naturally led to a strong desire to extend the European effort, and to focus on the impact of these international experiences on young people in rural areas. Indeed, the RECOS team is convinced that access to European opportunities has a strong impact on individuals :

Broadening perspectives

Exposure to a wide range of cultures, ideas and practices opens up new horizons for young people (especially those from rural areas, who are often more homogenous).

Personal development

Leaving known land can lead to greater autonomy, self-confidence, power to act and abilities.

Professional opportunities

Going abroad on school or professional exchanges, or on other projects, creates an international network of contacts and opens doors to internships, jobs... The daily use of foreign languages is also a huge asset for the future professional lives of young Europeans.

Reinforcing interpersonal skills

Confronting oneself and others develops adaptability, curiosity, communication skills, patience, a better approach to teamwork...



It's also worth noting that, if young people have the opportunity to go off and enrich their lives, knowledge bases, skills and experiences elsewhere in a holistic way, their communities are enriched in equal measure on their return. Indeed, leaving one's home territory to feed on ideas, ways of doing things and seeing the world enables :

An understanding of global issues, and a sense that one's journey is part of a larger world. This is particularly true of environmental issues.

Provide new skills that can be put to good use in local development.

Contribute to making communities more inclusive, through individual and collective reinforcement of adaptability, tolerance and acceptance of diversity.

All these points seem to be of particular importance in the current context. With nationalism on the rise on the European continent, a trend towards polarization of opinion, and at the dawn of an environmental crisis of unprecedented gravity... Although few organizations and young people focus on this subject exclusively, enabling young Europeans (and in particular those who are furthest from it) to access transformative experiences of encounter, confrontation, learning and dialogue, seems an absolute necessity to ensure a desirable future.

Organization

Maison de l'Europe



My name is Stéphane Libert, and I'm General Manager of the Maison de l'Europe de la Grande Thiérache. I've been working there since 1997.

Could you introduce me to the association? Its history, objectives, public, activities?

“ It's a non-profit association under the French law of 1901, created in 1993 by founding president Guy Hannecart. Initially, he wanted to set up a structure to combat illiteracy, but after meeting with the Académie Européenne du Nord de l'Europe, and noting our proximity to Belgium (the border is only ten kilometers away), he saw the relevance of creating a Maison de l'Europe. There are some forty such houses in France, affiliated to the Fédération Française des Maisons de l'Europe. Generally speaking, they are located in major urban areas; there are only a few in rural areas. In Hauts-de-France, we're pretty well off, with 4: Dunkirk, Douai, Béthune and ourselves, in the south. Our head office is in Fourmies, in small premises, but we also have a branch in Hirson; this is the only information point in the Aisne department.

We work on the four components of Grande Thiérache: the Sambre-Avesnois, the Thiérache in Aisne, the Ardennes, but also on the Hainaut boot in Belgium. The advantage of the border is that it enables the development of a micro-Europe on a daily basis, without language barriers. Our goals are to raise

awareness of European citizenship, to bring the opportunities that Europe can offer to the region, and to develop projects between the 4 components. The aim is to inform, raise awareness and train local citizens and stakeholders in the challenges of European integration, and to erase the border effect.

Overall, this action takes several forms. First of all, from an information point of view, citizens have access to a wide range of free documentation here, on all subjects within the competence of the European Union: maps, booklets on citizens' rights, more technical things (reading materials and advice on possible funding, for example) or documents linked to certain European directives and regulations. We also organize conferences on European Union news and study days within European institutions to strengthen citizen participation and the expression of the right to vote, as well as training seminars on various European funding schemes.

We also provide advice and support on cross-border issues. We are regularly contacted by people who have spent all or part of their lives in another member country, and who are therefore having difficulty claiming diploma equivalence or having their experience recognized, or who have tax-related problems. We monitor their files and help them to resolve these issues.

We're also looking to offer initiatives aimed at young people. We visit schools, from primary schools to training centers, to explain the workings of the European Union in an entertaining way. From time to time, we organize exchanges for young people, either by hosting them or by sending them, and we support various structures (schools, popular education associations, etc.) wishing to organize such exchanges in the area. We also support young people wishing to go to other member states for an internship, a job, a volunteer project...

More generally, we help people prepare for European mobility by providing information and language courses at all levels. We offer courses in English, German, Spanish, Italian and Chinese, as well as Dutch, Russian and Ukrainian. Our team is made up of two permanent staff and a core of around ten active volunteers, who help out both with activities and with weekend and evening events...

Can you tell me a little about the area in which you operate?

“ Our head office is in Fourmies. Historically, borders are hard-wired; we realized that people from the Aisne region didn't come all the way to Fourmies for information, even if they lived ten kilometers away. Thanks to the municipality of Hirson, we were able to set up an antenna on site, in the France Services building. It's the only European Union information point in the department, and it's likely to reach as far as Soissons, Château Thierry and even the Marne. In Hirson, we mainly support cross-border issues.

The area is quite similar throughout the Thiérache region. It's rural, with general socio-economic difficulties. It's a border area, so the question of Europe is evocative for the inhabitants. Younger people don't remember the days of different currencies, but there was a time when we always carried Belgian francs.

Our region is more sensitive to these issues because of its proximity. However, there's a paradox between a desire to be mobile, and a fear of the unknown, of the language barrier... That's where we come in!

Can you tell me about local youth?

“ When we talk to young people about the various opportunities available to them to gain new experiences, they are often very interested, especially those who are questioning their future, who are no longer in training, but not yet on the job market... The perspective of gaining professional experience and personal enrichment speaks to them and makes them want to do it.

However, there is a certain amount of discouragement, because of the long waiting periods: you have to find the right organizations, write the applications, have them studied, then wait for the funds to be released... We also have to make a major effort to combat prejudices linked to language problems. However, we've noticed that youth exchanges are a real wake-up call: some beneficiaries catch the mobility bug, and end up with a series of experiences. *Sometimes, it doesn't take much, and our role is to help them get the hang of it!*





To deal with a more specific aspect of your action, could you tell me more about the work you do in schools ?

“ It all depends on the type of school we're working in. The general idea is to start from what young people know at a local or national level, and extrapolate it to the European level. This enables them to see the difference between all institutions and scales. We also show them that there are false prejudices about the EU : this enables us to make them aware of the importance of voting in European elections, while remaining playful and interactive. We try to find out how they feel, what they know and what they expect from the European Union. We sometimes organize forms of citizen consultation, asking them to express their views on what they would like to see : should Europe have other competences, should it focus more on this or that issue ? Their concerns and ideas are then passed on to MEPs and the Commission.

Our chairman, Philippe Tabary, is a former member of the European Commission, and is now an accredited «Team Europe» speaker. His presence gives us a more technical perspective on many subjects. We also have the possibility of bringing in outside speakers, with direct links to the institutions. This gives us access to very good speakers - which is important if we are to attract interest and get our message across.

We try to vary and innovate in terms of media, especially for young people. For example, we've already created geocaching circuits with riddles about Europe, in the middle of nowhere, so there's no internet to cheat... It's a really fun way of learning. Another project, which should see the light of day in the coming year, is the creation of a mobile Escape Game, the «Cabinet d'Érasme», which can be transported to establishments, trade fairs... The goal will be to raise awareness of

environmental preservation, and of our carbon footprint in our daily actions. Participants will have to open a trunk with the help of playful clues, which will make them think and learn about these subjects and the role of the European Union in these transformations.

How do you involve young people ?

“ Mainly, we go out and meet them in schools and community centers. After meeting them, we propose our project. We try to get them involved right from the start; in the case of mobility, it's they who decide on the partner country, and whether they want to host or be hosted... We help them set up and follow the project, but it's they who keep the reins in their hands. As a result, they develop project management and communication skills. We're looking to encourage young people who haven't left the region much, if at all. We help them find European funding, and a maximum of co-financing on the side, so that the experience costs them as little as possible. In our context, this is important.



What are the main difficulties or obstacles in the region for carrying out your work ?

“ As with many associations, financial needs are a real hindrance. Cash-flow problems are a double problematic, since in addition to the day-to-day difficulties they can cause, certain calls for projects require significant cash-flow capacity. Even though we could apply, the impossibility of advancing expenses prevents us from doing so.

What do you see as the main results of your work with young people in rural areas? How does education about the European Union benefit them ?

“ The young people we support are often looking for internships, then jobs. When we attend job fairs, we come with a large map of the European Union, covered with post-it notes of current vacancies, and show them all the possibilities. In addition to project management, communication and modern language skills, we also promote European citizenship. We're opening doors, combating prejudices and helping to shape the younger generation's participation in the European way of life.



02

Culture and leisure



The three organizations taking part in the RECOS project have in common the organization of one or more cultural events during the year, as well as an informal education program for young people, whether in the form of one-off workshops, long-term volunteering or weekly get-togethers. The associations involved in the project have significant and varied experience, centered on the challenges of living together and social, territorial and environmental cohesion, and are fervent advocates of qualitative and unconditional access to cultural and leisure activities in their areas. For the young people who live there, as for the rest of the population, these two major sectors of activity are essential spaces for participation, as well as community and individual development.

E. Tylor's 1871 anthropological definition of culture emphasizes its complex character, encompassing knowledge, belief, art, law, morality, custom and other skills and habits acquired by the individual as a member of society. Culture, in its broadest form, is valued and disseminated through informal education initiatives, as an essential element in the service of civic action and collective emancipation. Cultural diversity is considered to be a common heritage of humanity, intimately linked to people and the territories in which they live. RECOS participating organizations act daily on these subjects, promoting alternative lifestyles, access to books, activities, concerts, workshops, think tanks and other resources, helpful to personal and collective flourishing.

It's not uncommon to hear of a lack of culture and leisure facilities in rural areas. Admittedly, there may be a deficit in terms of infrastructure and cultural offerings in the traditional sense, however, culture and leisure are omnipresent, adopting particular forms due to the rural context. Rural leisure and cultural practices are closely intertwined with family practices, cultural norms, and personal habits. The scarcity of cultural and leisure infrastructure diminishes consumeristic pursuits, and impacts the way citizens and young people busy themselves in their free time. Activities like bowling or cinema outings aren't regular, as they often involve taking public transport to a bigger town; on a day-to-day basis, youth instead gravitates towards communal pursuits, for example football matches or cycling excursions. Autonomy derived from the natural and seemingly safer environment characterizes rural leisure activities, including walking, cycling, fishing, and even hunting for some, alongside the prevalent presence of sports clubs. Community centers, like the « Centre socio-culturel » (TacTic) in France or the « Izgrev - 1926 » Community Center in Bulgaria hold

a strong role in broadening perspectives, engaging youth and other age-groups with new skills, but also local heritage. As for culture, it is also defined at the local level, through village festivals, joint events around specific themes, jumble sales, and convivial moments organized in the municipalities, which represent real meeting places for all age groups, especially young people, for whom they are often the first independent outings.

The cultural field and leisure activities, seen as a lever for social cohesion, are becoming an essential tool for inclusive rural development policies. Cultural rights, the guarantors of a more equitable society, recognize the identities and capabilities of all citizens, youth included, in rural areas. Access to culture and leisure activities is a major factor in equality of opportunity, enabling everyone to choose who they belong to and to participate in society. A robust cultural, intellectual and leisure offering plays a pivotal role in affording rural citizens access to communal spaces, facilitating discussions about their surroundings and providing exposure to diverse perspectives, ideas, genres, and aesthetics. Additionally to the personal benefits participating in culture and leisure activities can bring, it is important to note the positive economical consequences; these activities energize town centers. Facilitating this access offers many benefits for rural youth: broadening horizons, strengthening social cohesion via informal education and «doing together», stimulating creativity, learning new skills, reducing social isolation, opening up economic opportunities

In conclusion, promoting access to culture and leisure in rural areas contributes to the individual well-being of young people, while energizing and prospering local communities. This investment is essential to building a promising and balanced future, where every rural citizen can flourish and actively contribute to the development of his or her community.

Organization

Bougez Rock



Could you introduce yourself, tell me what you do for the association, and briefly describe your career with the organization ?

“ I’m Sébastien Decastiaux, current director of the Maubeuge-based Bougez Rock association. In a nutshell, the association was set up in the late 1980s by a group of young people in Aulnoye-Aymeries, who wanted to organize punk and rock concerts in the town, taking young people by the hand to get them out of their daily idleness, off the streets and out of petty crime.

I’ve been a member of the association since 2001, and I’ve had a fairly classic path within it. I started out as a volunteer, with a lot of drive and initiative. As time went by and General Meetings were held, I ended up becoming the president of the organization. As activities and projects developed, and finances improved, we were able to start remunerating a few people, including myself, through vacation work, intermittent work, short contracts... I was under the intermittent work scheme for about fifteen years, managing event production and cultural and mediation

activities in the Maubeuge Val-de-Sambre area. As the association grew, short contracts were no longer the best option - and when the budget allowed, the board offered me the chance to become a full-time director. I accepted, but without a team, I found it pointless. I activated new projects to hire more people, and now there are three of us: two production assistants and myself.

Today, I manage the association, develop its partnerships and diversify its sources of funding, in addition to administrative management. In our modest associations, you have to be versatile. 25 years later, I’m still putting up posters, running the bar...

Can you tell us a bit about the association? Its history, objectives, target groups ?

“ A lot has happened in 20 years! We started out in 2001 with our primary activity: organizing concerts. With the team of volunteers at the time, and with our first employee coordinator Laurent Delestre, we organized a series of concerts at the La Florentine social center in Leval. Every two weeks, the multi-purpose

hall became a concert venue, transformed by decoration, scenography and a little technical equipment. We invited local, regional and sometimes Belgian bands with a variety of aesthetics - rock, but also ska, dub, electro... These concerts, organized by a large team of highly involved volunteers, drew between 150 and 200 people each time. It was a very exciting time.

Little by little, we began to lend a hand to other associations and events in the area, and joined regional networks. It created a lot of energy, we met a lot of people who were keen to organize events, and we exchanged a lot - it was a period during which we learned and progressed a lot, through the richness of our encounters. Through various training courses, Laurent Delestre spread the word about our project. In particular, he met the then director of ARA (Autour des Rythmes Actuels) in Roubaix, who wanted to help us. He came and «messed with our heads». Up until then, we’d just been little concert organizers, very happy and festive. Suddenly, we had to think of a «project», figure out which philosophy we had, what our values were... This process happened through a number of intense brainstorming meetings, in the evenings after everyone’s work. They lasted for hours, but we eventually determined the association’s common thread, defined a real project, agreed on what brought us together, the values we wanted to defend, and the various actions that could flow from all that. It was at this time that we realized that music was above all a pretext for creating social links, encounters and creativity.

It became a project for the promotion and development of contemporary music in the Maubeuge Val-de-Sambre conurbation, with a focus on a finding a venue and a number of key items: support for amateur practices, support for developing artists, organizing concerts and festivals, promoting associative

life. We developed all these areas when we left Aulnoye-Aymeries. At one point, we lost our premises in Aulnoye, and Maubeuge reached out to us to allow us to open rehearsal space behind La Luna (concert hall). Having rehearsal space was part of the project at the time - it didn’t exist at all in the area. We had to move to be able to open it, so we moved everything to Maubeuge in 2006. We called it the Labo, the Lieu d’Amplification et de Bricolage des Ondes (the place to amplify and tinker with airwaves). It became a rehearsal and creation space, where we imagined a whole set of projects between 2006 and 2019 - we set up projects with lots of bands on stage, a mix of repertoires, choirs, youth jam sessions, sometimes with up to 40 musicians... this enabled us to develop the «band support» aspect, to think about how to provide young bands with the right tools and guidance to ensure their development and dissemination. At that time, we had around 30-40 active members and over a hundred musicians who gravitated around the association.

This renewal enabled us to open up our partnership network: we started to look at new municipalities, associations with which collaboration was possible... We gave a helping hand at the major cultural venues and events in the area, as volunteers and sometimes intermittents.



We had to leave the premises in 2021 for safety reasons. This marks the beginning of a third page in the history of the association, with the transition to the activity of three permanent staff who manage and develop the various aspects of the association. Our activities remain the same, open to musicians and non-musicians alike. We're also widening our scope of action: we're reaching out to the Sambre-Avesnois region, and we're trying to extend our influence to the regional level. We're still doing the same thing, but without our own venue, more in a nomadic dynamic: we support amateur practice, cultural action for all audiences, we accompany bands... We're also adding support for professional artists - today we can produce, or co-produce, by financially backing projects. We continue to organize events, concerts and festivals - for example, we inherited the Joly Jazz festival in 2018.

Quite a history! Can you tell me about the area in which you operate ?

“ As I was saying, the association was born in Aulnoye-Aymeries, but is now based in Maubeuge. Although Maubeuge is more densely populated, it's still two urban towns with suburban and rural areas around. We really enjoy working in these different areas because we are sometimes confronted with different expectations, practices and problems - I'm thinking in particular of mobility. Quickly realizing that we'd have trouble finding a venue of our own, apart from Le Labo, which remained small and ill-suited to hosting shows or larger groups, we started going out to show the experiments that were taking shape within the association. *We created at Le Labo, yes, but also in hospitals, retirement homes, schools and social centers. We'd create in one place and then go off and perform elsewhere - which meant we were able to create unusual, ever-changing configurations, and discover the local area.*

The action has now spread to the Sambre-Avesnois region - a larger scale, with even more complicated mobility issues, and therefore an even greater need for proximity.

We go into people's homes, into structures that welcome the public, and create and distribute in situ.

Our project focuses mainly on rural areas and young people. Can you tell us about young people in your area ?

“ It's hard to pinpoint a profile, because we're dealing with a wide variety of young people. We've met several generations of young people over the years. We've seen generations with a great appetite for music - that's why we grew up to 40 formalized bands, who came from all over the region to meet up at the central venue we'd created. I don't think you can really distinguish between rural, urban and suburban young people. What brings them together is the generation; they're the same young people at a given time.

I have the impression that today it's harder to reach them. We've moved on to more individualistic, more personal modes of consumption and behaviors, with a lot of time spent alone behind screens. We see fewer young people taking part in projects, coming to us to express their desires or needs. We've seen a sharp decline in the emergence of young people's musical projects over the past few years - which worries us, because we want to develop creation, but without initiators... Music has become so varied and rapidly consumable that I have the impression that young people don't linger as long, or listen as attentively, as past generations did. Where we used to buy an album and listen to it in its entirety, today we're more inclined to «zap» music. I'm not convinced that music has the same resonance in young people's heads today as it did 10, 20, 30 years ago; things are moving too fast, we're less attentive, messages are hard

to get across and many are not very benevolent... But maybe I'm just old.

What upsets me is that we can't really find young people with whom to embark on a shared adventure. We're a popular education association, so human beings are at the heart of our projects, and young people even more so. We meet them through workshops in schools, we listen to them, we hear what they have to say, we get to know them... But they don't want to get involved; very few of them get involved to defend a cause, a passion, to participate in an associative project, in something human, social, bigger than themselves.

For us, music is a pretext. Our challenge is to bring people together, to enable them to create, to socialize, to take responsibility, to help young people grow up... It's hard for us to meet these objectives, they're no longer interested. Without saying that it's all young people, I find that this generation is strongly marked by all of these things.

I know that some of your projects are aimed at young people in particular - can you tell me more about them? How do you mobilize the young people who participate? What are the results of this action ?

“ As part of the contract for the region's contemporary music sector, we and our partners have set up a system to identify and refer young musical projects in the «white zones» on the eastern side of the region. The «Périscop» scheme was conceived 4 years ago. Our aim is to provide initial access to professionals in the regional contemporary music scene. It breaks down mental barriers, helping youth and young bands realize that they have access to this world, or at least that we're there to help them access it. In concrete terms, we organize a kind of call for interest. Over a period of around 4 months,

we communicate with numerous establishments that could act as relays in more isolated areas. In this consortium of partners, Bougez Rock is a bit of a hybrid structure, mobile, with no space, so we go looking for young people where they are, in villages, social centers, music schools, behind their screens... The idea is really to take stock of all the initiatives - we identify around 150 bands a year. We then invite these bands to take part in an initial meeting, which we've decided to hold by videoconference to address mobility issues. This first video call is used to explain our approach, and to make it clear that Périscop is not a support system, but rather an identification and referral system. At the end of this first remote meeting, out of the 150 identified at the start, there are often only 60 or 70 bands left...

We organize 4 showcases in the 4 organizations cooperating on the project. During these days, we meet 10 to 15 bands, who come to show what they do, live or through video. Each group has a 15-minute presentation, followed by 30 minutes of discussion around their project. The idea is really to enable all the bands to listen to each other, to hear their problems and the answers we can give each of them... This way, they see that they're asking the same questions as the others, that they're facing the same difficulties. Our advice can be applied to many different projects, and each band can make it its own.



We also organize other events, such as collective creative spaces, exchanges of practices, or training (pitfalls to avoid, «recipes» for developing a musical project...). Finally, there's a wrap-up event, during which we invite programmers. The aim is not necessarily to program them, but to enable the young musicians to understand how things work, and the constraints and leeway that programmers sometimes have. It also helps to desacralize the profession, making them realize that they can approach programmers with no problem, that they're accessible, that there's no need to be intimidated.

On the whole, we're driven by the idea of supporting the creation and development of an embryonic musical project. Our aim is not only to enable musical creation, but also to help young people who are just starting out to understand how the contemporary music sector works, how to develop a band, to create links with other structures and to get out of the area to spread their artistic message and their songs. We know that we're sowing seeds that grow - some of them go on to become professionals in the field. What's at stake here is not so much awareness-raising and initiation as training; it's a whole mechanism, a phased approach to support.

You were talking earlier about the difficulty of mobilizing young people around the projects and spaces you propose - would you say that this is the main obstacle you encounter, or do you identify any other difficulties you'd like to share ?

“ Young people are harder to mobilize these days, but we still have the opportunity to meet them. When we work in schools, we listen to their opinions and doubts about today's world. It's good, it inspires us, it allows us to imagine new things, better adapted to their desires. But I think this difficulty in mobilizing people is also linked to us, to what we



we represent. We're older ourselves now - it's not as much fun to work with 40-50 year olds, even if we do have experience to pass on! And «Bougez Rock» is an old name and we're not going to change it, but rock music probably doesn't resonate as much today.

There's a big shortage of young people ready to enter the cultural professions. We have to be careful to look after those who are starting out, and to support them properly so that they can succeed... We're committed to

recruiting locally, in the area, but we don't always succeed. It's a problem that's found everywhere in the region.

At Bougez Rock, we've always wanted to support young people, not so that they all become cultural professionals, but so that their experience with the association serves their lives and their projects. We always want them to try out lots of things, to see and discover different sectors; to build sets and discover that carpentry is fun, to try their hand at

animation, to run the bar and discover a passion for serving drinks... We're delighted to meet up with them again a few years later, when they tell us what they've become, how the Bougez Rock experience has inspired them, or helped them discover this or that profession... In short, we're always happy to learn that we've contributed to their development as adults.

How do you think providing access to culture helps young people, especially those living in rural areas? What does it do for them ?

“ At Bougez Rock, we're convinced that music is a medium that brings together people from different backgrounds and social classes, young and old. *It enables us to share, federate, experiment, innovate, express ourselves freely, feel good, open up to others, exchange views on the world in which we live together, emancipate ourselves and blossom.* Young people in rural areas don't benefit from the rich and varied cultural offerings of the city.

We believe it's vital to reach out to them to make up for it. Today, there are a multitude of unique and alternative cultural initiatives aimed at isolated young people in the countryside. But it strikes me that some of them tell us that culture doesn't interest them, or that they feel totally excluded from it. We're driven by the idea of helping these young people to become players rather than consumers; we know that «doing it yourself» when it comes to culture is an extraordinary source of pride, especially when it's their first time. But above all, we have to convince them to dare. That's often the most complicated part. After that, things get rolling... and everyone is motivated to succeed together.

Organization

Tac Tic

Elise

“ My name is Élise, and I’ve been a youth worker at TacTic in the La Capelle area for 5 years. I work with 11-17 year olds and 16-25 year olds. I got involved with TacTic by volunteering for RockAisne-Force, the social center’s music festival. Then I did my BAFA¹ internship at La Capelle, which led to a Civic Service². That year, there was a high turnover among the youth workers - I was offered the job, and the goal was to try to stay on for a while to stabilize the actions, and revitalize the link with the public.

Isabelle

“ My name’s Isabelle, and I’m currently the director of TacTic Sud, but I started out in the children and youth sector over 25 years ago. I live in the area and raised my now grown-up children here - so I know it very well. I started working at the Maison Pour Tous social center in Nouvion-en-Thiérache. I did my BEATEP³ diploma there at the time, as part of a training contract. The social center closed, and at the same time, TacTic was being set up in Englancourt. At the time, there was an integration workshop section, and an animation section, in which I ended up spending my entire career! I’m delighted to be in Vervins, it’s a new challenge in an area I love. I’ve been lucky to be given challenges often, I don’t know if I’d have stayed without being able to evolve professionally.

¹ BAFA: Brevet d’aptitude aux Fonctions d’Animateur en accueil collectif de mineurs - non-professional diploma in animation. In France, BAFA training is available from the age of 16, and enables non-professional, occasional supervision of children and teenagers in groups of minors (vacation camps, summer camps, etc.).

² CIVIC SERVICE (Service Civique) is a French program of voluntary commitment to a mission of general interest. For a period of between 6 and 12 months, 24 to 35 hours a week, and in exchange for a small fee, young people aged 16 to 25 can join an association working in the following 9 fields: solidarity, health, education for all, culture and leisure, sport, environment, memory and citizenship, international development and humanitarian action, emergency intervention.

³ BEATEP: Brevet d’État d’Animateur Technicien de l’Éducation Populaire et de la jeunesse - diplôme professionnel de l’animation (1986-2001) remplacé aujourd’hui par le BPJEPS (brevet professionnel de la jeunesse, de l’éducation populaire et du sport).

Aline

“ My name is Aline, I’ve been a youth worker at TacTic animation in the South sector (Vervins, St Richaumont) since 2019. As a child, I benefited from TacTic and took part in a lot of activities. When I got to high school, I started doing small jobs as an animator, on Wednesday afternoons and weekends... I ran stalls, did make-up on the younger kids, babysat... Little by little, I started to get involved during the holidays, and started working as an animator in leisure centers, but more within the municipal services. I worked as an educational assistant in a secondary school for a while, and when that ended, I looked for a new job. I found a contract in a call center - I disliked it so much that I started looking for other job offers on the first day... I came across an offer for an animator at TacTic, and called Isabelle immediately. I resigned from the call center immediately afterwards... That was 4 years ago! Today, when I meet parents of young people, I notice that many of them used to work at TacTic. My son comes here, so maybe he’ll be an animator when he’s older! TacTic is a long-term project!

Could you tell me about your region ?

Isabelle We’re in a rural area, but it’s very pleasant. Thiérache is a great place to live. The associative sector is quite dense, and there’s a real willingness on the part of local people to get involved, even if it’s often the same people. The region has been evolving for several years, and is becoming increasingly dynamic. A new community hub has come into being, and there’s a highly motivated team of volunteers at the cinema... We’re really seeing some great initiatives developing and getting the area moving.

Aline Yes, it’s true, it’s really lively! There are a lot of associations around Vervins, offering a lot of things - so much so that it can be hard to find free weekends!

Isabelle Vervins has a town center. That means there’s a lot to do. La Capelle isn’t quite the same: there’s no small center, so there are fewer common spaces. I wouldn’t necessarily go and live there.

Aline A lot of older people are moving to Vervins. There are lots of things to do,

services within walking distance... The big problem here is mobility. There’s nothing to get around, it’s very complicated. There’s a train station, but only two trains pass through every now and then. Many services are concentrated in Guise, but there are no buses to get there. The women’s center, for example, will be moving to Guise; people won’t be able to get there. We’re forgetting those who don’t have a driver’s license, who have no way of getting around...

Isabelle The region is very rural. When you’re in a small village, you’re lost, you have nothing. Even when you’re a family with two driving licenses and two cars, you have to take the kids to activities left and right, and that can take a long time, you can spend a lot of time in the car... There are real difficulties linked to distance, even within families where both parents work. It creates a strong sense of solidarity between families. *As long as a young person doesn’t have a driver’s license, he’s stuck, he’s always dependent on someone.*

Aline That’s why they leave.

Elise In fact, it’s kind of black or white : *either they’ll decide to leave at some point, and won’t necessarily come back, or they’ll stay and close doors on themselves.* They’ll choose their professional orientation according to what’s available in the area, and it’s very limited... They won’t go to Lille... It’s also a question of means. We’re mostly with those who stay. I mostly have young people who are a bit lost, who sometimes don’t do anything anymore, who’ve given up a bit... Or who are trying to get by, but in the area.

Aline Most of the young people I know who have left to study don’t come back. They come to see their families, sometimes spend their vacations here, but...



Let's get back to TacTic: can you tell me about the association? Its history, its audience, its objectives?

Isabelle TacTic was born out of the determination of local residents, elected representatives and those involved in informal education. As I was saying earlier, at the start, there was a social integration component, with a social integration workshop, and an animation component, with events, forums and leisure centers. The aim was to act as an intermediary, to maintain a local presence, and to pass on the skills of animation.

At the time, when a municipality wanted to open a leisure center, TacTic helped them by organizing the first year with them. The aim was to build together, so that communities could become autonomous and their teams could be trained at the same time. In 1998, the integration program closed, it was too heavy for the association. We went on to develop the animation sector, and obtained the Social Center accreditation⁴... Today, we have two social centers, one in La Capelle (the historic one!) and another in Vervins, with local activity centers in the villages. These are places to welcome the public, and we always have the idea of proximity in mind. In Vervins, the municipality has bought a building and is working on it, so we'll soon have real premises in the town center.

We have a range of activities: youth, early childhood, family, senior... But like all social centers, our aim is to develop residents' initiatives. We don't always succeed in doing this - some people just come to us for services, but others get involved as volunteers, proposing and carrying out actions such as a Memory workshop, walking outings... They come to us to support them with a project.

What does TacTic offer in terms of youth activities?

Isabelle The youth sector is very cross-functional. We have base activities, which are a bit of a pretext, but which help to attract young people. The job of the youth workers is not just to run clubs or holidays, but also to attract potential young people who can take over, get involved and make the area their own.

Elise Some activities come up all the time, especially the weekly clubs for 11-17 year-olds, in the evenings after school, on Wednesday afternoons, collective outings on Saturdays... We try to create encounters between young people from different villages. It wasn't easy at first, but now they're used to it, and they even ask for activities that involve several villages.

In July, we organize a big leisure center at the high school. The activity leaders shuttle around in minibusses, or a big bus goes through the villages - we go and get them, otherwise they wouldn't come, they're old enough to stay at home on their own... The aim is to bring the local teenagers together. The schedule is predefined, but it can evolve according to the young people's desires. The challenge is to let them sign up where they want and suggest things; they really like the «à la carte» approach. We work with other associations in the area to help them discover what's going on, like sports clubs for example.

In August, we organize two one-week stays, with 15 young people each time. Over the summer, we have 8 activity leaders who support the youth workers. We have around 80 young people during the summer vacations, although the number dropped slightly after

COVID-19. Overall, demand is very high, and we are sometimes obliged to refuse registrations. Over the course of the year, we have a number of strong actions that mobilize them quite a lot: we offer young people the chance to run stalls and do activities for the younger ones, and self-financing actions for their stays: selling pancakes, old games... They understand that they can earn a bit of money to do what they want. It rarely comes 100% from them, they need to be guided, pushed...

Isabelle But they're small seeds. That's where we all started!

How do you get your young people involved?

Aline The ones who are still here at 16-17 are here because they were already here in 6th grade! They have a good time with us, so they bring their friends along. It works quite well by word of mouth. A lot of them come back on Civic Service, or pass their BAFA, and become our animators. But it's still difficult to get young people involved. We still have some success with middle schools, with the «devoirs faits» scheme for example, where we help young people with their homework during school hours. We make ourselves known through this kind of thing and other more thematic interventions, and then when we walk around they recognize us... At least they identify the socio-cultural center.

Isabelle We find it hard to mobilize them outside leisure activities. And it's not always easy to mobilize elected representatives. We have very good relations with local authorities, but when it comes to taking an interest in the subject of youth, we don't see anyone... We have a lot of young people who find it difficult to move around, with mental obstacles on top of their mobility problems. We'd like our group of young people and partners to expand.

⁴ In France, Centres Sociaux are local structures that create and nurture social ties, encourage democratic debate, support mobilization and projects by local residents, and build better living conditions, today and for tomorrow. They offer social, educational, cultural and family activities to meet local needs and desires. (Fédération des Centres Sociaux et Culturels de France). Centres Sociaux are accredited by the Caisse d'Allocations Familiales, which confers them recognition, and access to specific funding.



What do you see as the greatest difficulties facing TacTic ?

Isabelle Mobilizing young people is the first difficulty. But it's not just them who are difficult to reach, it's also the partners...

Aline Yes, people don't get involved, they don't play the game. We've tried to set up a committee to invite partners and elected representatives, but they just don't show up. We're thinking of organizing a nice event with a fun element, to try and get people thinking together.

Isabelle We also have fewer and fewer financial resources and subsidies for youth projects. Young people need a range of leisure activities during the school vacations. No one seems to want to take this on any more.

How do you see the importance of facilitating access to culture and leisure activities for young people in rural areas ?

Isabelle For me, it's these activities that enable open-mindedness, living together, tolerance, discovery, the development of critical thinking...

Elise Yes, some activities are seen as consumption, but we always bounce back

afterwards to try and question them about it, about their territory, about what they like or don't like and why. Sometimes they don't even know what they like, they're just repeating things they've already done, showing little creativity. Little by little, we see them becoming more attentive and taking the initiative. By getting involved with us, they participate more in local life. On the whole, there's a very critical, rather negative view of young people: they dawdle, have no ambition, are always on their phones... Getting them to participate a little helps to change the way local people look at them!

Isabelle On projects like the summer leisure center and holidays, we have a real social mix, which isn't necessarily the case with all the clubs. Of course, some young people are very busy, between music school, sports club and private lessons; those don't take part in our clubs, and are more inclined to join the Scouts, which are also very active here. But on vacations, it's different, they come. *It's a great way to get a cross-section of people's habits, to bring together young people from public and private schools... it's a great way to get to grips with diversity!*



Youth

Daniele

Can you tell us about yourself ?

“ Hi, I am Daniele the treasurer's office of Quasi Adatti association. I have 24 years old and I always lived in Bisenti. I attended high school in Teramo and now I work in a factory.

What has your life journey been so far ?

“ I joined Quasi Adatti because I have always liked their initiatives. So, I started collaborating with them a bit as a joke and just to try something new. Little by little, I wanted to participate more and more.

When you think of your territory, what is the first thing that comes to mind ?

“ *The first thing that come to mind is home and family. I like the people of this place. I feel better here than anywhere else.* It makes me think of a colourful place where it's always sunny.

What can you tell me about your territory?

“ There is a lack of services in this area, especially those related to road connection, and being in an inner area, getting around is more and more complicated. If you want to go in a town that offers services, you are forced to take your car, because with public transport it would take a long time. Even if we young people are aware that there are difficulties in living in this village, maybe it is precisely these difficulties that drive us to stay here. We could create a circular economy where we have everything within us. One thing I always this is that if I go out in Bisenti and I don't know who to go out with or who to hang out with and I go to the bar alone, there is always

someone I can have a coffee with and a chat with. And it is always a party.

What is like to be your age here ?

“ Besides the commitments we all have, I try to enjoy it, something I think I would not be able to do in other places. Of course, it is also true that being 20 years old here very often means that you have to find work and study outside of here, also before the university, because there are not high schools here. I notice that lots of my peers see themselves outside far away from here and cannot wait to finish high school and leave. On the contrary, I believe that I can also find my work dimension here or in a close place that allows me to return to Bisenti after work. Also because we have our association here.

What is your favourite thing about this place, and why ?

“ I like the serenity of this village and the festive spirit that it has. Hospitality distinguishes us: it is difficult for a person who comes to Bisenti to feel uncomfortable. Whoever comes, we make them feel good.

What are some of the territory's weaknesses ? What solutions can you image?

“ Certainly, as I have said before, the poor roads and in general a lack of services. We don't have accommodation facilities to host visitors and the infrastructure to get them there. For example, our organization don't have an office or a place to have a chat like this. In terms of real estate, many people

refurbish their home and expect to sell them at a very high price. Then, nobody buy them and the houses remain empty. However, we have continued the project of the Montonico wine museum, which is a tool to attract visitors and promote one of our local products. So, in addition to the Montonico live festival, we have created a permanent space.

If you could change anything on the territory, what would it be and why?

“ We are often a crossing point village and not a destination. In Bisenti, we don't have a place where we can meet, read a book, play the Play Station or cards... we are forced to go to the bar, and when the kids are used to spending the evenings there, when we organize an event no one comes before midnight. We need cultural centres other than bars. What would I like to change? The current municipal administration.

Do you participate in making the territory a more fulfilling one for its inhabitants? If so, how (project, actions, goals...)?

“ I try to make the village more alive through the organization of events, also trying to create opportunities for discussion on topical issues, for example the topic of mafias. We try to bring culture to the village. My social commitment is not only linked to Quasi Adatti association, since I also collaborate with other organizations, such as civil protection. Furthermore, in our events we always try to address the inhabitants of Bisenti, for example by shopping at the village's commercial activities or purchasing products from local producers. Then, in general, I help everyone in the village. I always step up to help unload wood for friends who ask me.

What local actions/organizations inspire you? What do they do?

“ “Casa del popolo” from Teramo and “Campetto occupato” from Giulianova. They are left-wing organizations to which I am very attached and politically similar.

I follow initiatives related above all to Teramo as the “Casa del popolo” or Giulianova, as the “Campetto occupato”. They are left-wing organizations to which I am very attached and politically similar. With our organization we don't expose at this level in our area, but I can say we are inspired by the same ideas. In Castiglione Messer Raimondo, a village near Bisenti, an association of very young people called Safari has just been born. They come to our events and we come to theirs. But you too (Contratto Sociale) are a source of inspiration for us with the Rock Your Head Festival.

Our last mobility identified five big themes regarding sociocultural action towards youth in rural areas. What theme seems most important to you? Why?

“ We are sensitive to the issue of environmental sustainability. When we organize our events, we use compostable plates and discourage the use of plastic cups. We prefer to reusable cups or made in glass. But also culture and free time... *We believe that by organising cultural events we try to keep the village and ourselves alive.*



Youth

Manon

Can you introduce yourself and tell me about your background?

“ My name is Manon Briatte, and I'm 25 years old. I was born in Maubeuge, and I've always lived in Auloye-Aymeries with my family - so far, I haven't felt the need to move anywhere else! I passed my literary baccalaurate in Avesnes-sur-Helpe, before going on to do a degree in «Culture, administration and media» in Valenciennes. It was a fairly natural continuation of the literary baccalaurate, a degree in which you had courses with other history, literature, arts students... I went on to do a «Culture and Heritage» master's degree at the same university. I had developed a keen interest in performing arts, cultural rights, exhibitions and, more generally, the mediation of these cultural actions.

During my second year of the Master's program, I was lucky to do a 6-month internship with Théâtre de Chambre 232U, a cultural association in Aulnoye. It went really well and I could have stayed on, but I wanted to discover other structures. I did a Civic Service in communications at Le Manège (national theater) in Maubeuge. After this experience, I was hired by the Collectif Parasites, as a Media and Cinema coordinator, for a year and a half. The idea of my job was to create a link between cinema and the association's audiovisual activities, with the 15-25 age group.

I was very lucky, because when my contract came to an end, I was able to rejoin the Théâtre de Chambre team straight away, as the person in charge of cultural actions and artist residencies. It's a job with more autonomy and more responsibility, in which my

that link the local population, the area and the 232U « artistic factory ». Alongside my work, I'm passionate about photography, and I've started developing it as a side activity.

I don't want to leave here. *Growing up here, I always complained that there wasn't much to do. Now I have the opportunity to do something, and I think it's important to do it while I can.* I'm not necessarily interested in moving to other areas. In big cities, a lot of things have already been done, and we tend to copy existing ideas. Here, there is still room for creativity and innovation.

You're very interested in culture, even though you say that there wasn't much of it around when you were younger. How did you develop such an interest for it?

“ Firstly it was my parents. Both of them are very interested in heritage and patrimonial buildings, so we went to Dordogne as a family often, to visit caves, castles, classic historic sites... I've been in contact with mediators and guides ever since I was little - it's always fascinated me. In kindergarten, I was lucky enough to take a trip to Egypt with my family. I don't remember much, but I do remember falling in love with the guide and her job, and following her everywhere. It developed in me a great desire to understand and pass on what surrounds us.

I also have a lot of friends who are immersed in the world of culture, which is one of the ways in which I became moved by it - the mother of one of my friends is a museum curator, and I always saw her doing pottery, sewing, painting... I also took the theater option in

high school, which was a real discovery. I fell in love with live performance, seeing behind the scenes, on and off the stage... I think it was a combination of all these influences that led me down this path. When I was looking at study opportunities, it was really the cultural field that appealed to me, but it was really in undergraduate studies, when I discovered the different jobs and the nuances, that I positioned myself professionally.

You used to say that your job today was to create links between artistic proposals, local people and the region. When you think of the Avesnois, what comes to mind ?

“ The first thing that comes to mind is «rural», because the Avesnois is a rural area, with a lot of protected spaces, like the Morma forest, the fields... Then, the second word that comes to mind is «galère», or hassle! It's the hassle of public transport, getting from one place to another. At the same time, when I think of my region, I think of a very family-oriented, cocoon-like space. We're lucky to know everyone everywhere, and to bump into them easily.

It's a resourcing place, with a variety of flora and fauna, and a lot of well-preserved local know-how. A lot of new dynamics are taking shape, and a lot of associations are working to make the most of everything that's going on here, with a big touch of modernity. There's both a lot that already exists, and a lot that still needs to be done, taking into account today's issues, like ecology for example... To sum up, I think we can say that it's a very rural, old territory, but one that's trying and managing to renew itself.

And as someone who grew up in Aulnoye-Aymeries, one of the region's urban centers, what can you tell me about it ?

“ Aulnoye is a fairly dynamic town, quite

central to the region, with a mayor who's very focused on culture. There's been a lot of development over the last few years - the town is changing, both in terms of construction and action. It's half-city, half-countryside. Around my house, there's nothing but fields, but you're soon in the town center, with local shops that are enough to live on. We're lucky enough to have the Théâtre de Chambre, the Pôle de Cultures Actuelles, a broadcasting center, big sports clubs... There's also the Nuits Secrètes, a big contemporary music festival that I've been going to for ages - it's become a bit of a tradition! It's the event of the year; you go there for the artists, of course, but also to meet people you don't see the rest of the year. It's a great way to keep in touch with people you went to school with, for example. It's an event that works very well, attracts a lot of people and continues to grow!

What's it like to be 25 and live in the Avesnois ?

“ It's pretty strange, but I think it's the same for all rural areas - it's not for everyone! There are a lot of people who love to get out of an apartment into a street with 5 cafés, with people constantly passing by. The Avesnois is far from being like that. However, when people tell me that there's nothing on the territory, I tell them that they're wrong, that they should be more interested in what's on offer, because they'd be surprised. Even if you're a city-dweller just passing through, in the Avesnois there are plenty of things to see, plenty of people and initiatives to meet. Just because you're 25 and living in the Avesnois doesn't mean you're lost and without a future - quite the opposite. I've noticed that a lot of people my age, or a little older, are coming back to settle in the area after leaving to study - there's a real endearing side to it, and it's a good place to live, between tranquility and dynamism.

You speak very positively of the Avesnois region - do you also see any weaknesses ?

“ Because we're so rural, we're far from a lot of things, and we're heavily dependent on public transport. It takes an hour by train to get to Lille, but within the region, if you're a minor and don't have a driver's license, it's really hard to get around. Everything is spread out, and we depend on friends and relatives to get us from one place to another. To solve this problem seems difficult to me, because I feel like it would mean denaturing the area. We're not going to put a tram on the territory...

The area is somewhat lacking in common spaces where people can gather; many cafés have closed. In Aulnoye, a café-library has just opened, where you can sit on a sofa with your friends... It's this kind of place, a bit secondary, alternative, that's missing. There are a lot of them in the big cities, but here it's not yet part of the local culture and habits. But I think it can develop; things are starting to happen, and demand is growing.

If you had the power to change something, what would you do ?

“ I'd change political opinions ! Generally speaking, we should continue to develop policies that listen to the needs of the area. Sometimes, choices are made that don't meet real needs at all; that money and time could be concentrated on other efforts. We're an agricultural area - it would be great to develop ephemeral stores, for example, to think about local life in an innovative, alternative way.

How do you contribute, in your own way, to making the region a more fulfilling place for the young people who live there, and for the population in general ?

“ Everyone will judge what I do, but I think that when I bring together artists from all over France and young people from the area,

who don't know the jobs, experiences and backgrounds, or where the artists come from... I contribute to developing the area. It both allows the locals to discover what's going on elsewhere, and at the same time it allows outsiders to discover the Avesnois and all its resources. *In a way, that's my aim: to open up the region and open people's minds.*

Are there any organizations in the Avesnois that particularly inspire you ?

“ I don't know if I could talk about one structure in particular, there are so many and I don't know them all. Their strength lies in the fact that they work very much as a network. Each one is an important part of the associative fabric that shapes the region. I think that all of them should be valued - from the moment you start working in the associative world, it's clear that you're imbued with certain values, certain principles, a desire to act...

Our project has identified 5 main areas for action by socio-cultural structures aimed at young people in rural areas. Do these themes speak to you ? Do some seem more important than others ?

“ Regarding the European aspect, there are very few foreigners in Avesnois, so we don't have much opportunity to talk about these things, but I think we're much more confronted with them than we think. When we're at school, we're told about the European Union, but it's a very abstract notion, which everyone grasps differently. I was confronted with it during my higher studies, when I found myself in class with Erasmus students, who came from elsewhere, spoke other languages, had different cultural codes... It allows you to reappropriate Europe, to realize that borders can be crossed, that distances are actually quite small... You enter into a form of human melting-pot, in a constant discovery. There's also the Europe of films, in which you discover languages,

cultures, national heritages... What does it mean to discover Europe? Does it mean physically leaving? The results of the union? Or the particularities of each country?

The theme of ecology is paradoxical; I have the impression that it's linked to everyone's sensibilities. In the Avesnois, some people are already very educated and involved in these issues - I've learned a lot over the last few years, spending time with these people. I think the environment is the region's greatest asset, but even so, protecting it remains a bit of a niche. We need global action, but we also need to mobilize at the local level, where we can still take action on artificialisation, the preservation of hedged zones... This is where associations can play a real role.

The question of Involvement is undoubtedly the most important for me, because we're a region where you have to be willing to do something. They won't come looking for you here, you have to motivate yourself. It's up to you to go and find things out, to get the information, to have the nerve to dare and try something new. There's something very subjective about involvement and giving of oneself; everyone has a goal for which they're ready to give of themselves and their time. All the people I meet have some kind of involvement... Something I feel less in the big cities. Over there, it's a metro-work-sleep rhythm, you find work quite easily... Here there's a bit of the culture of the land that's passed on to us, this agricultural culture of work, which pushes us to be in action.

Culture and leisure... I was talking about it earlier: there's a lot going on culturally in Avesnois, even if it doesn't and won't interest everyone. And yet, this Culture - with a capital C! - is becoming a real asset for the region. Leisure activities are tricky. We have plenty of leisure facilities for young people, and at the same time, very few intermediate, meeting spaces, better suited to young adults.

An alternative space, with artists, young students, a small program, a guinguette spirit... That would be great!

Any last words you'd like to add ?

“ By way of conclusion, I'd like to say that the Avesnois is a great mix of generations, and in recent years, young people have been injecting a new dynamic into the area... I have the impression that this always leads to something. It's time to get started!



Youth

Bryan

Could you introduce yourself and tell me a little about your background ?

“ My name is Bryan Bossaud, and I'm 24 years old. I'm originally from Caudry, but I lived in Cateau-Cambrésis for a long time. I went to school in Caudry, then trained at the EPIDE - an establishment for integration into employment. I chose to work in the building trade (masonry, plasterboard, painting, plastering...), and after several training courses, I obtained my «T2 building professional» card. My passion is canoeing. I love it, because you're so close to nature. I took advantage of COVID-19 to change career paths, and get closer to this field that I love. So for the past two years I've been working under various contracts with the Regional Canoe Committee, first as a civil service volunteer, then as a seasonal worker... I was quite a lonely kid, with quite a few difficulties. Today, working with young people to put a smile on their faces does me a world of good. It'll soon be two years since I moved to Landrecies - I lived on my own for a year, but last autumn my best childhood friend moved in with me.

Can you tell me a bit about the Avesnois, your region ?

“ *My territory doesn't really mean much to me. There's nothing that belongs to me !* When I think of Avesnois, I think of beautiful landscapes. It's a beautiful countryside, and the people are friendly and warm. Everyone greets each other here, whatever their generation - I find country people much kinder than city folk. I had a friend from Lille come here, and I told him it was really beautiful, with lovely paths and forests... He doesn't have access to nature like that in Lille.

I showed him that we had lots of farmers, and that you could buy good produce directly from them. Landrecies is a very beautiful town, which I find quite eco-friendly, but there's a lack of activities for young people. But we still find ways of getting by, developing our skills and training... For example, I came to Landrecies with nothing, and I managed to get my driving license. A driver's license is essential if you want to work. Here, without a car, you can't do anything. When I worked in the building trade, I had to travel all over the region, around Maubeuge... Without a car, if you're lucky, you can get by, but generally you have to be able to travel a long way.

So, what's it like being 24 and living in Landrecies ?

“ It's a bit strange. It's been two years now, but I'm still having a bit of trouble fitting in. I don't necessarily talk easily to everyone - I grew up with a lot of the older generation, so sometimes it's a bit tricky. But it's all right, I like the town all the same. At first I wanted to leave, but now, even if I don't plan to live here all my life, I'm not in such a hurry, I'm ready to stay a little longer.

What do you do in your spare time? Do you go out ?

“ No, I'm not much into going out with friends. I like to go home when I've finished for the day, and stay home with my music. Sometimes I go clubbing at the weekend, but on the whole I like to stay home and wait for festivals. *Festivals allow me to get away and feel free. If I like an event and I'm free, I can*

go on a whim, spontaneously, on my own.

I've done it in winter, but it's more likely to happen in summer - I tell my friends where I'm going and hit the road. I'd like to do more, but with work and having to organize vacations, it's not always easy. My dream is to do the biggest electro festival in Germany.

Do you have everything you need to thrive in Landrecies, in Avesnois? Are there any things missing?

“ Maybe I don't know enough about what's on offer, but I think there's a lack of activities for people. The new water sports center is very nice, but I think there's a lack of activities for young teenagers, 15-18 year olds. Older than that, I don't know if it's necessary to plan things, you're working, you're already busy. In Landrecies I know the social center, the Garantie Jeunes... The municipality has quite a few associations to help young people find work, and help them with administrative formalities. But there's a lack of leisure associations, especially in summer. A lot of young people hang out in the streets, and when I talk to them I get the impression that they'd be happy to go on outings and afternoon activities, to get away from their daily lives in front of their computers. They really enjoy getting together with friends to play sports.

So you're helping to overcome these obstacles through your work, aren't you?

“ Yes, I think I do. I started out as a member of the canoeing club. When they were looking for a young person to do a civic service, I told them I was interested and they took me on - it was a natural fit. They knew I was looking for a way out of the building trade, so they introduced me to the world of animators. Since then, I've been welcoming people of all ages and accompanying them on paddle-boarding and kayaking trips... I've also accompanied my tutor in his activities at summer camps,

which I really enjoyed. My contract will soon be coming to an end, but I'm in the process of taking the BAFA to be able to continue working as an animator. It's really gratifying to see young people leave happy with their day, and I feel I'm contributing to their learning.

Do you know any associations in Avesnois? Are there any that you particularly like, or that inspire you?

“ In 2021, I began a course with the Mots et Merveilles association. It's an association that fights illiteracy. I hadn't really written or read for a long time; I'd lost the habit. So the team helped me to recalculate, read and write correctly, but also to make the most of digital tools. The volunteers are there for us, and they're very welcoming and educational. At first, I was nervous about going there, but now I love it; I go every Tuesday for my class. It's very different from school - we're each with our own volunteer, working on our personal project. For example, I'm working on my application to become a sports educator, to get my BPJEPS - we spend all our time on that. It's very concrete, so it's motivating! It's an association I'd really recommend for anyone who's struggling with these things.

Thanks to Mots et Merveilles, I met the Sens du Goût association. I didn't know what it was all about, but it's really nice. You learn a lot about food, the relationship between the taste of things and vegetables... They're the ones who introduced me to a lot of local producers, for example. Twice a month, we have cooking workshops, where we share a moment and eat together. Everyone has a different background, some work, others don't... It's a real mix of cultures, and it's very caring. If someone's not doing well, we give each other advice, we listen to each other - it's a bit like cooking as a family.

Our project has identified 5 major themes on which socio-cultural associations can work with young people in rural areas. Do these themes speak to you? Which ones are important to you?

“ There are some themes I don't even understand, like Europe. Ecology, I think it's important, we have to take care of nature... But the others I don't really know, I haven't really thought about them. I was talking a bit about leisure earlier, about the activities that young people need. I think it's important to get them out of their comfort zone.

Thank you, Bryan. Do you have anything you'd like to add?

“ I'd like to talk about public transport again. Even if we'd like more, we have to understand that there aren't many inhabitants, so we can't afford to develop the offer any further. If you're not lazy, you get up in the morning to catch the first bus, and you come home on the evening one. I had a lot of problems with my car at one point - I hitchhiked a lot. It's much easier to get picked up here than in the city, and you can really count on people's help.



Organization

Quasi Adatti



What is your name, how old are you and what do you do in the organization ?

“ My name is Azzurra, I am 23 years old and I joined the organization 5-6 years ago. At the beginning, I joined as a volunteer. In this role, I was mainly involved to help out during events and to promote cultural initiatives in my municipality. Then a generational change occurred, so I and other young people took over from the organization’s old guard, which was composed of 35-36 years old people who were starting to have different needs, no longer compatible with a daily commitment to the organization. I am currently the president of the organization and still today I am actively involved in the organization of the grape festival, the last edition of which took place just a month ago.

Can you tell me about this organization ?

“ The organization was born in 2008 as an initiative of a group of friends eager to bring something positive to our village. At the beginning, we organized small events, but the turning point was Coloriamoci sopra.

It has become our main event, which allowed us to host artists from all over Italy. We have always tried to bring culture, history and interesting topics to the village.

Where is organization implanted ? Why ? What can you tell me about the territory ?

“ We mainly operate in Bisenti, but we also collaborate with other organizations, such as La Nuova Direzione based in Cellino Attanasio. We also experienced Bisenti in Tour, bringing events to other surrounding inner areas. The main objective is to enhance the village, create events and meeting places such as the museum and the mural project.



Our Erasmus project, up until now, has mostly focused on rurality and youth. What can you tell us about youth in your territory ?

“ We are the young people and we try to involve even the little ones, who always offer to lend us a hand, showing interest in the initiatives we carry out. For example, it has happened several times that they proposed bands to host for concerts in the village. We collaborate with different organizations and collectives, such as local ultras, and we try to revitalize the village with festivals and cultural events, such as the San Martino’s Fest.

Our last mobility identified five big themes regarding sociocultural action towards youth in rural areas. What theme does your organization most work towards ? What are the reasons behind it ?

“ We try not to consider our area as a **second class place**. Of course, there is a lack of services, but if you come to Bisenti we can show you that we are not isolated from everything and that if you come here one evening you can find a stage with a band playing, or a presentation of a book that has just been released on which we are creating a debate. We always try to enrich our free time, because if we didn’t do it, more than free time it would be wasted time.

Can you tell me more about this project (goals, methods, stakeholders...)?

“ The current main project of our organization is Coloriamoci sopra, a festival that we are trying to bring back into vogue. It is an event that requires a lot of organization, but it gives us the satisfaction of seeing the village alive and full of energy. It takes place over two days, during which the village stops and everyone really gets involved. Bisenti seems like a circus! Festival includes different contents : music, art exhibitions, children’s activities,

five-a-side football and street artists.

Can you tell me about the young people that take part in or benefit from the project ? Do they have specific backgrounds ? Needs ? Aspirations ? How do you mobilise youth around this project (and around the organisation) ?

“ With regard to the younger people who lend us a hand, we always try to ask them what they think about what we do; we try to involve them by asking for their opinions. Other times we involve them as volunteers. This drives many of them to become interested and approach us... and anyway, we all know each other, so we don’t have too many problems involving them.

What kind of results/impact of the project can you tell me about ?

“ The fact that we can succeed. We have the satisfaction of seeing a successful event with



involvement and fun, even if sometimes it didn't go well from an economic point of view. It gives us the impression of not being a dead village: young people are there and they have the desire to do things. As for the inhabitants, it can happen that someone complains, but usually they welcome and help us. Another interesting thing about the festival is the period during which it takes place: since schools are closed for the summer break, the students are actively involved through the organization of various initiatives, which are imagined and created by the students themselves.

What are the main difficulties the organization/the project faces? What could the solutions be?

“ We face some difficulties related to the availability of space: we don't have an area or a place where we can organize a concert and, at the same time, set up an area for children or other stuffs. Other difficulties are related to transport and road connections: when we organize events we often hear that we are far away and in a place not easy to reach, but we always look for solutions.

To you, how does working on theme help rural youth? What does it bring them?

“ The experience in the organization is an opportunity to learn to communicate (especially between different generations), listen and contribute positively to the community. It teaches you to stay where you live, to realize that your life doesn't have to be outside of Bisenti. It also teaches you that not everything in life is economically relevant. It is not just a free commitment, but a way of living and giving value to free time in our area.



Organization

Cultural center Izgrev 1926



What is your name? How old are you and what exactly do you do at the community center?

“ My name is Pavlina Toteva Kotlarska. I am 73 years old. Before I came to the community center, I was a children's teacher, and now I am a secretary and librarian. I am responsible for the library, for the distribution of books to the readers, for the maintenance of the library and at the same time the lounge of the community center. I organize cultural events on holidays and various entertainment with banquets and light treats.

What brought you to community center?

“ When I was of working age, I was in the city of Lovech. I worked there as a children's teacher. After I came to the village, some

things happened in the community center and people wanted to change the leadership - the secretary and the chairman. At the general meeting, they proposed me and Mr. Kandevev as chairman. I take on more work than I should, because our chairman is a working man, of working age, and I try not to involve him too much in activities, but to take over. And we share our responsibilities equally.

Can you tell me a little more about the history of the community center?

“ The history of the community center is a bit unclear. Chitalishte «Izgrev - 1926» it is listed, but on the board in the corridor there is a production that was from 1898. There are not only self-made artists from Bulgarene, but also from the neighboring villages - Kazachevo, Stefanovo, Prelom, because there was a school in Bulgarene, but there was none in these neighboring villages, and all the students studied in this school in Bulgarene. Officially, its date is 1926, but theater was performed in the school, as the corridor of the school is huge and there at the bottom was the stage where the plays were performed. There are many people in Bulgaria who participated in these cultural events. I can tell you that even a musical has been staged in the village by people who are competent. These were the *daskals* (teachers), starting with Radoi Ninkovski, who was from the neighboring village of Stefanovo, Yordan Hubavenkov was from Bulgarene. After that, Marin Balkanski - a theater actor, who later also played in Lovech's amateur ensemble. They are all deceased.

Brass music was composed in Bulgaria a long, long time ago. Its exact date has never been

recorded that I can tell you. The composition of the brass band numbered 12 people, but for some people only the three names and the instrument they played are known, because there are no living people from their environment to say anything more. They were all listeners and played like that. Later, a teacher - Marin Garbov, who is from my home village, headed the brass music. There was a festival in Pleven, at which Bulgarian brass music won the prize. These are people who really are in the true sense of the word workers. I remember as a child, when the village meeting came, that used to be on the Mother of God (August 28-29, according to the old style), then the brass music started playing from the morning until the late evening. There were two or three big horos (Bulgarian traditional circular dance) winding up in the square, because the village was crowded, not like now - a hundred people live, and they are my age, even older. Many theaters have been staged here, and only by self-made artists. Many people joined these theaters - whole families. There is a lot of footage here of people who have participated. Most of them are not among the living. To come to this day, when there is neither a singing group nor dancers. The age of the people is so great that they no longer have the physical strength to make something more legible. But we want to preserve the identity of Bulgarene. And it is called Bulgarene, because no Turk has stayed or slept in this village. This village is a very awake village. *I can talk for hours about the community center, I'm sorry that it is in a state of decline at the moment. It doesn't deserve to be in this state.*

What are your main activities ?

“ Our activities are very limited. In the summer, when various children come to the village, I invite them to the community center, but each child has a tablet or a phone. I talk, they click their phones, they don't care about anything childish anymore. They have

outgrown their time as children, as the Internet came in and these computers captured the younger generation. This is on the one hand very nice, but on the other hand, in my opinion, not so not so nice, because the children are too young for me to understand what is positive, what is negative and sift through it. Otherwise, there are active pensioners in the library who, especially in this winter period, when they have finished their work, come for a book. I direct them more towards Bulgarian literature, because I really want them to know about our literature first. We have rich literature, not to mention folklore.

What do you talk to the children about when you invite them to the community center ?

“ To those who do not go to school, but are already in kindergarten, I talk about the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm, Andersen and other more modern fairy tales. Around this and other activities from the kindergarten: about my native region, my native village, the street I live on and others. And the older ones are very difficult to work with. They come in, go out, phones, selfies, etc. Unfortunately, they don't read and don't want to talk about reading books. Even for the Bulgarian language as a language. I have been a children's teacher for 35 years and I do not like this way of communicating with the elders.

What kind of human resources does the community center have ? What is the membership base ?

“ We have about 75 members of the community center. When I have a cultural event I call them, they help me clarify some events from the past, they provide photos and other materials. On Grandmother's Day - January 6th, we have a banquet in the restaurant. I introduce people to those who were midwives of the village. Then I call the younger members to specify the menu in the

restaurant, how much money to collect to pay our expenses, some music, etc. There are 5-6 people who are younger, and when I asked them for help, I always got it, even from the older ones. There is no greater support than when I have a celebration, to have them come and even bring flowers. Although it is minimal, but there is nothing else I can do.

Can you tell me more about young people in Bulgarene ? Are there any ?

“ There are no young people in Bulgarene. As far as there are younger ones, they are in the city of Lovech or Troyan. They work there and their weekends come. A child hasn't been born here for at least 15 years. Children who have grandparents in Bulgarene come in the summer. We have empty houses that have been bought by people from Sofia or from Plevna and they visit their houses in the summer and improve them. But in Bulgarene there is nothing for people to work. The village has very difficult transport - 1 bus every 24 hours, which comes to Bulgarene at noon, returns to Lovech and then there is nothing to come back to the village with, and we are 5 km from the central Lovech-Troyan road. This is an unsettled issue, but there is no way to settle it, because there is no one to ride.

And are there young people attending your events ?

“ When the grandmother comes, she takes the grandchild with her. Now, on the day of the wakers, a father came who is not a member of the community center, but he brought his son, who is in the 7th grade, and his daughter, who is in the 4th grade. I welcomed him happily.

Does the community center have an influence on people ?

“ The fact is, when I tell them about a

holiday or write an ad, people come. Almost everyone who lives in Bulgarene comes.

Now on November 1st 32 people came. This fact shows that people need cultural events to take place.

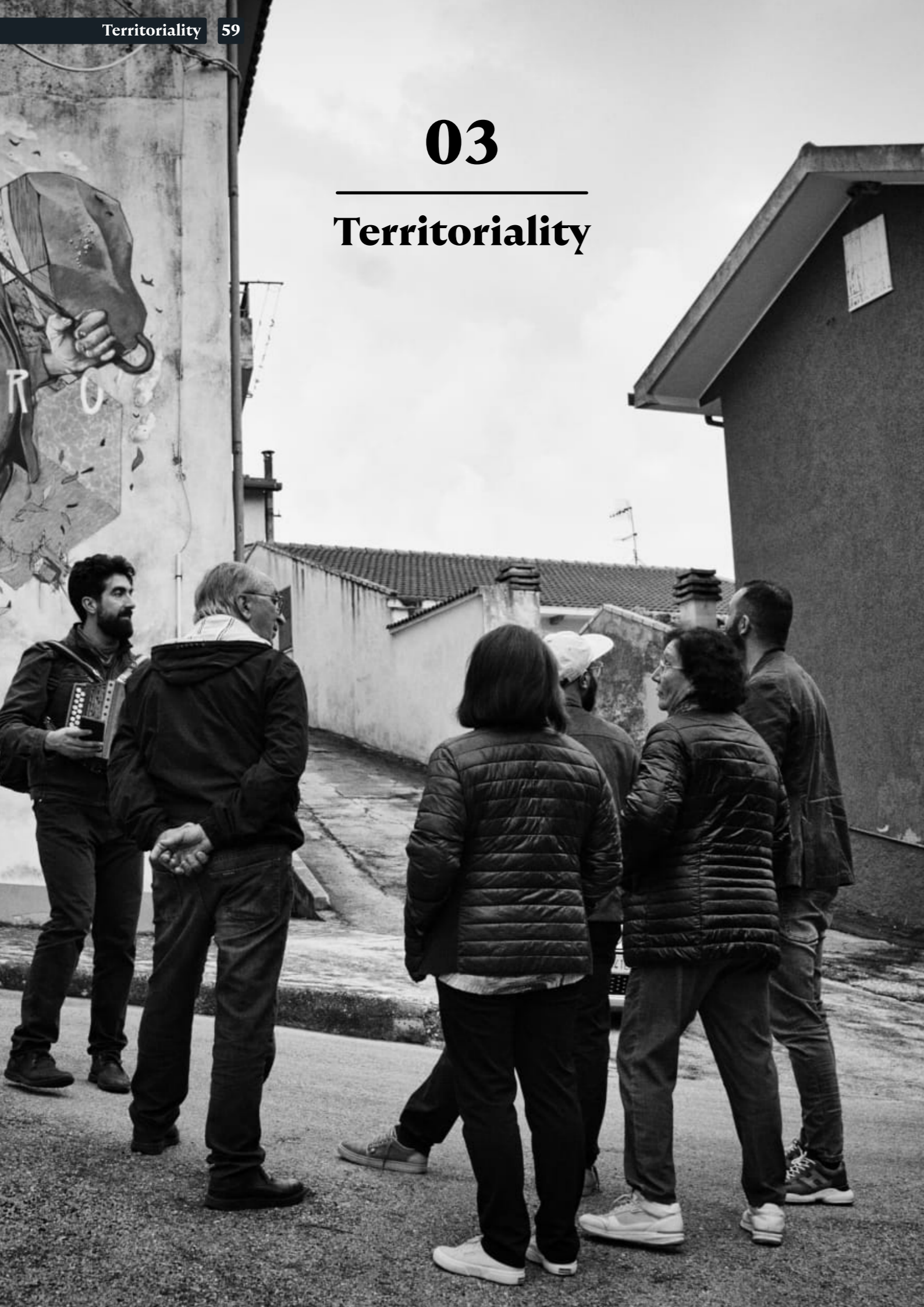
What are the biggest difficulties that the community center faces ?

“ For me, the biggest difficulty is the lack of people. That's number one. The aging of the population, because there are people who want to come, but are on crutches, have difficulty moving. The next thing is that the roof of the community center is about to collapse. It flows in many places, even on stage. The stage curtains were bought from Sevlievo and people brought them with carts and personal funds. *The community center was built with personal funds of the people, with voluntary work. And today it will collapse before our eyes.* There are no funds to support it. Not having an option makes me pessimistic about everything. I want to leave something for future generations. But only when there is a holiday, we organize a treat, candy, bread, etc.



03

Territoriality



The concept of territory is boundless, encompassing the physical and human, material and immaterial elements of a specific delimited space. When we speak of territory, we envision a multitude of factors, including landscape, socioeconomic context, and traditions—a dynamic interaction and continuous influence between natural elements and human presence. The European Union, through its various programs, promotes actions and policies aimed at enhancing territories in both material and immaterial terms. Concurrently, through territorial cohesion policies, it addresses the socioeconomic gap that exists between different areas of Europe. Often, to reduce these disparities, territories undergo modifications aimed at increasing economic development, bringing about changes in ecological relationships that had historically existed.

Policies related to territorial development often focus on economic, social, cultural, and environmental strategies. They may stem from the intention to enhance and/or preserve certain local features or from the need for progress and development that certain areas aim to achieve. Territory is, therefore, a highly dynamic field of action where maintaining balance in interactions between human and non-human elements is often problematic or, at the very least, complex. This complexity is heightened when considering fragile territories, such as European rural areas.

Speaking of development in these areas involves magnifying the dichotomy between the push for socioeconomic and infrastructural (material) development and the conservation of a cultural heritage and practices that need preservation (immaterial). As maintaining a balance between these two forces is not simple, the emphasis is on promoting an in-depth, multidimensional, and interdisciplinary understanding of the territory.

Additionally, creating forums for discussion that serve as multistakeholder observatories on the territory is crucial.

The RECOS project chose to focus on the territory because, in rural areas, it represents a rich heritage of natural, cultural, and social resources that must be valued and preserved to ensure a prosperous future for these regions while maintaining distinctive elements. The project aimed to employ knowledge, respect, and care for the territory as fundamental elements to achieve its goals and promote sustainable development in rural communities in Landrecies, Staro Stefanovo, and Montebello di Bertona.

In each mobility, emphasis was placed on contact with the territory, both in terms of cultural and landscape knowledge and understanding the various actors and issues that inhabit it. The project also contributed to the development of project and technical tools oriented towards citizen participation and involvement. Collaboration and compromise are crucial, as an action is unlikely to have an impact if its objectives are not shared.

A collectivized, multisectoral, and intersectional knowledge of the territory is valuable for the growth of rural regions, seeking active participation from all categories, especially those less involved, such as youth and women. This approach allows them to build more inclusive territories regarding the issues they directly experience and makes them protagonists in defining their future on their territories.

A concerted reflection on the territory can lead to mediation between the aforementioned forces, allowing the pursuit of: Integrated Development :

- Understanding different aspects of the territory enables an integrated approach to development, where initiatives can be interconnected to maximize positive impact.
- Economic Diversification : Multisectoral knowledge can promote economic diversification, opening new opportunities for employment and business activities.
- Conservation and Preservation : Awareness of natural and cultural resources helps preserve the territory's heritage, contributing to its long-term sustainability.

Organizations, in their territorial reflection work, have also pondered extensively on the theme of valorization, giving this term an orientation toward essential services that support both old and new citizens in exercising their citizenship. Rural territories are valued by offering them the same opportunities as urban citizens. The project has thus worked on promoting the territory, stripping away stereotypes surrounding rural contexts and reflecting on ways and tools to make them more habitable.

In practice, the project experience has strengthened the community work that organizations carry out in their territories by:

- Encouraging young people and local communities to tell their stories and share their experiences, contributing to dispelling prejudices and showing the territory in all its diversity and complexity.
- Promoting collaboration across different sectors, such as agriculture, tourism, education, and art, to create synergies and opportunities for sustainable development.
- Encouraging ecological practices for territory care, and promoting environmental sustainability as an integral part of rural development.



These actions continue to allow us to inquire and put into practice the knowledge and awareness of the territory, which cannot be separated from the following methodological steps :

Territory Study

Before initiating any activity or initiative, conduct a thorough study of the territory. Gather information on natural resources, local culture, traditions, and challenges the territory faces. This allows for the planning of targeted and sustainable interventions.

Involvement of Local Communities

Actively involve local communities in defining project objectives. Organize meetings, discussion forums, and interviews to listen to their perspectives and needs. This enables adapting activities to the real needs of the territory.

Promotion of Local Cultures

Valorize and promote local culture through events, workshops, exhibitions, and cultural activities. This helps preserve traditions and disseminate knowledge about the cultural roots of the territory.

In conclusion, knowledge, respect, and care for the territory are key elements for the success of any project leveraging the territory and community involvement in European rural contexts.



Luana

Can you introduce yourself?

“ My name is Luana Géhéniaux, and I’m 21. I’ve always lived in the Avesnois area, so I know it well. I’ve been studying in Valenciennes for the past three years, in the audiovisual sector. But I also enjoy many other things: cultural outings, like going to the theater, cinema, but also spending time with people and discussing the world around us.

What’s your background so far?

“ I’ve always lived in the area. I went to primary school in the small villages around my home, in Prisches and Beaurepaire. Then, for secondary school, I went to middle and high school in Landrecies. It’s a bit ridiculous, but at the time, Landrecies was the biggest town in the area, as far as I was concerned. All of a sudden, I found myself in a school with over 1,000 students, which was pretty impressive. I met lots of new people, and I had some really interesting teachers, who introduced me to many, many things.

In high school, I took audiovisual classes, and I was already very interested. The Collectif Parasites came to do a bit of promotion in the school, and at the same time our audiovisual teacher told us about the association, since it works in the audiovisual field and its offices are right next to the high school. I ended up approaching them to do an internship.

It was quite a turning point in my life, because I discovered that the association did much more than just its audiovisual dimension. I became interested in the organization of events and concerts, and met a lot of

people, each with different jobs and backgrounds... *I learned not to close any doors, and to continue doing what I liked, because I was faced with people who had made that choice.*

At the same time, I discovered animation. As a child, I’d spent a lot of time in leisure centers, but I discovered that I could get my BAFA financed, and so do the job I’d been wanting to try for a long time. So I started training and did my first experiences in animation alongside my studies, while continuing to meet people and forge links, notably with the surrounding municipalities. I’ve discovered that I’m a natural in this area; I love talking to people, organizing things, making children smile during their vacations... I really enjoy interacting with people. It went so well that afterwards I decided to become a center director. I started my BAFD, which I’m still taking. It’s a whole new set of responsibilities, a new way of managing time, relationships and actions... You have to constantly anticipate the arrival of children from 5 different communes, manage relations with parents, meals, find inexpensive activities in the area or elsewhere, be creative... I love it!

As well as volunteering with the Collectif Parasites, I’ve also met other organizations that organize events. Now I’m also a volunteer on other projects, often video recording. That’s how I met the association La FLAC, in Marly, with whom I’m now doing my internship. In the end, all this «mishmash» of passions came together; today I’ve managed to create something very concrete out of it, and I think that’s really great.



And so you decided to move to Valenciennes to study audiovisual engineering. What motivated your decision, and your choice of this particular course?

“ Actually, I always wanted to be a vet. From CP to Terminale, I was convinced it was what I was going to do - I did my 3rd year internship in a veterinary practice 5 minutes from home. I went to people’s homes, to farms, and I really enjoyed it. In high school, I met this audiovisual teacher, who put me in touch with her. When I asked around, I saw that there were courses available not too far away. I had applied on Parcoursup for courses in Roubaix, Douai, Valenciennes... I had asked for courses as close as possible to the Avesnois region; I was a little afraid of leaving the area, of ending up in the city... I had prepared myself a little to leave, but when I found out I’d been accepted at Valenciennes, I didn’t hesitate, especially as the degree had been recognized as one of the best in France at the time. I don’t regret it at all, I discovered that the audiovisual industry was even more diverse than I’d thought, and I still love it just as much. For two years I drove every day to get back to Avesnois. It was Covid, but I also had a job here, so I had to get back. It wasn’t easy to manage my schedule, so for the past year I’ve chosen to live in Valenciennes. I still drive back every weekend, because this is where I have my family and most of my friends... In a parallel world, I think I’m a vet, I went to study in Paris, I realized that Parisian life isn’t great, and I opened my practice in Landrecies.

When you think of your region, what comes to mind?

“ The greenery! The vast expanses of grass, the pretty brick and bluestone roadside houses... Last weekend, I organized an integration weekend in the area, bringing 75 people who didn’t know the Avesnois.

It’s really this aesthetic - the wide open spaces, the bricks, the green - that makes an impression on people. The air is much purer than in the city, you realize you still have a lot of space, and there’s this almost wild side in places, which is very pleasant.

And if you had to describe this region to me, what would you say?

“ The Avesnois is everything around Avesnes-sur-Helpe, but it extends far beyond what I originally imagined. There are places that are more than an hour’s drive apart, but which are still part of the territory - something I wouldn’t have imagined even a few years ago. The Avesnois has a number of features in common: stretches of grass, farms, hedges, bits of forest...

What’s it like to be 21 in the Avesnois?

“ It’s special. It’s quiet. Growing up in a peaceful environment for as long as you can remember, then at some point you have to leave and find yourself in the city, confronted with new things. When I talk to my friends who come from the countryside, we have the same experiences: we used to go to the multi-sports ground, play three-a-side with a ball, ride our bikes home, then go for a walk and eat blackberries... My friends from the city didn’t have the same life at all; they went out alone in the city, at night, they had a different kind of autonomy.

And so 21 years in the Avesnois... You’re looking for things to do, it’s not an area where there’s a lot of activity, you have to move around a lot. To do anything, you have to get in your car and drive 10 kilometers. The nearest hospital is over 30 kilometers away, the cinema 25 minutes by car, there’s no bowling alley... There aren’t really any places like that where you can get together with friends and enjoy an activity.

That's why I also appreciate the city, now that I've discovered it: every evening, I can go out to see my friends, meet them in a bar or at the cinema, on a whim... In the Avesnois, when we meet up, it's generally quiet evenings at one or other of our homes - we talk about our lives over a drink or a board game. We're less likely to try to find something to do, or go somewhere. It's less possible.

Is there anything about the area that you particularly like ?

“ It's very human. I live in a village where everyone knows everyone else. I know the first names of all my neighbors, the names of their pets... As soon as I'm in a village, I can see that we've really kept that bond, that natural warmth. In the city, nobody says hello to each other. *In Valenciennes, I don't know any of my neighbors, even though there are a hundred of us in the building!* Here, I feel surrounded, that I can count on lots of people.

Have you identified any weaknesses or shortcomings in the area ? If so, can you think of any solutions ?

“ Yes, that's what I was talking about earlier. We have relatively few activity spaces, we're short of places to get together, spaces where people can get together in a relaxed, spontaneous way. There's a lack of infrastructure, of concrete places. And solutions... There are people who organize events, which take off because people need to get out. We need to create places where people can meet easily, open from morning till night, with a pool table, a dart board, a bar, snacks...

Yet there are social centers, bistros... Don't these spaces satisfy these needs ?

“ It's very special, the bistrot de l'Avesnois... It's categorized. The average age is higher, we'd feel out of place, not really at ease - even though I'm convinced it wouldn't be a

problem and that we'd be welcome! Social centers are like that, full of limits. It's not an open place, there are opening hours, you have to pay membership fees... You only go there if you have a good reason.

How do you contribute to making the region a more fulfilling place for its inhabitants ?

“ I think that through my voluntary work, in lots of associations, I play a part in that. It's important for local associations to motivate residents to create, support and participate. Knowing that we've managed to put on events for over 1,500 people, put on exhibitions, made people happy, makes me proud... Finally, by contributing to all this, I tell myself that I'm a small link in the chain.

Is there a particular event or project that makes you proud ?

“ With the association La Chambre d'Eau, we put together an exhibition for the Eclectic Campagnes festival, and offered guided tours on particular themes. We chose industrialization, even though we were in the middle of fields. We talked about the works, which all had a strong link with industry, very «factory-like», very worked... Since it was so at odds with the environment, it really made people react, and it was very interesting. But overall, I don't know if there's one event in particular that has touched me - every time, events make me very happy, we get great feedback, people are really happy.

Are there any local associations or initiatives that particularly inspire you ?

“ The association La Chambre d'Eau, with whom I set up the exhibition I mentioned earlier, is an association that strives to bring culture and contemporary art to the area. I discovered them thanks to the actions they were proposing at the school. Every month,

the association organized a «third Friday of the month» and proposed something: a film, a puppet show... it was rich, entertaining, and above all it was free. Anyone, from any background, could come and enjoy what was on offer. Afterwards, we'd discuss what we'd seen over a drink or a meal... everyone made an effort to talk to each other, to meet. Later, I learned that they were still doing a lot of things, festivals, shows... And since then I've been volunteering from time to time.

The RECOS project has identified 5 major themes linked to the contributions of socio-cultural associations for young people in rural areas. Do these themes speak to you? Do some seem more important than others ?

“ To me, they're all on the same scale. As far as Europe and international affairs are concerned, I think it's very important to be able to see further, to take an interest in what's going on around us, outside our own territory, but also outside France. I was lucky enough to go to Romania and the Netherlands with my high school. From one culture to another, I discovered many different problems, and also many innovative solutions. *In fact, everyone has their own way of building their world. From one country to another, things change enormously, and I think it's very important to be confronted with this when you're young.*

In today's world, ecology is a universal key to the future. Everyone should make an effort. With my friends, at the events I take part in, preserving the environment is at the heart of many things, of many discussions... We've already talked a lot about rurality; for me it's very important and it fits in with my personal commitment, I'm much more involved here than elsewhere. It's a bit different now with FLAC, which is closer to Valenciennes... But my personal investment in culture and leisure is very strongly linked to the region.

How do you see yourself in the future ?

“ As far as my professional life is concerned, I'm in a sector that you wouldn't expect to be very developed in rural areas. A lot of my friends move to Paris to work in television or in big studios. Right from the start, I didn't see it that way. I preferred to work in small structures, to see what was going on in small associations, to see how audiovisual and related activities could help people. I'd like to do that. To do it here, in my area, and mix it with animation... To find a structure to welcome me, or else create my own, to make a living from my passion and pass it on.

I'm lucky because I've been able to see and discover so many things along the way. I'm young, so I can move through life as I please... I'm sure my path will become even clearer as I meet people !



Youth

Debora and Niki

Tell us a little bit about yourself first ?

Debora My name is Deborah Maslarska, 26 years old, and with me is...

Niki Nikolai Maslarski at almost 30.

Debora In general, we decided at one point to break away from the big city and buy a house in the countryside, because we really like to be surrounded by nature. This for me personally is my biggest inspiration: Being in nature, going out for a walk every day, growing my own food.

Niki And for me it's nature and mainly sports. I've always been an athlete. In general, life outside the apartment. I didn't really like apartment life.

When did you move to the countryside ?

Debora About 3 years ago more officially. But even before that, we often lived outside the city.

Before that, where was your main place of residence and what did you do ?

Debora We used to live in Sofia. We have an apartment there.

Niki Actually, even back when we were traveling, I worked from home, but it wasn't all the time. We officially moved out when the pandemic started. This allowed us to be completely remote. Otherwise, we both lived in Sofia. We worked. My hobbies were sports.

Debora I worked as a teacher in Sofia and already after the pandemic we simply

decided that our place was not in Sofia. And already here we started to deal mostly with developing our hobbies intensively.

When you think of territory, what is the first thing that comes to mind ?

Debora Personally, the first thing that comes to my mind is that this is a very beautiful area that we could show to many people.

Niki Pre-Balkan area. Maybe what I miss is more eco-trails and sights. In general, tourism in this area is not very developed. When we were looking for a house, I really liked a house in a village that was right next to the eco-path and I imagined how I would go running there, but the house itself was in a very bad condition, so we didn't settle on it in the end. I miss sports events, running competitions. Although I recently found out that there is a running competition in the nearby town of Troyan, and I am thinking of signing up next year.

What more can you tell me about the place where you live now - the village of Bulgarene ?

Debora The population here is mainly older people. There are also young people, but they tend to live in the city. The village is between Lovech, Troyan and Sevlievo. In the middle of a triangle. Here, the grandmothers have a kind of community and every morning they get together, talk, spend time together and that's how their day goes. When it's summer, they talk about the garden, when it's winter, they talk about the things that happen in winter, like wood and cooking.

And do they have a place to gather in the winter ?

Debora Yes. Since last year, they have opened a new shop in the village and there is a room there that is heated, and they gather there in the winter. Now we have a new mayor who has promised to build a retirement club. I don't know if that will happen, but there is a group of people who come together every day.

What is it like to live in Bulgaria at your age ?

Debora It is quite interesting for us, because here we met and became quite close with the local people, who teach us extremely interesting things. They tell us about the village before. They teach us about different ways to conserve food for the winter, dishes. They taught me to knit, which is very cool because it is a craft that is typical of our rural areas.

Niki I'm not so detached from my peers because my work is the same as before. I deal with people from bigger cities and from abroad all day long, so I don't feel as local as Debbie, but it sure is interesting. I communicate a lot with the people of the village. I sit down for a beer, in the morning for coffee with them. In general, I feel good.

What is your favorite thing about the village and why ?

Niki The fact that we are in a house and that we have a yard. You're not locked inside all the time. Getting up to go make coffee, I have to leave the house to go downstairs. You're always out.

Debora My favorite is that we have a garden. For me, this is the most valuable thing about being in the countryside. And of course all the things I was taught here related to lutes, sealing jars, etc. We also learn a lot from the

Niki Actually, now that I think about it, when I lived in the city my work was on a computer and I was sitting all the time and I had little movement. While here there is always work to be done around the house. To chop wood, arrange them, light the stove in the morning. There is always some movement. I definitely feel better than sitting all day. At work I'm sitting, then in the car I'm sitting again, then I'm at home and I'm sitting again.

Debora Here we build our own home. We make our own house. With the help of people, of course, but it's somehow more yours when it's out of your hands. Then you enjoy using it.

What would you change ? What solutions to the problems do you see ?

Debora It would be nice if there were more young people, more families living here, because this lack is felt. There are still one or two young families living here. Everything else is old people. I don't know if it directly depends on us and how we can change it. The first thing that comes to my mind is to organize events in the village. Either in the community center or just outside. This would perhaps gather some popularity among young people using the internet. Our community center is very interesting and a project related to it could be done. To tell a story. Even to be used as a cinema.

Niki As I already said, a little more marked trails, sights in the mountains, if they are found. Something to attract more tourism to this part.

Are you in any way involved in improving the environment for the locals ?

Debora We take care of the grandmothers. We buy them things from the city. If they need it, we drive them to the city. Nicky has

become the personal driver of the whole neighborhood. Apart from that, when something is organized in the community center, we are always present, donating labor or money.

Are there local organizations in the area that inspire you ?

Debora Green Association is a very inspiring organization. We really enjoyed finding out in general that it exists. It was a super coincidence that this happened. We really enjoyed the last event you organized. It was very precious to us that you took us to these gardens. And not only. That you gather people from the world and bring them here. You inspire us a lot and we would love to communicate even more in the future.

Our last mobility identified 5 big themes regarding sociocultural action towards youth in rural areas. What theme seems most important to you ? Why ?

Debora Culture is quite an important part, but I'm not sure if it's as important in rural areas. Although it is important to attract young people. And also inclusion and ecology. Because there are many young people who are interested in this topic.

Niki Culture I would say. Because until now I have not felt anything about the area that is typical. At least I don't have that feeling in our village. Perhaps the knowledge has been lost in time.

Debora Although there are dishes here that I don't know if they are exactly typical of the area, but I haven't encountered them elsewhere. It inspires us a lot to see young people like you. Keep working in this direction.



Organization

Tavola Rotonda



What is his name, how old is he, and what does he do in the organization ? If relevant, personal history : what brought him to this organization ?

“ Domenico Curciarello, 55 years old, president and working partner. I have been living in Campo di Giove for over 20 years, where my family and I have managed the Orsa Minore campground.

Can you tell me about this organization (history, goals, target group, activities, human resources) ?

“ The Community Cooperative was established in April 2018 by eight founding members with the aim of meeting the community's needs. We started with around 60 members, fostering a mutual exchange relationship between worker members and user members. Currently, we have over 100 members, including 15 active workers engaged in activities ranging from public and private green space maintenance to the management of hospitality facilities, tourism, agriculture, cleaning, sanitization, and after-

noon activities for kindergarten and elementary students. Human resources are drawn from what the community can offer, and we orient our activities based on capabilities.

Where is the organization located ? Why ? What can you tell me about the territory it operates in ?

“ The cooperative operates in Campo di Giove (AQ) with the aim of creating conditions for young people who choose to stay or return to the village in the future to find fertile ground to work on according to their creativity. The territory is within the Maiella National Park, with high tourist potential, but also rich in untapped resources that contrast with the lack of essential services for residents (mobility, social assistance, recreational and social spaces...).

Our Erasmus project has so far focused mainly on internal areas and young people. What can you tell us about the young people in your territory ?

“ Like all young people, they feel the need



to explore and gain experience elsewhere. However, if they want to return to live in the village, they do not find the conditions to face the world of work with the necessary dignity and adequate quality and quantity of services. ***This is the most challenging task the cooperative has set for itself—creating a «place» to live together with young people.***

Our last mobility identified 5 major themes regarding action and socio-cultural activities for young people in internal areas. On which theme does your organization work the most? What are the reasons behind it?

“ I would say all except perhaps Europe, with greater emphasis on the recovery of rural territory and the protection of the environment and its biodiversity.

Can you tell me more about this project (objectives, methods, stakeholders...)?

“ The project we are currently working on is related to agriculture and its various forms. We have established a community workshop that allows us to complete all the processing cycles of our products independently. This year, the Community Mill has also been activated, a shared space freely available to all residents. These actions aim to stimulate the start of agricultural and educational activities for awareness of healthy and sustainable nutrition. To achieve this, we have relied on the capabilities and knowledge within the cooperative.

Can you tell me about the young people who participate in or benefit from the project?

“ Do they have a specific background? Needs? Aspirations? We find it challenging to involve young people, probably due to a socio-cultural and work-related past that saw Campo di Giove prosper through winter

tourism from the 1970s/80s until a few years ago. This has led to an inability to think participatively as a group, laying the foundations for individualism that has hindered the growth of today's youth with needs and aspirations focused on themselves. This is the most difficult knot to solve and requires a lot of time and effort.

How do you mobilize young people around this project (and the organization)?

“ Through job offers and training.

What kind of results/impact has the project had?

“ The project is young and still in its early stages—currently, no feedback from young people.

What are the main difficulties that the organization/project has to face? What could be the solutions?

“ The biggest difficulty is the lack of national legislation on community enterprises, which unfortunately binds us to being considered by lawmakers as a normal worker cooperative with the consequences one can imagine. It would be enough to recognize our social and economic role within the community.

04

Involvement - Engagement



The term «engagement» takes on significant importance when we discuss the actions and practices promoted by the Erasmus+ program, especially concerning youth. This theme represents a key element to be transversally promoted in projects applying for Erasmus+ funding. It is explicitly highlighted in 2021-2027 programme as a crucial element to provide young people with :

- The opportunity to engage and learn to participate in civil society, offering paths of commitment not only in their daily lives but also in democratic life, aiming for significant civic, economic, social, cultural, and political participation of young people from all backgrounds, with particular attention to those with fewer opportunities.
- The opportunity to develop digital skills and media literacy (especially critical thinking and the ability to evaluate and use information) to increase their resilience to misinformation, fake news, and propaganda, as well as their ability to participate in democratic life.
- The opportunity to participate in decision-making processes at the local, regional, national, and transnational levels.

The geographical contexts where the project partners of RECOS operate, namely rural and internal areas, enrich the term «youth involvement» with multiple dimensions of challenge and complexity. It is more challenging to involve young people in contexts with a lower prevalence of educational, cultural, and employment services, where the average age is higher than in urban contexts, and where social and cultural participation levels are proportionally lower than in urban centres. It is more challenging to retain young people who rightfully prefer to project their desires and needs into contexts where they have a greater chance of finding answers for their personal development.

RECOS has chosen to speak of youth engagement not in general terms, but by giving this word a more specific meaning: youth engagement in European rural contexts. Rural communities, to remain vibrant and regenerate, need to be nourished with new knowledge and citizens who must be cared for, offering real services and spaces for participation. This prevents these areas, spread throughout

Europe, from becoming places of the past, perfect for a historical reenactment of their peculiarities and traditions, but where history is static, and development processes are oriented towards the past. Youth engagement can offer the opportunity to build intergenerational bridges for knowledge transfer and give these territories future socio-economic perspectives, starting from their territorial peculiarities, offering them a new innovative and creative impulse.

However, the tools used in this process are crucial. Often, frontal and standardized methods are applied that not only produce no results but also discourage local entities from attempting youth engagement processes. It is essential to give relevance to hybrid engagement tools, combining online platforms with offline participatory and peer-to-peer moments that strengthen relational bonds, not only with people but also with places, which must be perceived as their own to build a sense of belonging. Used from the bottom up and with genuinely participatory and almost self-managed methods, these tools allow the reawakening of youth protagonism and the reconstruction of a frayed social fabric for the definition of new policies and projects that influence communities.

In their way, each with its peculiarities and difficulties, the partner realities of the RECOS project promote youth participation through a series of activities and initiatives that increase their social and cultural participation. The goal is to offer tools that make them decision-makers with their own 'collective agency' and create greater awareness of the socio-ecological dynamics of the territories they come from. This is done through an inclusive approach, encouraging active participation in the planning and implementing activities.

RECOS has attempted to achieve this by creating mixed transnational groups, participated in by members of associative staff and young volunteers. Through moments of exchange and knowledge-sharing, they have gained new tools to share and apply in their local contexts. The exchange between Bulgarian, Italian, and French realities has enriched must be perceived as their own to build a sense of belonging. Used from the bottom up and with genuinely participatory and almost self-managed methods, these tools allow the reawakening of youth protagonism and the reconstruction of a frayed social fabric for the definition of new policies and projects that influence communities.



Toolkit Overview

Active Participation

Involving young people in the planning and implementation of initiatives, giving them the opportunity to influence decisions and activities.

Intercultural Exchange

Facilitating exchange between young people from different European regions, allowing them to share experiences, knowledge, and tools to bring back to their local territorial contexts.

Advocacy and Activism

Encouraging young people to become active advocates for rural issues, promoting positive change through advocacy and activism.

Value for Rural Territories

Innovation and Creativity

Youth bring new ideas and perspectives that can stimulate innovation and creativity in rural communities, contributing to the diversification of the local economy.

Skill Development

Involving young people contributes to the formation of a skilled workforce, ready to meet the needs of local businesses and promote economic development.

Long-term Sustainability

Youth involvement in decisions regarding resources and the environment promotes the long-term sustainability of rural communities.

Active Citizens

Efforts to involve young people create more aware and engaged citizens, more likely to care for their communities.

Mihai

Can you tell us about yourself?

“ I am Mihai, I am 23 years old and I was born in Romania. When I was a kid I moved to Italy thanks to my mother, who worked here as a caregiver. Step by step, my father and my brother also moved here. From 2006 to 2019, I lived in Secinaro, where I attended primary school, then, I attended middle school in Castelvechio Subequo and high school in Sulmona and Pratola Peligna. I currently live in Gagliano Aterno.

What has your life journey been so far?

“ Over the years, I first saw a notable crowd of American tourists in this area, but then, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, things changed a bit and, in many respects, it was really hard for the village to deal with this crisis, even if there were also some opportunities. About my life path, I would like to become a masseur, but it is a question mark at the moment... I will take what life gives me. Then, I have other projects in mind, but first I have to concentrate on current problems, such as getting driving licence, above all in a context like that of Gagliano Aterno.

When you think of your territory, what is the first thing that comes to mind? What can you tell me about your territory?

“ Definitely, tranquillity. However, I also think about the lack of services. Luckily, we have a slightly larger municipality nearby which is Castelvechio Subequo, so I also consider myself lucky paradoxically. The other thing that comes to mind thinking of Gagliano and Valle Subequana is the Sirente Mountain, which overlooks our village : it is

there in front of us, majestic and protecting us and it is a spectacle to see it. Obviously, sometimes it is difficult to live in this place, and I am not just talking about the lack of services.

What is like to be age here?

“ Living here, especially when you are young, is quite difficult. At least until you are student, when you have a lot of free time, you have to reinvent yourself a bit and, above all, be creative to create your own opportunities and to find a way to spend your time. But then, when you become an adult, if you do not have the right tools to enter society and grow, you find yourself without the means to emerge from your situation. So maybe a kid, here, has the dual task of having fun and being a kid, but, at the same time, he must think about his future, also starting to enter the world of work in order to be able to do a job at the end of the school.

Maybe in a city there are many more jobs, but, in my opinion, in Gagliano there is a need for more of a broader “sense of work”, that means something linked to industriousness towards your own community. For example, when friends come back for the holidays in the summer, very often they rightly come back just for to have fun, but, for the people who live here every day, sometimes there is also a difference in responsibility towards those who come even just to have fun, because very often even after and evening of fun, they know that tomorrow they also have to do jobs, such as chopping wood. Perhaps, in these contexts, work education (often manual) is perceived more.

**What is your favourite thing about this place, and why?**

“ Intergenerationality: the fact of dealing with generations older than yours and then, growing up, doing it with people younger than you. In my country of origin, I could only do this with relatives or family friends, but here it is the order of the day.

What are some of the territory's weaknesses? What solutions can you image? If you could change anything on the territory, what would it be and why?

“ Habitability, in particular. In Gagliano, there are houses in very poor condition, uninhabitable for various reasons, but also many houses in excellent condition and habitable, which, however, are not rented by their owners who live elsewhere. *So, habitability is not only a weak point, but also a point to start again, because the solution of this problem could encourage people to come and live here, then look for a work (or invent a work) and settle down*, also creating a family. I would like more activities such as pharmacies, etc.

Do you participate in making the territory a more fulfilling are for its inhabitants? If so, how (project, actions, goals...)?

“ Since Luca became mayor of Gagliano I have always made myself available to do anything: cleaning up the streets; act as an intermediary for the MIM guys with Romanians people... I always worked hard. Then, this year, it has been easier for me to collaborate thanks to the civil service, focused on the care of the territory and territorial promotion. In the morning I dedicate myself to civil service and then, in the afternoon, I have to work in the company with my father. With my project I also had a collaboration with the NEO Project, interviewing people who went on walks, providing care for the elderly and

home shopping. *It is wonderful when the various projects meet each other and give life to partnerships that do nothing but good for our village. The more collaborations the better!*

What local actions/organizations inspire you? What do they do?

“ La stanzetta is the one that involved me the most, but we are talking about many years ago (2006). For me it was an inspiration but at the same time it put me in a state of depression because I saw that there were many people, and there was much more frustration comparing with our reality.

Our last mobility identified five big themes regarding sociocultural action towards youth in rural areas. What theme seem most important to you? Why?

“ I think that the involvement and leisure are very important, because, in my opinion, it is in your free time that you manage to involve the community. Involvement and leisure are interconnected with each other. The other three themes come by themselves.

Benedetta

Can you tell us about yourself?

“ I am 25 years old and I have been living in Gagliano for one and a half years. I was born in a village near Lanciano in the Val di Sangro, a very rural but at the same time also very industrialized area in Abruzzo. I like nature and going to the mountains, gardening, being with animals, reading and being in my tranquillity.

What has your life journey been so far?

“ I attended high school in Lanciano and then I moved to the University of Urbino, where I studied physical education. During the pandemic, I left university after discovering the MIM Project, I moved to Gagliano. The reason why I was attracted to Gagliano? As a teenager, I have always been attracted to the life of small realities, not that my native village is large, but the mountain context, also because of my passion for herbs, was certainly decisive. I currently work in a holiday home where I take care of bookings and cleaning. I also do hospitality and, above all, I carry out civil service for the municipality.

When you think of your territory, what is the first thing that comes to mind? What can you tell me about your territory?

“ If I think of Gagliano, I think of the community and the people who live in this place. It is truly a cohesive village, even on an interpersonal level. I have friends who are 80 years old as well as some that are children, and boys and girls my age, and this is beautiful. It is a continuous exchange and the municipal administration works to keep this community cohesive. However, Gagliano has 250

inhabitants, some people decide to leave, some to stay despite the lack of services and thousand conflicts that can be created in a small place, such as old grudges, jealousies, etc. **But despite all this, we always manage to move forward.**

What is like to be your age here?

“ Living in Gagliano is very peaceful, but at the same time very stimulating. I am never bored, there are always things to do. I am busy with the association, with the radio, with the civil service... in the summer you go crazy! There are many people who hang out the village, many events, many activities every day and keeping up with them is sometimes quite stressful. Then, when winter returns you finally return to a quiet and reflective dimension.

What is your favourite thing about this place, and why?

“ What I like most are certainly the people. Maybe here there is much more social control, in the sense that we try not to leave anyone behind. Then the mountains: living in a place close to a protected regional park is stimulating.

What are some of the territory's weaknesses? What solutions can you image?

“ Lack of services and depopulation, which is a problem destined to grow more and more. It is hard to find solutions. **The municipal administration has played a fundamental role in repopulating Gagliano in these years thanks to the many projects implemented in recent years that had repopulation as their target.**



In my opinion, it should always be done through culture, and, in this perspective, different structures are being activated, such as the bookshop and, probably, the bakery. I believe it is also essential to resume traditions: in the Middle Age, Gagliano based its economy on wheat, so, in my opinion, we should return to the primary and then, after having achieved these objectives, we can start thinking about tourism and then, above all, about jobs with the woods with the park. Besides, there is no music, no one who plays music... Regarding this aspect, maybe we could organize music courses with the involvement of our local radio.

If you could change anything on the territory, what would it be and why?

“ Parochialism must be abolished. Enough to wage war between small villages!

Do you participate in making the territory a more fulfilling one for its inhabitants? If so, how (project, actions, goals...)?

“ Since I have lived in Gagliano, I have always been committed to voluntary activities and let's say that my civil service was just a way to pay me for what I already did on a daily basis. From the beginning, I collaborated in organizing events, making posters for the municipality. I was also part of the NEO Project, which offers hospitality for six months, providing a training period in collaboration with university professors from all over Italy, focused on the topic of ecological transition and anthropology applied to territorial development.

Before the NEO Project, I participated in the “Montagna che resiste” (Mountain that resists), a project supported by Abruzzo Region, which consisted of a group of between 15 and 25 boys and girls from the Subequana Valley who met twice a week for two months. In each meeting, we talked about topics as

gender issue, Covid-19, war (Ukraine War just broken out), how we live the inner areas and how to improve them, how we perceive ourselves... and the, in July, there was the caravan of inner areas: we done more than 1.000 km with a van in several inner areas of Abruzzo, mainly between the three Abruzzo's natural parks. And then the radio: I do the show schedule and I am also starting to be a presenter. Probably, I will present an entertainment program in the morning. Another project I would like to attend is the vegetable garden.

What local actions/organizations inspire you? What do they do?

“ The first one I thought of was Contratto Sociale (laugh), but as regards the area in which I live, the CAP for sure. They are a cultural association who deals with artistic residencies and organizes cultural and artistic events, also linked with herbs.

Our last mobility identified five big themes regarding sociocultural action towards youth in rural areas. What theme seems most important to you? Why?

“ **In my opinion, involvement is the most important, to which all the other topics are linked. For example, through culture you can create involvement; through culture you can enhance ecology, Europe and internal areas.**

Dragomir

What is your name, how old are you, what are you interested in ?

“ My name is Dragomir Angelov, I am 29 years old. I think I have a wide range of interests, including music, country life, generally the idea of a better life in every way, and I'm excited about unknown and interesting things.

Tell us more about your journeys in life. Where did you live, what did you do ?

“ I am from Dobrich, since I graduated high school I have lived in different places in Bulgaria. I have lived only in Bulgaria, having passed through most of the big cities such as Plovdiv, Veliko Tarnovo, Sofia. In Plovdiv, I studied at the Agrarian University, majoring in Plant Protection. But I haven't exactly worked on my major for moral reasons. I've worked in restaurants, for herbalists, in gardens for a bit, etc.

And where do you live now ?

“ Right now I have a few more days to live in Vegetarum in the village of Zelen. After that, the plan is to go back to Dobrich for the winter. After the winter, it is not very clear, but I have an idea to get involved a little more with the Green Association.

When you think of the territory you are in now, what is the first thing that comes to mind ?

“ Perhaps if I had to sum it up in one word it would be transit. Because I used my stay here in such a way - to move from one career life to another. I decided it was time to make a change and find satisfaction in my life as a

whole. I had a very good year. I aim to continue in the same direction and spirit and enthusiasm.

Can you tell me a little more about the place ?

“ The place is located on a hill between two villages - the village of Zelen and the village of Tserovo, near Svoge. The cottages themselves are a bit isolated here. This is an old neighborhood, I suppose, in the village of Zelen, which was abandoned. There is only one local who lived here since he was a child and now continues. There are almost no neighbors. You have to walk for almost an hour to reach the village where there are more people. There are houses here and there, people, but they are more solitary. Nature is very beautiful here. Very nice views. But like everything, it has its pros and cons.

What is it like to be 29 years old and live there ?

“ To be honest, I don't consider myself to be the most standard 29-year-old person, but for me, my stay here was very useful. It was very diverse in many ways. And it was very fruitful. Even I know I will miss it.

What is your favorite thing about the area ?

“ Perhaps the purity of nature, of air, of water. I also like that it is close to Sofia. When I get bored, I can quickly move to a more social environment. Because that's one of the things I can miss here from time to time.

Speaking of lacks, what are the things you would change ?



From a natural point of view, I would bring more water to the site itself and more fertile soil. If these things are there, this place will flourish in a unique way. Socially, maybe more people like me and generally in every age group. People who have the desire and intention to live in a similar way. It would enrich the place a lot, I'm sure. Maybe a nice road that is not passable only by jeeps.

How do you participate in making the area more pleasant for the people who are there ?

“ The truth is that everyone here contributes in some way. Everyone pretty much serves the place. So the things we can do are varied. One of the main things I do is keep it clean. And I cook a lot.

Can you name a few local organizations that inspire you ?

“ I like the INTEGRA organization very much, as well as the Green Association. I can't think of any others right now. I really like the reforestations going on around here. Some festival activities. I am inspired when people do what is needed with desire and dedication. *And I think it is necessary to take care of the destroyed nature and the villages, which very soon will have to be filled with people.*

Our last mobility identified 5 big themes regarding sociocultural action towards youth in rural areas. What theme seems most important to you ? Why ?

“ In my opinion, the involvement. Because you can be all these other things, but if you're not really committed to that thing, you're only half in the water.



05

Ecology and environmental action



The climate crisis has alarmed people and politicians around the world since 2017. Environment and climate action are key priorities for the EU now and in the future. The European Green Deal Communication is the European new growth strategy and recognises the key role of schools, training institutions and universities to engage with pupils, parents, and the wider community on the changes needed for a successful transition to become climate neutral by 2050. The European Green Deal, the New European Bauhaus are essential measures for the continent's ecological transition, but without local support, without a mediator at the heart of the territories, it seems to us that public policies cannot be applied effectively. That's why the environment is the second major issue that motivates RECOS.

First, it is important to underline the universal dimension of climate and environmental issues. The preservation of our natural heritage and the fight against climate change cannot be a national affair – global coordination must exist and be implemented. In this context, the RECOS project, which aims to support isolated rural areas in a transformation of practices towards greater resilience, takes on its full meaning. Convinced of our essential role in the transformation of practices, our organizations are already identified as actors of the transition on their territory. Through workshops, participatory work sites, eco-festivals, our structures contribute to mobilizing and raising awareness among residents around ecological projects.

To support our territories in the ecological transition, and in order to contribute to the social and economic revitalization of these territories, our project focuses on supporting the emergence and promotion of cultural, ecological and/or solidarity initiatives carried out by young people. We are convinced that it is through a transformation of our models of

society towards more community that the populations of our territories will develop the resilience necessary to face future political and climatic challenges.

As an outcome of the project we see enhancement of what already exists and development of ecological and solidary initiatives led by young people. Strengthened power to act, eco-citizenship awareness and European feeling among young rural people. The RECOS project aims to develop the skills of the structures organizing local cultural events: eco-design, eco-construction, responsible management of the public, communication, waste, pollution (sound, visual, etc.). To imagine together ways of reconciling environmental responsibility and the dissemination/mobility/internationalization of performing arts. In your hands you hold one of the two productions that came out of our hard work – a Franco-Italian-Bulgarian album-study and the guide to good practices to reduce the environmental impact of cultural events. Through these deliverables we want to reduce the environmental impact of our (and not only) cultural events, raise young people's awareness of climate issues, local issues, European cooperation and establish new eco-citizen initiatives in our territories.

In conclusion we believe what we created with the RECOS project will continue to work and change our territories and the world even after us towards a more sustainable and ecological way of managing initiatives.

Organization

Venets


What is your name? How old are you and what exactly do you do in Venets?

“ My name is Katrin Tsanev, I am 44 years old and I am the owner of Venets biofarm. We are engaged in organic production of fruits and vegetables following the principles of permaculture and restorative agriculture.

How did you get to Venets or it to you?

“ I am half Bulgarian and half German, I grew up mostly in Germany and at one point in my life I discovered the connection with our native village here in Bulgaria. Until then, I had studied political science at the university, but I was interested in EU policy in rural areas and in agriculture, and on this path I also dealt with the structure and situation of agriculture in Bulgaria in general. Mostly from the point of view of nature and sustainability, and mostly from a scientific point of view. *The moment I set foot in this village, I decided that one day I would have to and want to physically do something about this.* And so I started in parallel, while working in similar organizations on the subject of

agriculture and sustainability, to deal with my personal project and build a garden. I found partners and that's how we set out to create our «Venets» biofarm project.

Can you tell me about this organization (history, goals, target group, activities, human resources)?

“ We started with a small team in our first garden and worked in partnership with the Balkan Ecology Project (BALKEP) and other scientific organizations to create a design for a 5-hectare mixed sustainable garden in the village of Todorovo, Pleven region. There we uprooted the old abandoned vineyards of the village and planted pears and other plants to make a permanent plantation that, according to the principles of permaculture, can sustain itself after we have created it with a lot of hard work. The idea is that it doesn't require a lot of human intervention in terms of maintenance and garden health, and so far it's been working out pretty well.

Then we expanded into the Trojan Balkans, where we happened to find land and made

a cherry orchard, many mixed gardens with a variety of shrubs that on the one hand bear fruit, but also have many other functions in the gardens. At the same time, we tried to create a closed production cycle. That is, what we produce as a fresh product, we not only sell it fresh, but also process it. For this purpose, we built a small workshop in Todorovo and a drying plantation, where we also make marmalade, in Vrabevo, which is next to our gardens in the Trojan Balkan. And so now we also make sweets and juices. All our gardens, as well as our products accordingly, are bio-certified.

In the beginning we sold everything only in Bulgaria, now we also export abroad. We work with the crowdfunding.com platform, which is a very interesting model for the realization of production from small producers, because it allows direct contact with buyers in Germany and other countries in Europe, and the transaction takes place through this platform, and so we already sell cherries, quinces there, marmalade and garlic. In this direction, we plan to expand this sales channel and, at the same time, in the local market we are working with small shops for organic products. We do not plan to work with the big chains. We prefer selected small traders and directly with customers.

Besides our personal presence in the markets in Bulgaria, an important part of this is our seasonal baskets. This is a model of community supported agriculture, in which together with several other farms we are trying to build a new relationship between the producer and the consumer in the world, which is more directly connected on the basis of solidarity. Customers are not just customers, but become participants in the process, as they pre-register at the beginning of the year for the entire season. And every week they receive from our products in the form of a basket that we send with fresh products that

that we have in the garden, from our workshops or from other partners with products that do not grow here. And so we are mutually beneficial. We can't say with 100% certainty in advance what there will be in the basket. It requires flexibility and spontaneity on the side of the consumers, who at the same time enjoy this variety and the moment of creativity that is created by finding new and sometimes unknown products in their basket every week. The idea is to build more and more stable partnerships with colleagues, as well as with our customers. This year, for the first time, we are offering the opportunity to adopt a cherry tree. Which also means they buy the produce ahead that will bear that tree. Which helps to generate income precisely in the periods when it is most needed for preparation. And at the same time, for consumers to engage with the process behind farming and the people behind the production of these things.

At the moment we have two volunteers in the winter season, there are more in the summer. As a permanent team, we are about 8 people who deal with the entire structure and all activities.



Our Erasmus project, up until now, has mostly focused on rurality and youth. What can you tell me about the youth in the areas where you work ?

“ I observe that from the so-called Bulgarian population, the people who work for us, especially in the pre-Balkan region, are mostly older people, even pensioners. While in the Pleven region the whole team is younger. We have many workers of Roma origin, who are entirely young people under 30 years of age. And their children also intend to be actively involved with us in the future, which makes us very happy. But it is very important for us that these children finish school first and then whoever wants to come. Because we still need qualified people. Not just people to mine, but people to be able to contact customers, work with excel, etc. *Therefore, we also look at giving them the opportunity to master these so-called soft and hard skills.*

Our last mobility identified 5 big themes regarding sociocultural action towards youth in rural areas. What theme does your organization most work towards ? What are the reasons behind it ?

“ Social and environmental sustainability are at the forefront of this project. I see social sustainability mostly as this inclusion, which is actually the integration of people who are outside the market and outside the village community and without prospects. It is important to me that we contribute to change that. *It also involves working with volunteers from across Europe and other countries, which broadens the perspective of the local population.* For ecology, I think it goes without saying.

How do you manage to reach young people and involve them in your activities ?

“ One way we involve youth is through volunteering. By working with partners on the



one hand, the Green association and on the other, the Green School Village. We accept volunteers for several months at both locations, where they are involved in various activities - in the gardens, in the production of seedlings, renovation of old houses with natural materials and others. The goal is for them to see how a farm works in its entirety from seedlings to the realization of the product and going to markets and events where we present our farm. We also support a solidarity project in the village of Todorovo for the restoration of the cinema together with the Green School Village. We managed to gather a group of local youth to support the cultural activities.

Are there already results from this project with the cinema ? What is the impact on locals ?

“ Although it is early in the project, results are already being seen. The community center in which the cinema is located was on the

verge of collapse, the roof was leaking and it was difficult for anything to happen there. Thanks to this project, the young people found their own offers for repairs and film projection equipment, which gives them the opportunity to both work on a specific project and learn how to create and execute such a thing, along with all the accountability, planning and execution of tasks. A very large part of the renovations have already been completed and 4-5 cultural events were even realized. All this is very much appreciated by the local population, that there are young people who have the desire and are really doing something.

What are the main difficulties that «Venets» encounters working with young people in rural areas ? What are the solutions ?

“ It is difficult to find young staff who are both motivated to work in agriculture and qualified to do something other than picking

potatoes. There is a huge lack of work ethic in Bulgaria and especially in the periphery of the country and rural areas. Which comes from the fact that young people have nowhere to learn. In Germany, every person must and can either go to university or become a craftsman. Like the very word «master» in Bulgaria is empty, because here everyone learns something by himself and is called a «master».

While behind this there must be a whole system and this means that you are a person with experience and systematically study and finally be able to upload what your profession will be in the end. And it is very difficult for us to fill this hole ourselves. We have to find people who are motivated enough ourselves or create motivation and prospects and train these people. Very few people have the desire to live in a village and engage in such a profession of connection with the land. Surely the state can work on the attractiveness of these professions, that it is actually something cool to be a farmer for example. It is also historically driven that the profession itself is very obscure and undeveloped here.

Because during communism everyone was a worker in a very industrialized agriculture and there was no entrepreneurship in agriculture. Now this is something that is still being built anew. Here, everything is very centralized and focused on Sofia and the big cities, and everything else is conducted and in practice is terribly backward. *The profession itself is already completely absent from people's minds. And making it attractive and promising for young people again will simply take a long time.*

Organization

Montagne in Movimento

What is your name, age, and role in the organization?

“ I’m Giulia Ferrante, 31 years old, and I’ve been part of the Montagne in Movimento action-research group since 2019. I’ve been involved in nearly all field activities shared with the group, especially (since 2021) in Gagliano Aterno. Here, I volunteered for a research project in collaboration with the municipal administration. Since the beginning of 2023, I’ve become the vice president of the Montagne in Movimento Association, based in Gagliano, particularly overseeing the NEO project - Nuove Esperienze Ospitali.

If relevant, personal history: What led you to this organization?

“ The events of the last four years are deeply intertwined with Montagne in Movimento. As briefly mentioned earlier, in 2019, I met the individuals with whom we founded MIM because we were all involved, in different ways, with marginalized contexts, particularly in inland and mountainous areas. At that time, it was crucial for me to bring my research out of academia. I realized that the direct beneficiaries of our studies often remained unaware of the fruits of our work, how much they contributed, and so on. I saw MIM as a context where I could address these issues, discuss them with others, both peers and non-peers, and for the first time, build an ethical framework to cope with the limitations of what - perhaps - would be my future work.

Can you tell me about this organization (history, goals, target group, activities, human resources)?



“ Montagne in Movimento was informally established in 2019 as an informal action-research group uniting young social scientists, primarily anthropologists and sociologists, focusing on transformative and applied research in marginalized territories, mainly inland and mountainous areas. *The idea is that social research can serve these territories by placing at its core the immaterial processes that traverse them, starting from the communities that have inhabited, inhabit today, and hopefully will inhabit them tomorrow.*

In 2021, a long-term research project (originally 3 years, later reduced to 2.5) started in Gagliano Aterno through an agreement between the municipal administration and the University of Valle d’Aosta. Raffaele Spadano is a research fellow, and a working group is formed with volunteers, thesis students, interns. During this project, MIM, along with the Spazio Pieno Association, won a grant from the Abruzzo Region for activities aimed at young people. Young generations are a privileged target for MIM, and between January and August 2022, the very young people of

Gagliano Aterno and Valle Subequana were directly involved in the «La montagna che [r] esiste» project, offering training activities in the village on inland issues (from ecological to historical and cultural, to gender issues), and a caravan of Abruzzo mountain villages (13 visits).

From 2022, another project is born to bring young temporary residents for 6 months to Gagliano: NEO - Nuove Esperienze Ospitali, an immersive school for community activation and ecological transition. The project covers living and training costs for participants, involving them directly in village activities and creating conditions for those who want to stay longer. MIM acts as an intermediary between the local community and new residents, facilitating integration and creating spaces for «doing together.» Human resources are a sore point: we are all volunteers. Before forming the association, we managed to work with two people on the «La montagna che [r] esiste» project, while the NEO project (funded by Fondazione HUBRUZZO, SunCity, and, in the pilot edition, Enecta) covers only material expenses to support project activities. The coordinating group has worked voluntarily so far. Besides me and Raffaele Spadano, there is Annalisa Spalazzi and Andrea Massimo Murari.

Where is the organization located? Why? What can you tell me about the territory in which it operates?

“ MIM association is in Gagliano Aterno, and I believe I have explained the reason by recounting its history. Gagliano Aterno is a municipality located in one of the most depopulated valleys in Abruzzo, with minimal tourist traffic. Nevertheless, the community is particularly active. The mayor elected in 2020, Luca Santilli, immediately saw his mandate as an opportunity to change the fate of his village. He recognized the potential of

activating bottom-up processes, involving people as fundamental actors in the realization of immaterial processes that, in various ways, create territorial development. Gagliano is also within the earthquake crater of the 2009 Aquila earthquake, so it is in the process of rebuilding both public and private buildings.

Our Erasmus project has so far focused mainly on inland areas and youth. What can you tell us about the youth in your territory?

“ The youth of Valle Subequana has grown up in total deprivation of essential services, as is the case in all inland areas. Many leave, and indeed, many young people with Gagliano roots are born elsewhere because the last massive waves of emigration were in the 70s and 80s. At the same time, however, there are still many young people under 40, and many have chosen to return to the village after the 2009 earthquake. There are also newcomers who have arrived in recent years, building economic activities and families in the village.





Our last mobility identified 5 major themes related to action and socio-cultural activities aimed at youth in inland areas. On which theme does your organization primarily focus? What are the underlying reasons?

“ We primarily work on the role of culture in local development processes. As social scientists, we believe that providing a cultural interpretation of everything that happens in the territories is essential. Culture is not understood here in a «high» and elitist sense. *Ecology is also related to culture and participation in the management of territorial resources.* For this reason, one of the projects carried out by MIM, particularly by Raffaele Spadano, follows the process of establishing a Renewable Energy Community in Gagliano Aterno.

Can you tell me more about this project (objectives, methods, stakeholders...)?

“ I will talk about the NEO project, which started in 2022. It brings young people to Gagliano Aterno for a temporary period (6 months) with the goal of providing them with multidisciplinary training, both through participation in association activities carried out in the village and theoretically on the topics of inland areas. The project aims to immerse participants in all those immaterial processes studied by anthropology that involve the communities living in villages. The theoretical training is characterized by various appointments that involve the arrival of trainers and experts in the village. Another theme related to the NEO project is ecological transition, as Gagliano Aterno has an energy community. We believe that it is essential to reclaim and manage one's own energy and resources in general.

Can you tell me about the young people who participate in or benefit from the project? Do they have a specific background? Needs? Aspirations?

“ Participants are selected through a call. The recipients are mainly young people from various educational and professional backgrounds. The idea is to create a diversified group where a piece of paper is not important, but rather the motivation that drives participants to have such an immersive experience. We hope for increasing involvement of local young people from Gagliano Aterno and the valley in general, both in the project and related activities.

How do you mobilize young people around this project (and the organization)?

“ We try to integrate participants as much as possible into the community by involving them in projects and activities that can allow them to gain useful experiences in the future. Additionally, after the six months of residency, they can choose to stay. The long-term goal is to create job opportunities at the end of the project.

What kind of results/impact has the project had?

“ Even just the presence of these individuals attracts flows, not just tourists who visit the village but people who stay for a few days and interact with the residents. Then there are results more related to those who stay after the project. The extension of residency beyond staying in the village creates alliances and networks that allow people to remain connected to the project and to people even when they decide to take other paths.

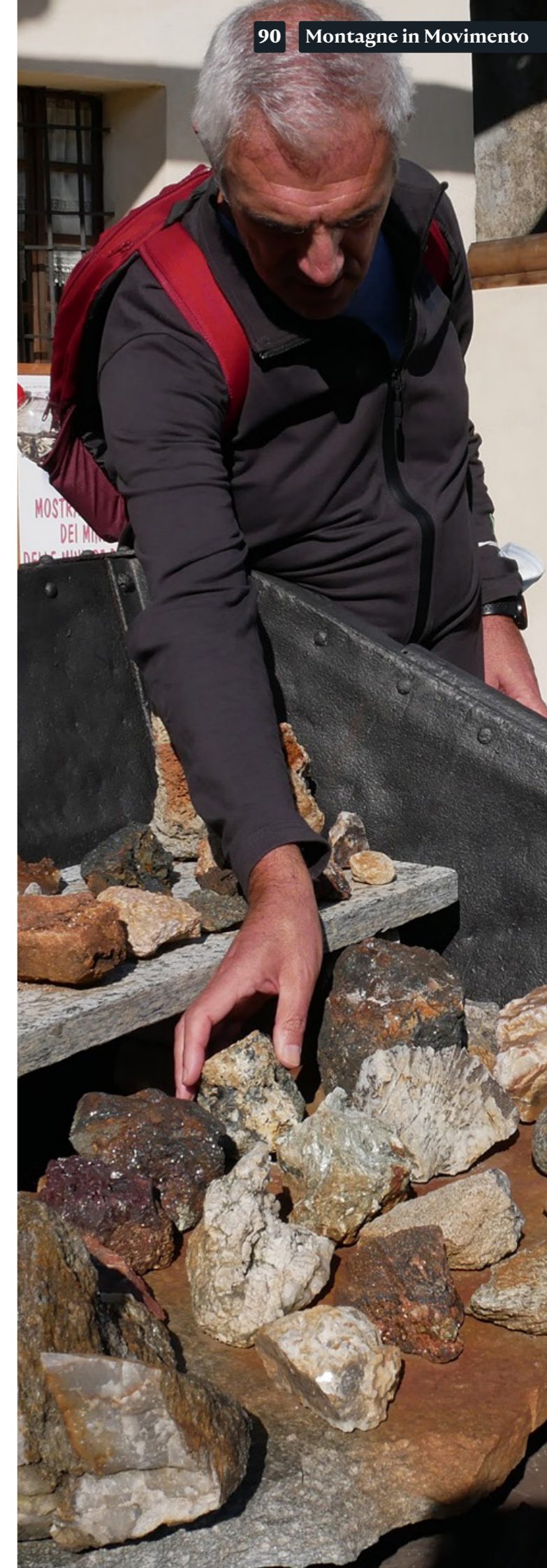
What are the main difficulties that the organization/the project must face? What could be the solutions?

“ The main problem for our organization is making ourselves financially viable. This type of activity takes a long time, and the impacts are not immediately visible. *Results are challenging to quantify because they are immaterial and are based on networks and relationships that indirectly activate concrete things.* The solution is to make the project tellable. Simplifying it. However, we start with the idea that the method of social sciences that we want to apply is to be able to encompass the complexity of the world even in a project that still needs simplification because it has to be organized, shared, and told. Finding the balance between the two is not easy.

In your opinion, how can work on this theme help the youth of inland areas? What benefits would it have for them?

“ The youth of inland areas, those born there or who have grown up there, have often been raised with the idea that the only solution to encounter sociality and young people from other contexts was to leave. Or simply to be commuters. However, what the youth of inland areas actually get to experience is meeting many people their age or slightly older who come and live in the place they have always considered empty without opportunities. It's as if the world and other worldviews arrive right at their doorstep.

Although intangible, we consider this revolutionary. We are talking about close generations finding common ground and starting to do things together. Building future alliances that can make a difference in places with a few hundred inhabitants and perhaps persuade people from different backgrounds to reside there and change the fate of the village culturally and not just numerically.



Conclusion

The Rural ECOSystems (RECOS) project has been much more than a simple cooperation initiative between different partner structures. It has been a powerful catalyst to strengthen links between European rural areas and young people. By focusing on raising awareness on the opportunities offered by each territory, it provided an enriching intercultural experience, revealing the individuals behind each associative project and those who joined the adventure.

Thanks to the Erasmus+ program, RECOS was able to provide a space to exchange on and compare experiences, whether professional, collective or personal. These exchanges brought to light life paths that answer to each other, and associative projects built to be anchor points for individuals and territories. The project also offered a critical perspective on the impact of international, national and regional opportunities on the development of initiatives, while exploring diverse strategies for making projects viable and creating spaces for experimentation.

Most of the collaboration on the "Dialogues" deliverable took place online. The experience was an interesting opportunity to continue confronting the major ideas raised during our mobilities with our territories, partners and target audiences. The interviews, valuable sources of information and privileged spaces for conversation, enabled us to re-emphasize the common issues formalized during our face-to-face collaborations, and to consolidate our positions.

These encounters gave us an insight into the difficulties and opportunities of each of the participating territories, drawing strong parallels between the diagnoses. Consider, for example, the impact of mobility-related problems in all the areas we met, or the

depopulation issues in Bulgaria's pre-Balkan region, which resonate strongly with the demographic challenges facing the Vestina area... At the heart of these major problems lies a common thread: the flight of the younger generation.

What RECOS reveals, beyond the concomitant diagnoses of the three participating territories, is the fundamental importance of the attractiveness of territories for their young inhabitants. A region that fails to meet the needs of its young people in terms of employment, housing, but also in terms of social life, cultural offerings, leisure activities and opportunities for encounters, ends up losing them. And what becomes of a rural community without its young people? Without the prospect of renewal? Of transmission?

The discovery of the Staro Stefanovo region offers an impressive vision of an area depopulated by dynamic age groups. The interviews and visits conducted during the Bulgarian mobility program testify to the ever-increasing aging of the population, the lack of job opportunities and the general flight of young people to the country's two major cities. The solution found by our partners and a variety of other local players (farms, for example) is to focus on European volunteering projects! Bringing young people into the heart of villages, even on a short- or medium-term basis, appears to be one of the solutions for revitalizing towns, services and social ties.

While the project's name, "Rural ECOSystems", was already based on the premise that the vitality of European rural areas depended on strong interdependence between the various stakeholders in the area (political bodies, local economic, social and social players, young people and other residents), experience confirmed the need to maintain social proximity, and the fundamental importance of citizen involvement in rural dynamics.

As a result, socio-cultural, cultural and social structures emerge as essential in their role as federators, mediators, creators of public participation spaces and local expression and encounters... Associations are key links in the equilibrium of these rural ecosystems.

In short, the RECOS project has left a lasting legacy by strengthening ties, stimulating thought processes and inspiring ongoing commitment in the territories involved. Its impact extends far beyond the borders of the involved organizations, and continues to inspire new initiatives and collaborations for a more dynamic and sustainable rural future.



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