

Appennino l'Hub: accompanying communities in the Inner Areas towards Inhabitants

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"The inhabiting enterprise is the enterprise that builds its own place. Local enterprises, which stay in a place or use its resources, are no longer sufficient. Places need engineers, builders. The Inhabiting Enterprise builds by involving everything that constitutes its place in its production and business processes.

The key word of the Living Enterprise is 'transformation'. One must access the homes and things of places by being allowed to make new things out of them: for new utilities, new beauty.

*Only by being **places in the world** can countries be found and be places for new aspirations".* (Giovanni Teneggi, Scientific Coordinator Appennino l'Hub).

Where to start

The Inner Areas cover 60% of the Italian territory, include 4200 municipalities and are home to 13 million people, 22% of the Italian population.

These are fragile areas that suffer from a lack of basic services, such as schools and health services. They have mobility problems due to their geographical location, aggravated by poor transport links, but above all they offer limited employment opportunities for their inhabitants, who are forced to move to larger urban centres and in the most extreme cases to relocate permanently.

This is combined with the difficulty of finding quality training in the area and services to support business start-ups. In addition, these are territories that experience progressive and constant depopulation, especially of young people, which prevents generational change.

Not to mention the lack of all those activities and services that could stimulate a return process such as digital and broadband coverage, but also libraries, community gathering spaces and cultural activities. Something to make the place identifiable and unique.

Yet, the pandemic has accelerated a process of return and rediscovery of these territories, particularly of young people in the 25-40 age group, and many initiatives are in turmoil.

A large part of the inhabitants and communities of the *Inner Areas* are willing to take action both individually and collectively to generate wellbeing for their community, in concert with the public administrations and territorial bodies already active in the area such as trade associations and LAGs, reactivating essential services, regenerating spaces and places for residents and outsiders to socialise, and creating job opportunities that will allow inhabitants to stay and live in the inner areas.

So, what if we stopped for a moment seeing everything that doesn't work and imagined the Apennines as an experimental laboratory of opportunities for innovators, activators and creatives?

What if, instead of imagining the ridge as a marginal territory, we imagined it as a link between the east and west of the country, also recovering the value that these territories had in the past as a connection and crossroads between the two seas?

By changing the approach to the narrative about these areas, the narrative about them could also change and become an incentive for people to choose to live there. We can thus speak of the 'aspirations' of the inhabitants as an engine for local development.

So far, in fact, if you look for an indicator of the innovation rate of the *Inner Areas*, you will not find it. Small businesses that resist, reopen or open to offer basic services such as bakeries, pharmacies, shops, farms, are not seen as 'innovators'. Yet they are the economic foundations of these territories and their livelihood.

It is not about innovation, but about resilience and restiveness for those who decide to start an economic activity in marginal and mountainous territories.

Actually, even a bakery in an indoor area can become an innovative business, as we will see in a moment. The challenge is to make it understood outside.

Accompanying Communities

The regeneration of the Apennines and *inland areas* passes through a profound rethinking of the development model of communities and territories in a transformative and coordinated key, carried out by 'inhabitant economies', capable of transforming and shaping the territory they inhabit.

Indeed, through the development of innovative inhabitant enterprises, living conditions can be improved, employment can be developed and basic services can be regenerated in villages, enhancing the richness of places and communities.

This process, which ranges from awareness to the implementation of innovative forms of enterprise, requires an accompanying process, which is often absent or does not provide the necessary tools tailored to the specificities of the territory in which one works.

Accompanying communities means knowing how to listen to them, not only in their needs but also in their vocations and aspirations. It also means knowing how to define with them the paths to take without reference models but with good examples from which to draw energy and new visions of the future. Creating solid enterprises that enable the capacities of places and participation in a social and economic renaissance of the Inner Areas.

These community economies are the **Imprese Abitanti**, as Giovanni Teneggi, director of Confcooperative Reggio Emilia and scientific coordinator of the Apenninol'Hub project, called them, *"i.e. instruments of reconciliation between the citizenship and economic dimensions. The real and lasting development of a territory can only be achieved by combining these two aspects: a citizenship that is truly a protagonist and an economy that is useful for the wellbeing of the community. It is therefore difficult to say whether these are social experiences that develop economies or economies that produce relations and social cohesion, and to tell the truth we care little. The result is a sustainable and competitive enterprise in contexts where resources are more difficult to access."*

Activating Living Enterprises is what Appenninol'Hub aims to do.

The project was born in 2019 and has its roots in field experience, in a small village in the valley on the border between Marche and Emilia-Romagna, San Leo. The Marecchia Valley, a border territory made up of spurs of rock and seas of stone, with its fairytale-like vertical fortresses, is experiencing a

moment of community ferment and the launch of the project coordinated by Figli del Mondo to activate Economie Abitanti, AppenninoliHub, could only start from here.

Designing a process

We tell you about this project with the story that gave it life, that of the Fer-menti Leontine Cooperative of San Leo (RN), inland area Alta Valmarecchia. A story of encounters, relationships, but also of concrete actions to support the birth, financing and development of a community-impact living enterprise.

San Leo, one of Italy's most beautiful villages, a symbol of the Montefeltro landscape and the scene of historical, literary and mythological tales for centuries, welcomes, on average, 75,000 tourists every year.

There are eight restaurants, a small grocery shop and a couple of handicraft shops. Less than 3,000 inhabitants.

Yet despite this outward attractiveness, the community of San Leo had a wound, a raw nerve. Like many inland towns, the inhabitants are slowly leaving the valley and services are closing.

During 2019, an initial inspirational meeting and co-design workshops involved the inhabitants of the San Leo community in a first phase, where wounds and opportunities in the area were identified.

And so the path facilitated by Sons of the World began. Among the many desires, aspirations and needs, the community's raw nerve was identified: the closure of the bakery and the fear of losing the essentials of village life.

After sixty years of operation, the village's old bakery had closed with the end of its historical owner's business. And a closing bakery is an indicator that the community is dying. A frightening sign. This was the starting point of a process for the community.

Today, after two years, the old bakery has been reopened and regenerated with a potential for business innovation that marries new ways of marketing and a focus on product supply chains. Not only that.

The cooperative generated 5 jobs, refreshed the sense of community cohesion and started to activate additional services for citizens and responsible tourism, to counteract the shortage of citizen services and job opportunities for young people.

The resulting cooperative, Fer-menti Leontine, is the first Community Cooperative in the Province of Rimini and the Marecchia and Conca Valleys G.A.L. area. To date, it is not only producing employment in the area, but is also establishing relations with other economic activities and social enterprises, voluntary activities aimed at improving the quality of life of the village and its citizens, and copious media coverage of the Inhabitant Enterprise project and the wealth of the Municipality of San Leo.

Figli del Mondo's role in this story has been and still is accompaniment: from the pathways of inspiration, to the participatory processes with 54 members for the establishment of the company; up to the concrete realisation phase that has seen the association support both with research and participation in calls for tenders, and with the collection and identification of funds that has led to a financial availability of more than 283.000 euros, including access to ordinary and subsidised finance,

microcredit, crowdfunding, planning for participation in local and national calls for tenders and calls for funding, business development and other innovative economic and financial solutions.

The genesis of Appennino l'Hub: intuition and innovation

The keyword of the Appennino l'Hub is 'accompaniment'.

To accompany, means *'to follow a person, to go with them as a companion for affection, honour or protection'*.

And this is what Appennino l'Hub does with the communities of the inland areas: it supports them in developing new economies and services starting from their aspirations, proposing to accompany them in all phases from inspiration to realisation: a true support action for the territories, in the form of a network between public and private entities that can activate, incubate and accelerate ideas and micro-projects.

Extrapolating the teachings and practices from the San Leo experience, the aim of Appennino l'Hub is to multiply Inhabitant Economies through a service that accompanies the communities of the Apennines in focusing their aspirations, creating new and solid enterprises that produce job opportunities and reactivate necessary social services, combating depopulation, improving the quality of life, environment and landscape. It does so in an inclusive way, without reference models but with good examples from which to draw energy and new visions, to create enterprises that enable the capacities of places and participation in a social and economic renaissance of the Inner Areas.

Accompaniment is a process and starts first of all from listening, not assuming that the process is the same for everyone. The development of a new path always starts from the creation of links and conversations with the Communities and the realities that already work there.

These relationships are the starting point for learning and developing micro-economies, new services and projects that the communities themselves identify as necessary.

Appennino l'Hub works in three stages:

- 1) **the activation of territories**, by organising participatory 'conversation' moments that rebuild bonds and confidence in one's own capacities, a propaedeutic element for the identification of economies and projects;
- 2) **the incubation of business ideas** through professional and methodological support leading to sound and innovative development, integrated with the skills present in the communities;
- 3) **business acceleration** through tools that support business development and facilitate access to financing and credit opportunities, crowdfunding, participation in national and international calls for tenders, matching with investors.

The process may consist of several stages, depending on the community's needs analysis:

- **Inspirational meetings**, to start the first conversations with the community, conversing about stories, aspirations and places and inspiring through the presentation of other experiences that have dealt with similar emergencies and wounds in other areas of our country inspiring communities to take action. The meetings are curated by experts and with the involvement of testimonials from other communities, through videos and images.

- **Participatory workshops** to focus on the aspirations, needs, urgencies, and resources of the community, up to outlining the common mission, economic activities and services that could become the object of the activity of the nascent community enterprise.

- Only once the starting point (the wound, the aspiration, the fuse) has been defined, does the **business incubation** phase begin, based on the 'economic object' (in our example case, the oven) to be launched. We then proceed along a path typical of business incubation: the study and drafting of the business plan of the enterprise and the expected and desired social impact, the design of the service offered, commercial testing and communication tools.

- Another crucial element is **financial support**, as the start-up company and its project requires the initiation of the Search for Financing and Investors and other economic resources necessary for the planned investments.

In this area, the Appennino l'Hub network identified various financing solutions best suited to the project (ordinary credit and capital contribution) as well as the skills to plan, among others, participation in calls for tenders (G.A.L. and others) and innovative forms of micro-financing such as Equity Crowdfunding.

- Subsequently, the business **development project** of the 'identified object' is defined and Appennino l'Hub supports the first market tests, also helping in the selection of the professional figure in charge of the project management with experience in business start-up on the defined topics.

- **Continuous accompaniment** and **support for networking and supply chain work** are the final element characterising the Appennino l'Hub process. In fact, when speaking of Economie Abitanti, one cannot only work on the start-up of the enterprise, but it is necessary to involve other cooperatives/enterprises/bodies in the territory that can integrate the products and services offered, in order to support territorial collaboration.

One example is the support for the implementation of the 'AltaVal' supply chain project, which involves not only Fer-menti Leontine but also two other cooperatives and builds a business project created for the integrated marketing of products resulting from the cultivation of organic ancient grains and the production of flour (Coop.va Valmarecchia Bio), organic jams and creams at zero kilometres (Coop. La Fraternità) and the production of bread and cakes from the Forno di San Leo with home delivery to customers.

Extending the time for accompaniment in this way may seem strange, but it is the aspect that makes the most difference for communities in inland areas, which face many more obstacles than elsewhere.

The accompaniment is prolonged because the timeframe of an Inhabitant Enterprise is not comparable to that of start-ups or city enterprises. Just as an oak tree does not grow in a few days, these businesses need time and care to develop their full potential in a difficult environment.

An ongoing and transversal aspect of accompaniment is not to use pre-packaged solutions, but to select and choose the opportunities that best suit the characteristics of each project.

It is not a linear path: it requires continuous cycles with further visits, explorations, weaving bonds and trusting relationships with people and the land.

"Telling each other what is 'missing' and 'what can be done' is necessary to build territory, to build community" (G. Teneggi). Telling each other what is missing is also the way to initiate long-lasting and mutually beneficial processes of networking and integrated territorial cooperation.

Territorial networking, project support

Two years after the first experience and with the incubation of other Inhabitants Economies underway, Appennino l'Hub is now a territorial network project made up of 28 entities and coordinated by the Figli del Mondo association, which accompanies the Communities of the Inland Areas to develop new economies and inhabitant services from listening and inspiration to the realisation of ideas: a real support action for the territories, in the form of a network between public and private entities that can activate, incubate and accelerate ideas and micro-projects.

In June 2021, the network signed a memorandum of understanding. A pact, more than a document. A signature that has no monetary value, but a profound economic and social value, for those who have decided to say 'yes, I am part of this vision and I am putting my skills on the line', whatever these may be. A promise to turn a structural problem into an opportunity.

The vision is that, through the development of innovative inhabitant enterprises, living conditions in these territories can be improved in a concrete, continuous and sustainable way, employment can be developed and basic services can be regenerated in villages and towns, enhancing the wealth of places and communities.

Appennino l'Hub empowers citizens' skills to create new opportunities for social-economic development and increase the rate of widespread community economy.

It supports the establishment and development of companies and services step by step in the implementation of projects and in obtaining financing.

It networks experiences with each other and facilitates connections.

All this in synergy with other local and national projects, in alignment with strategies such as the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI) and the Local and Regional Development Plans, in full symbiosis with the projects of the activators of the territories.

Community-friendly

However, a project is only innovative if it knows how to adapt to the needs of those seeking support, particularly at the stage of defining what these needs actually are.

The Fer-Menti Leontine Cooperative was joined by the newly founded Casteldelci Cooperative, Incanti Delcesi, with a different process but an absolutely common objective: to activate the community as the protagonist of its own development.

Other processes are in turmoil. Many others are waiting patiently to be activated.

Great enthusiasm was recorded following the first national call for Inhabitant Business Ideas addressed to citizens, innovators, communities and associations launched by Appennino Hub in spring, gathering over 120 expressions of interest and more than 80 business ideas from all over the Apennine ridge, with a strong concentration in the Central-Southern Apennines and covering 12 regions.

Listening to these aspirations and needs is directing the project towards its characterisation, in order to be the activator for those who decide not only to do business, but also to live and innovate in these territories.

Appennino l'Hub is founded and carried forward by people who believe and carry forward every day the idea that inland and mountainous areas are an opportunity for development and cohesion for the entire Italian territory, and for this reason it will continue to shape and adapt to the 'wrinkles' that characterise the country.

It is a supporting agent, constantly redefining itself in order to blend and integrate with the characteristics of the territory and make the communities of these territories' places in the world and no longer islands in the mountains.