
Providing services in inner areas: challenges and solutions

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ABSTRACT

A testimony from two small towns in the north-western Italian Apennines: the reception centre of the Municipalities of Fontanigorda and Rovegno, in Liguria Region. The geographical and social context in which the two small towns are located has been defined as Inner Area: a territory characterised by abandonment, distance from services, lack of opportunities and serious depopulation. Because of this, in 2015 the two municipalities have been involved in the National Strategy for Inner Areas promoted by Italian Government: it was a good opportunity to start imagining new development strategies to make these areas more attractive. The establishment of a reception centre for asylum seekers and refugees in 2018 was initially viewed with fear by the local community, but gradually it has become an opportunity to rethink the methods of provision of services to citizens and to experiment with innovative practices in which the beneficiaries of reception become providers of services to citizens with a reversal of roles.

Introduction

When the immigrant reception project was announced in 2017 to the inhabitants of the little villages of Fontanigorda and Rovegno, it was a cold and stormy day, exactly like the reaction of people.

At that time Margherita Asquasciati was the Mayor of the village of Fontanigorda. She put together all the community and said that our Valley would host an immigrant reception project. As for myself, I was about to become social operator and teacher within the two reception centres that were about to be open shortly after that announcement.

The reaction of the population was very strong. There were people shouting: *«I won't be able to leave my children on the street to play anymore!»*

There were women who said: *«We can't go out at night anymore!»*

The panic spread and the message was very clear: “we don't want them”. This reply was especially from young people. Old people lived the war, emigration and the time of after-war and they were not scared by immigrants. They tried to persuade young people to be sensible, but without success.

The building for men reception has been located in the little village of Casanova, about 2km from Fontanigorda. Before immigrants' arrival, that house was seriously damaged by unknown people, who came in the night and broke all the water pipes.

Problems arose also for us operators, despite living in the villages of the Valley and knowing all people and the social context quite well.

Therefore, the challenge was very ambitious and the solution we have thought in that period was articulated in five points:

1. Don't forget that the first job to do was *"to prepare the ground"*.
2. Accept people's fear of *"unknown"*, which is not an easy feeling to manage.
3. Leave time to people, an element that was important because, after the first moment of aggression, a moment of curiosity appeared.
4. Start answering people's questions and reassuring them, also starting from our personal experiences.
5. Try to play down, to go out of the *"collective drama"*.

I would like to tell you a funny little episode. One afternoon, before the first beneficiaries arrived, some men called me and said they wanted to offer me a coffee. I accepted and I already knew they wanted to ask me something. Indeed they asked me some questions about immigrants and I answered.

Italy still has a strong patriarchal tradition and culture: women at home and men at work. This does not happen everywhere, but in our small villages in the Ligurian hinterland the situation is often this.

So, when they asked me: *«Claudia, tell us, what can African boys do all the day here?»*

I answered, speaking very seriously: *«African boys will do many things. Among others, they will organise a course only for Italian men, during which they will teach them how to cook, sew, use the iron for clothes, and how to clean home.»*

There was a moment of silence, perhaps ten seconds, the men looked at each other, then one begin to laugh and they all understood that I was joking.

Thus, one day the first two Nigerian boys arrived, and then other very young boys, from Senegal, Ghana, Gambia, Mali, Guinea Bissau, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sudan and families too, from Somalia and Nigeria.

The contact among people solved the situation. Our work was to facilitate meeting and integration. As soon as the stranger began to speak or smile at someone, it was as if a giant iceberg had melted in an instant.

Now our guests have friends and the native people of village are part of their lives. During last years many friendships were born between Italians and non-Italians. SAI beneficiaries find work and often they choose to live in the Valley, where they can look for a house to live in, that is not so expensive as in the city.

Problems arise when the beneficiaries decide to go and live in cities. It is very difficult to find a house in Genova. People don't trust foreigners, even if they have a good employment contract. In some cases it has been necessary that we personally guaranteed for the rental of a house. It is a great problem, we think the most serious critical issue.

In a little community the problems can be solved because of the power of relationships, because day by day people have time to build meaningful social relations.

In cities, it is different, especially in this moment.

1. The context

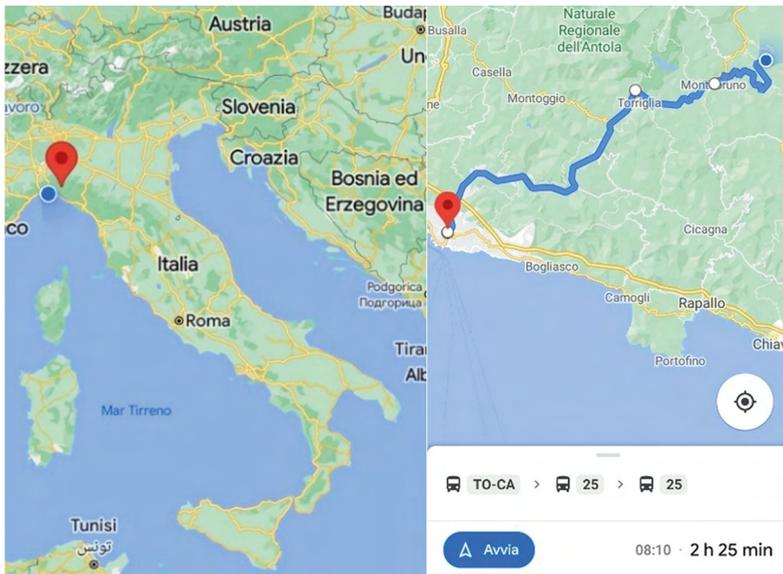
1.1 The geographic context

The living testimony in the introduction, offered by Claudia Priano, social operator and teacher in the reception centre of the municipalities of Fontanigorda and Rovegno, well represents the difficulties encountered when starting asylum seekers and refugees' reception, also partly due to the geographical and social context.

Fontanigorda and Rovegno are two small towns within the Liguria Region in North-Western Italy.

These small towns are located in the mountain context of the Trebbia Valley, situated around 800m above sea level, and 50 km far from Genova, the closest city offering essential services, such as hospitals, railway stations and high schools. It takes 1 hour and 30 minutes by car, and more than 2 hours with public transport to reach the centre of Genova from the Trebbia Valley.

Figure 1. Location of Fontanigorda and Rovegno and journey from Fontanigorda to Genova with public transport



Source: Google maps

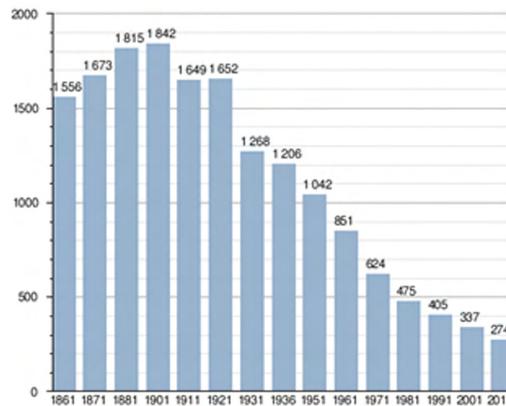
Over the last 100 years, people resident in the valley have migrated to large cities and also to other countries, due to the distance from services and to the lack of job opportunities.

The populations of Fontanigorda and Rovegno have drastically decreased and now are reduced to 244 and 492 residents respectively.

Population loss caused the abandonment of the territory, the creation of a stock of unused buildings and, above all, the progressive reduction of public services: many little local schools have been closed, public transport rides has been drastically reduced, and the same happened to healthcare from general practitioners in small outpatient clinics.

The perception of citizens is that they have been progressively abandoned by the institutions and the news of the establishment of a migrant reception centre has been experienced as yet another lack of attention towards them.

Figure 2. Population decline in Fontanigorda



Source: Wikipedia

1.2 Involvement in the National Inner Areas Strategy

As a consequence of the described territorial and demographic characteristics, since 2015, the Trebbia Valley has been included in one of the first «Project Areas» of the Italian National Strategy

for “Inner Areas” (SNAI) - an innovative policy for development and territorial cohesion to counteract marginalisation and demographic decline within “Inner Areas”.

Inner areas are in fact defined as territories characterised by a not adequate offer of and access to essential services to ensure a certain level of active citizenship among population, substantially far from urban centres able to supply adequate health, educational and transport services.

Nevertheless, these areas are rich of history, tradition, art, beautiful landscapes and biodiversity, and are strategically relevant to foster a more sustainable and inclusive national growth.

The Inner Areas National Strategy (SNAI) has a national dimension, but also follows a multilevel governance framework (State – Regions – municipalities). It is declined through selected project areas, including different municipalities. For each selected area a local strategy is implemented.

Each local strategy foresees the implementation of services (through national policy) and investments in development factors (regional policy), with a multi-fund attitude (EAFRD, ERDF, ESF and national funding) and a participatory approach to local development.

Figure 3. The 72 selected project areas of the national inner areas strategy

Source: SNAI

Fontanigorda and Rovegno have been included in the project area named “Valli dell’Antola e del Tigullio”. During the construction of the strategy several focus groups were held, with the involvement of local actors and entities providing services for citizens. It has been an excellent opportunity to imagine new ways of developing these mountain territories starting from a new model of sustainable tourism, focused on outdoor sports (especially mountain biking and sport fishing).

The focus was also the construction of new services for citizens, calibrated on the real needs of these territories consistent with the idea of sustainable development designed for the area and foreseeing the use of new technologies to overcome the distances from distribution centres (e.g.: substantial investments for the elimination of the digital divide, provisions of distance learning for local schools, telemedicine and remote referral etc.).

1.3 Involvement in SAI, the Italian public system for the reception of the asylum seekers and refugees

In the above-described socio-spatial context, made up of fragility but also new stimuli and opportunities derived from the implementation of SNAI, the activity of the reception centre of Fontanigorda and Rovegno started in January 2018, as a part of SAI (System of Reception and Integration), the Italian public system for the reception of the asylum seekers and refugees.

SAI has been funded 20 years ago by public bodies as Ministry of the Interior and ANCI (“National Association of Italian Municipalities”) and it is voluntarily activated and managed by local authorities - municipalities either individually or in association among them or with other institutions exercising public functions of local interest - with the implementation of local reception projects.

The primary objective of SAI is to provide support for each individual in the reception system, through a personalised programme designed to enable that person to regain a sense of independence and thus enjoy effective involvement in the life in Italy in terms of employment, housing, and access to local services, social interaction and scholastic integration.

Figure 4. Project logo of the local reception centre and a view of the dismissed school of Fontanigorda



Source: Own illustration

The reception project of the associated municipalities of Fontanigorda and Rovegno provides for a total of 12 places, divided into two residential structures. The two residential structures are both hosted in public-owned properties: the abandoned school of Casanova di Rovegno and the teacher's home at the second floor in the building of the abandoned school of Fontanigorda. Both have been dismissed after the closing of local primary schools about thirty years ago, as a result of depopulation. Now both of them have been restored thanks to SAI funds and have found a new destination.

1.4 New challenges arise from the geographical and social context

As clearly emerged from the story about the beginning of the project and the distrust of the inhabitants, it was not easy to imagine how to combine the fragility of the people welcomed with the fragility of a left-behind territory which is far from the city, subjected to depopulation and in which services are progressively cut off as the population decreases.

For the reception project the first challenge was to ensure access to services as requested in the SAI manual (health, public

transport, education) for the received people in a territory in which indigenous people have often no access to many services. Some significant, but not exhaustive, examples are the following:

- Public transport, connecting the villages of the valley with each other and with the centre of Genova is limited to few bus rides;
- Health services are inadequate and the closest hospital is located in Genova;
- Education is limited to one multi-class primary school and lower secondary education; both are located in Rovegno. Secondary schools are all located in Genova.

The next challenge, once the first has been resolved giving services to the beneficiaries, was and is to avoid creating inequalities between the services that are provided to the beneficiaries of the reception project and those the native residents have access to.

This potential inequality in access to services, in fact is unfair and, in addition, can cause a deep resentment and rejection towards the hosted beneficiaries in resident citizens, who cannot use the same services.

Therefore, our constant attention was to ensure that the services gradually created for the beneficiaries could be made available to the entire local community and this was present in each single challenge we had to deal with. In the following chapters some of them are described.

2. Challenges and solutions

2.1 Challenge: how to ensure adult education in Fontanigorda and Rovegno?

Adult education is one of the services that have to be granted to all the beneficiaries in the SAI system, according to the Operative Manual.

In Italy, the Provincial Centres for Adult Education and training (CPIA) are responsible for this service: they provide literacy and Italian language courses as well as primary and lower secondary education (compulsory education).

The closest CPIA to the municipalities of Fontanigorda and Rovegno is located in the city of Genova, and offers only afternoon and night classes. It's not possible to reach CPIA in Genova from the Trebbia Valley with public transport. In fact the bus ride takes more than 2 hours and it is not possible to come back home after the lesson, as there is no bus service late in the evening.

The solution found to guarantee the service is the so called "AULA AGORA", a mixed online/in-presence education programme to ensure adult basic educational opportunities at the local level.

The operation can be described as follows: students remain in the territory in the so called "Aula Agorà", which has been created in the hall of the municipal council in Fontanigorda, while teachers are connected from the CPIA, located in Genova and a tutor is present in the classroom to help students to interact with teachers online. Students' attendance is regularly registered.

This method was firstly presented during the Inner Areas Strategy implementation in 2015, but has been used for the first time in the SAI project in Fontanigorda during 2020-2021 school year.

Figure 5. Lesson in the municipal council hall of Fontanigorda during Aula Agorà activity, 2021



Source: Own illustration

The results obtained during the first year of experimentation (school year 2020-2021) were consistent:

- 5 beneficiaries obtained the diploma of lower secondary education in June 2021;
- a social operator, who worked as a tutor in Aula Agorà decided to study and obtained an important Certification for Didactics of Italian as a foreign language “DILS-PG II level” in December 2022;
- CPIA teachers in Genova have acquired skills in distance learning, since none of them had similar experiences of teaching before collaborating with our reception centre.

During the following school year (2021-2022), the focus was on consolidating the activity and opening it up to the local community. The opportunity to attend CPIA lessons in Fontanigorda was thus offered to local adults, who attended lessons together with beneficiaries of the reception centre.

AULA AGORA' has now become a stable service for citizens who live in Fontanigorda and, more in general, in the Trebbia Valley, as it has been recognised by the regional superintendency for studies, the local branch of the National Ministry of Education.

2.2: Challenge: how to ensure professional training?

Given the lack of education services in the Val Trebbia area, guaranteeing on-site vocational training is also a problem. No training institutions are present in the valley, since they are all in Genova.

In this case, the solution we found came through the use of a local resource: a professional forest operator living in Fontanigorda, who has a forest instructor license.

It was thus possible to organise a theoretical and practical course for the safe use of the chainsaw. The surrounding area, in fact, is particularly suitable for forestry.

Figure 6. a moment of the practical lesson on the use of the chainsaw



Source: Own illustration

Thanks to a certification by the Liguria Region, this activity has been recognised as the first didactic module (F1) of the professional training course for forest operator. Furthermore, this training is also valid as specific training for safety in the workplace, which is mandatory.

This qualification was subsequently useful to some of the beneficiaries in their job search and it was very appreciated by employers.

The beneficiaries of the reception project found themselves having a qualification that the local forestry operators do not yet have.

Also for this reason, then, this training has been subsequently opened to local participants, as done for the school activities.

2.3 Challenge: how to grant support for job placement?

Job placement support is another of the services that must be guaranteed to beneficiaries of SAI reception. This is particularly complicated in the Val Trebbia area, due to the total absence of large production activities and other economic realities.

In fact, due to depopulation and abandonment, the local production realities are few and fragile, mainly family-run.

In addition, in the local context there is not an unitary organisation (like in Genova) for the coordination of extra-curricular internships and other work experiences that can be offered to beneficiaries of reception as paths to approach the job market.

It was therefore necessary to create from the beginning personalised work inclusion paths with local small companies (in agriculture, hydroponic fish farming, restaurants, building, etc.) located in the valley, but also and with centres of expertise in the city, such as Genova Aquarium, previously contacted during the co-planning activity carried out as part of the National Strategy for Inner Areas.

The reuse of abandoned tanks for trout breeding was in fact an action included in the local inner area strategy, as a support to sport fishing. A start-up company of hydroponic fish farming, that reused the abandoned tanks in Fontanigorda, hosted a training of a beneficiary, who also had the opportunity of a work experience at the Genova Aquarium.

Some beneficiaries were able to carry out work inclusion courses in agriculture, for example in an apple production farm with the recovery of local species and an eco-sustainable cultivation system.

Other personalised work inclusion paths were held in landscaping and cleaning thanks to a social cooperative based in Genova, but

already operating in the territory of Trebbia Valley This is a social cooperative that carries out an important inclusion activity in favour of people with different fragility and at the same time has achieved great professionalism in the care of green areas.

Figure 7. Work inclusion paths in apple production, in fish breeding (Genova Aquarium), landscaping



Source: Own illustration

The creation of various work inclusion pathways, bringing together subjects who did not know each other, also trying to accommodate the vocation and aspirations of each individual beneficiary and the needs of the host subjects, was a huge effort but it produced several positive results.

The first result achieved was, of course, the training in action of the beneficiaries, who were able to test their skills, acquire new skills and establish personal relationships with employers, who, in several cases, subsequently hired them.

On several occasions, for example in construction, catering and landscaping, the beneficiaries of the hospitality project have had the opportunity to work together with people living in the valley. Working together has been a powerful means of inclusion and a stimulus to improve and helped erase the distrust of the local population.

In some cases, the presence of the beneficiary in small, sometimes family-owned businesses helped to support the activity and stimulate growth projects.

Finally, thanks to the involvement of the beneficiaries in the social cooperative that carries out green cleaning activities, they have carried out activities of public utility for the local community.

2.4 Challenge: underused public library

The involvement of beneficiaries in public utility activities for the local community was even more significant in the revitalisation of the small municipal library of Fontanigorda. This was substantially underutilised due to lack of human resources, and it also needed to be made more welcoming and usable. At the same time, there is a need for meeting spaces and cultural stimuli especially in the winter months, when few people remain in the village.

The revitalisation of the library began in 2020 thanks to a group of volunteers, including some members of the city council and with the involvement of residents and tourists.

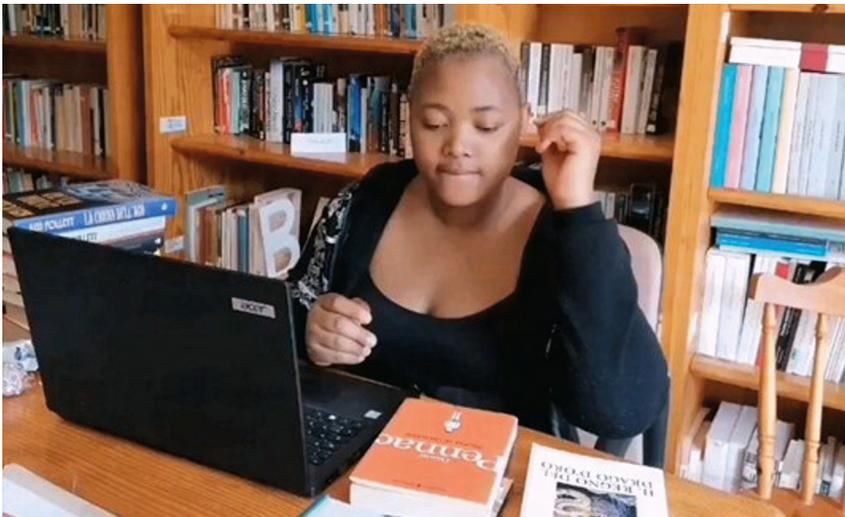
The opening was initially guaranteed thanks to the collective utility project of a citizen receiving Citizenship Income – a welfare measure provided by the State, – but soon the presence of this person and other volunteers was joined by the work inclusion path of a beneficiary of the reception project.

Even in this case, there were many results and benefits for the community: the library opens to the public for consultation and loan, but also for homework, drawing, playing and meeting. The loan service increased (almost 200 in 2022) and, thanks to the work of the beneficiary, also a digital book database was created with more than 2200 books included.

At the same time, the beneficiary acquired digital skills in uploading data and improved her level of Italian.

Even more important was the network of relationships that grew up around the library: many activities, such as reading workshops for children, reading groups for adults, an active cooperation with the local school, but also the simple daily work together, helped to build meaningful personal relationships.

Figure 8. A beneficiary uploading data in the library during a work inclusion paths



Source: Own illustration

2.5 Challenge: a CULTURAL HUB in an abandoned school?

A similar case of a public property to be reused concerns the old classrooms of the primary school, located on the first floor of the building that houses the reception centre of Fontanigorda.

This abandoned space met the need of a place for smart-working for people who want to stay in the valley in search of a more sustainable life, but also the need of a space for temporary exhibitions and activities for fruition of digital contents.

The result was the creation of two new collective spaces for the community in the old abandoned school classrooms:

- FontaLAB: A digital museum-educational laboratory, promoted by a doctoral student in digital humanities from the University of Genova;
- FontaWORK: A shared space for work and study.

Figure 9. FontaLAB and FontaWORK during summer 2022



Source: Own illustration

This reconversion was possible thanks to a set of combined actions:

- The renovation and furnishing of the spaces was financed by the National Operational Programme on Legality ;
- Internet connection has been granted by the «Banda Ultra Larga» national programme (BUL) that was included in the local Strategy for inner Areas (SNAI);
- Know how and networking for the coworking space were provided by Southworking Association, that promotes

new ways of working starting from the territories and enabling a new balance between personal and professional life;

- Coworking space management was guaranteed by Fontamici APS: an association of young people who aim to promote social innovation and growth in Fontanigorda and its territory;
- Daily opening and on site assistance was guaranteed again with a personalised work inclusion path for a beneficiary of SAI;
- FontaLAB design was realised by a doctoral student in digital humanities from the University of Genova.

Some first important results during the first year of opening (2022) were reached.

FontaLAB hosted educational activities for children within the European project LIFECLAW for the protection of native crayfish but also activities of summer camps.

It hosted also a Hypermedia temporary exhibition on ancient local production made with the contributions of local school students and designed by the doctoral student in digital humanities.

FontaWORK opened to the public of the new coworking space in July 2022. More than 100 presences were reached during summer 2022. Many university students and workers extended their stay in Fontanigorda thanks to the possibility of using this space.

Conclusion

Based on our experiences, which have been widely exposed in the text above, some general conclusions can be drawn to highlight key points that can be useful to make other similar contexts understand the potential value of immigration in small towns. In particular, we want to stress that:

- Small towns in inner areas can be places of experimentation for innovative practices and, in this sense, hospitality is an opportunity for development and innovation, which can involve and enhance a large set of local resources;
- A strong alliance with the city's centres of expertise (CPIA, Regione Liguria, University of Genova, Coop. Il Rastrello, Genova Aquarium) proves to be crucial for the success of our reception project, as well as the complementarity with other projects and funding sources, as in particular PON LEGALITA', LIFE and SNAI;
- Reception of asylum seekers and refugees can allow to put at use abandoned public assets (accommodation for the teacher and classrooms of abandoned schools, library, abandoned tanks for trout breeding...);
- New services calibrated on the real needs of the territory have to be conceived and, within this context, beneficiaries of SAI themselves made available to the local community some of these services, directly participating in their creation and producing a role reversal, so that the beneficiary of the reception becomes the provider of services for and with the local community.

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