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# Inner Archipelagos in Sicily. From Culture-Based Development to Creativity-Oriented Evolution

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**Abstract:** When Covid-19 arrived in Europe from the far East, the media and experts in economics and social sciences noticed that it was the expected discontinuity in the socio-economic development process. Really, the current phase has spread since the 1960s, when the application of econometric worldwide-spread development model was going to produce social inequalities, and consumption of physical, social, and cultural resources. Some places in Italy, far from the erosive and urban context and erosive metropolitan areas, are currently isolated seeds of a new cycle of life, because of the local community identity and the strong link between human, cultural, and natural components are currently working together towards a new development model. Starting from a 20-year research about Local Cultural Systems in Sicily, the research group has defined and tested the cultural dimension of development, and affirmed that the transition to a culture-based growth, as defined by UNESCO, should be the solution for overcoming the erosive Anthropocene era. In western Sicily, the Belice Valley is working on cultural transition thanks to relationships between cultural heritage, identity, and settlement network, that we have designed as a Territorial Archipelago. The research demonstrates that local communities will innovate if they rethink the development model and reshape spatial patterns and economic networks focusing on the creativity-driven vision.

**Keywords:** neoanthropocene raising; inner land; local cultural systems

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The Neanthropocene Challenge: The General Theoretical Framework

When in January 2020, the new Coronavirus arrived in Europe from the far East, the media noticed that it was as the expected “black swan” of the millennium. However, Covid-19 is not a black swan, an unexpected event caused by a malevolent fate, because it is the predictable effect of the apical phase of the pandemic “polycrisis” in which we live [1–4].

Really, this phase has spread since the 1960s, when the contradictions of predatory capitalism, started at the time of the Industrial Revolution, exploded, and awareness began to be confirmed by researchers [5]. The application of an econometric worldwide-spread development model produced social inequalities, and consumption of physical, social, and cultural resources beyond the limits of the planet. The recent world health crisis—a clue of the wider ecological crisis—requires the development model to radically revise. To do this, the Western world has to start to change its development attitude, but necessarily the whole planet should implement new policies for a more sustainable future [6], starting from the actions that we can put in the field immediately, because it is not too late, in other words, starting from a different present and from a development model shift.

We expect that this shift will be economically re-oriented, politically re-driven, socially based, but, overall, culturally re-shaped. As recently recognized at global level [7], a cultural transition is happening:

It is a relevant part to overcome the erosive and predatory Anthropocene [8]. Actually, the Anthropocene hasn't only produced a massive ecological footprint on natural ecosystems [9], but has also destroyed the fragile identity structures of landscapes and the cultural tissues of cities, consuming or overusing heritage, weakening the strong relationship between cultural heritage and community. For fifty years, UNESCO and the Council of Europe have stated landscape and cultural identity preservation as fundamental rights [10], and the governments have approved laws and adopted operative rules to protect the cultural identity and support local culture-based policies. In Italy, for example, the heritage, landscape, and cultural identity protection is stated in article 9 of the Constitution: The consequence is that national government must promote regional and local culture-based policies. However, the cultural identity has not yet become a beacon for local development to aim at the cultural transition.

### 1.2. The Post-Covid-19 Context: The Great Acceleration

Furthermore, while governments and global organizations are testing new “Covid-19-proof” development policies, some communities in Italy, far from the Anthropocene urban context and erosive metropolitan areas, are currently isolated seeds of a new cycle of life [11] because the local community identity and the strong link between human, cultural, and natural components are currently going to work towards a new development model. These communities are the seeds of a so called “Neanthropocene” [12,13], a hard challenge that we define as sensitive, respectful, and temperate anthropocentrism aimed at repositioning humankind in an integrated framework based on a renewed alliance between urban growth and heritage preservation, between urban evolution and creative development.

Specifically, in Sicily, a wider and wider number of local communities have grown for last twenty-five years, basing their development policies on their local identity, as creative hubs [14], and transforming the weakness of isolation into the strength of slowness [15]. Some examples are below.

In 1997 in Castelbuono, on the slopes of the Madonie mountains, the Ypsigrock Festival started its first edition: It is an international festival of independent rock music that started a process of creativity-based innovation. The festival is a “boutique festival” (less than 10,000 visitors) and has won numerous awards and nominations in international contexts since 2011: Artistic creativity has fertilized a historical and natural context of great local value.

In 2010 in Favara, near Agrigento, the Farm Cultural Park was born: It is an international-reputed independent cultural center able to spark urban regeneration based on contemporary art and creativity. The project was born from the desire, passion, and ability of the patron of the arts Andrea Bartoli (“cultural agitator” he says of himself) and his wife Florinda, who recycled an abandoned historical district, turning it into a worldwide cultural center devoted to contemporary arts, architecture, design, and social innovation. The creative district, called “Sette Cortili” (seven courtyards), includes a breakthrough contemporary art museum, a residence for artists from around the world, an innovation-oriented co-working space, a space dedicated to an innovative School of Architecture for Children, a leisure garden—called “riad” as tribute at the Moroccan tradition—with a high stars hotel suite for art travelers, a bookshop, a concept store, and several ethnic food spaces that mix Mediterranean culinary traditions.

Across Sicily, other creative beacons started animating inner lands and fully or partially abandoned towns: In 2015 in Casteltermini, near Agrigento, the Stiva creative farm for innovative projects in performing and visual arts; in 2013 in Mazara del Vallo, Periferica established a creative and multicultural community; in 2013 in Campofelice di Roccella, Lumaca Madonita relaunched snail farming and the related production chain as a part of cultural identity of the Madonie community.

Based on the culture-based development theoretical framework [7] and on the global commitment for the rising of Neanthropocene, the paper describes how in Sicily, cultural transition is the root of inner area development. In particular, starting from the research conducted by the authors in 2002–2003 about Sicilian culture-based policies [16], in recent years Gibellina and Belice Valley have

been investigated in-depth to check and demonstrate if and in what terms the cultural transition could fully happen in western Sicily.

Taking into account the current unclear status about influence of urban context (e.g., pollution, settlements, air quality, micro-climate) in Covid-19 contamination, we referred to consolidated studies that underline the relevance of unsafe urban context in disease diffusion [2].

About local case study, the research group worked to a specific precondition: Belice Valley is a well-connected territorial system, with a good-level facility equipment and a strong interconnection between rural and urban context that integrates the strong background for development.

The results are focused on planned opportunities of establishing a new rur-urban archipelago among Gibellina and other towns [12], as a non-molecular settlement, in which each town shares housing, public spaces, facilities, and contributes to balance the rural, urban, and land development. Lastly, the discussion focuses on further improvement of the model in other inner areas and how to aim at cultural transition, and on outcomes expected in the next ten years.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. The Cultural Dimension of Development: The “Local Cultural Systems”

In 1994, UNESCO [17] restated that local development has to include culture as the whole complex of distinctive, spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features that characterize a society or a social group. Based on this definition, the cultural dimension of development provides the basic reference by which all other development factors are measured. So, in UNESCO’s point of view, the cultural dimension of development is the main key for a sustainable development, as defined by Brundtland’s report [18].

In the early 2000s, the empowerment of the cultural dimension in development was widely experimented with across European regions and funded by Structural Funds in the 1994–1999 programming period and transformed in principles and agendas by EU Member States [19], based on five principles:

- New cultural policies must be implemented by urban communities, especially in medium-sized cities, in spreading the principles of sustainable development aimed at the adoption of local strategies, centered on the cultural identity.
- A stronger governance model of cultural heritage and activities must be checked and evaluated by an appropriate set of “cultural indicators” suitable for aiming at development that would be compatible in values and sustainable in resource use.
- Citizen engagement in culture-based development is a critical aspect. The social empowerment must be achieved as a key factor of local development towards forms of culture-based empowerment, promoting social cohesion, and gathering public support and ownership.
- The culture-based economic sectors must act as a “multiplier in the cultural domain”, with a mix of public funding and private investment geared to promoting and innovating cultural policies.
- Finally, the implementation must be conducted through the promotion of more strategies capable of integrating cultural development with social and economic development in such a way as to strengthen the quality of life.

In Sicily, these principles were applied to Regional Operative Programme 2000–2006, as one of the priority goals was to make—or to empower—local cultural systems focused on medium-sized cities and composed of thematic networks [20] mainly among archaeological sites, historical centers, natural parks, and cultural facilities (museums, theatres, etc.).

The cultural richness of the Sicilian territory—and in particular, that of the non-metropolitan areas that have not undergone phenomena of transformation of identity—constitutes an opportunity on which a tourist activity can be founded, which must become a complement to traditional productive activities:

It is a question of reintegrating cultural heritage into the local economy through its exploitation as a basic material for an interpretation aimed at a renewed use.

However, the tourism would not be the only sector for economic growth. The use of the regional cultural systems as resources for the activation of development policies based on the cultural dimension was addressed by identifying in the regional system the Local Cultural Systems (LCSs), as territorial aggregations characterized by the recognition of belonging to a specific local culture, and identified by a precise theme in the cultural domain. The LCS firstly and foremostly is a “cultural system”, which finds in the writing and overwriting process of historical evolution—a sort of palimpsest manuscript—its connotation and in the space of local geographies its configuration. This is not an aggregation of territories that adds the cultural dimension as a shallow aspect, but is instead a geo-ecosystem characterized by specific components, well-identified values, and close relationships that act deeply in the cultural identity. In this case, the LCS is the precondition to propose a “cultural district”, as it is the most correct translation of the cultural cluster of Anglo-Saxon experiences.

In the territorialist [21] meaning that we propose, the characteristics of a LCS are:

- The historical identity that connotes its theme,
- the cultural belonging that connotes its relationships,
- the permanence that expresses its power, the proximity that shapes its space, and
- the exclusivity that shapes its boundaries.

The identification of the LCSs in Sicily was conducted through the study of the historical evolution of the territory and through the interpretation of cultural, functional, and socio-economic relations that communities have entertained over the centuries.

## 2.2. Steps and Application of Methodological Framework in LCSs

Starting from the Ancient age up to the Modern age, the research group has investigated the strengthened identity by (a) a reading and qualitative assessment of human settlement and its evolution, (b) an analysis and reconstruction of historical mapping and travelers’ and geographers’ tales and reports, (c) and an analysis of administrative aggregations in comarche (from 1583 to 1818) and in districts (occurred in 1812) and similarities occurred in Contemporary age.

We used the database and the ortho-photo coverage released by Sicilian Region in 1997, and used for the first step of regional landscape planning: The database is based on UTM33N coordinate system at 1:25,000 scale and the ortho-photo coverage, at the same scale, is a black and white digital restitution. The database has been updated in ArcView 3.x and released to Sicilian Region.

After the identification of local cultural systems as in Figure 1, the research group has started the phase of interpretation and evaluation of the potential of the systems to establish cultural districts. This assessment of potential cultural districts is based on hard geostatistical-based analysis and so, in order to facilitate the repeatability, we are going to explain the steps with technical language as much as possible. Specific indicators were therefore drawn up, covering both the characteristics typical of cluster analysis and the specific components of the heritage and culture topics:

- The concentration, distribution, and specificity of the cultural and natural heritage possessed is assessed on the cultural centrality index.
- The cultural specialization of municipalities is defined through the cultural flexibility index.
- The proximity and accessibility index has been assessed in relation to the transport infrastructure system and in relation to territorial “infrastructures”, that is to say, the intangible network of digital communications, the thematic networks of exploitation and dissemination, the routes promoted, etc.;
- The size of economic activities in cultural domain, such as conservation and restoration of heritage, training and scientific research, enhancement, communication, tourism, and hotel activities.



1. Maturity condition—the presence of territorial heritage and cultural services is such that it can already be considered sufficiently high and articulated, as well as related to the system of relationships and interdependencies in the context of local planning, training, and tourism.
2. Trend condition—where the different component municipalities possess a fair level of heritage and services, and local projects of cultural specialization are detectable.
3. Planning-in-progress condition—where the elements of the cultural heritage and services do not express a high degree of territorial specialization based on the cultural sector yet, and consequently the level of local culture-based development is low.

According to the LCSs and according to the scores attributed to municipalities, the identification of the condition of cultural districts has been carried out and scaled as follows:

- Mature cultural district, that is in condition to start development policies based on the cultural dimension: It is the condition relative to local cultural systems characterized by the presence of a majority of municipalities in condition of “maturity” and a significant presence of municipalities in “trend” conditions.
- Pre-district, characterized by ample opportunities that await a project capable of putting them into effect: Condition relating to local cultural systems characterized by the presence of a majority of municipalities in “trend” condition.
- Proto-district, which needs a strong design action to transform the strengths of the cultural domain into opportunities for development: Condition relating to local cultural systems characterized by the presence of a majority of municipalities in “Planning-in-progress” condition.
- In-coming District, which has yet to complete the path of recognition of belonging to a system: Condition relating to local cultural systems characterized by the presence of a large majority of municipalities in “Planning-in-progress” condition of “planning”.
- Finally, the Metropolitan Cultural District has been introduced, in order to distinguish the characteristics and the opportunities of the three capital metropolitan cities of Catania, Messina, and Palermo, and of the district of the small islands and archipelagos to define the peculiar insular characteristics.

At the end of this phase developed at regional level, the research group have analyzed and in-depth tested a specific model to improve the condition of cultural district in western Sicily, for the last ten years, as recognized in the second part. Firstly, the LCS status in western Sicily was verified to confirm the cultural district status.

### *2.3. The Cultural Transition to the Neanthropocene Age: From Culture-Based to Creativity-Based Local Development*

After this relevant step in regional policies evolution, for many years the local culture-based development has autonomously grown and each community has agreed with the nearest ones, basing policies on specific interests or identities, like in the Madonie area or in the Barocco district [22], or gathering specific funds.

The result is a mosaic of solutions and a locally driven scenario aimed to improve the territorial cohesion [23] through four thematic approaches:

- Competitiveness improvement policies based on cultural and natural resources and funded by regional and EU funds. The focus is on the increasing capacity of natural and archaeological parks as engines of development, including territories and municipalities that do not belong to the protected areas, but that are recognized as belonging to a territorial brand, such as Madonie Natural Park or Agrigento Archaeological Park. In this case, Park Authorities are the pivot to establish relations for drafting and implementation of development policies.
- Provincial development policies based on the specific competences of Provincial Administration, such as local infrastructures, tourism improvement, advertising campaign.

- Multilevel policies based on supralocal networks, combining the previous two policies.
- High level instruction and university policies, based on local resources such as the Research Centre in Bivona, on the Sicani mountains, for energy, environment, and local resources.

Really, for ten years the culture-based policies have been drafted as a part of general cohesion and competitiveness policies, but the communities have not caught up to a culture-oriented growth model. In other words, no cultural transition happened, and this is the evidence of a lot of in-depth research that the authors have conducted for ten years across Sicily, such as into the activities of Sicani Research Centre for Energy Environment [24,25], established in the middle of the island or in the support and consultancy for Municipality of Favara and Farm Cultural Park on the southern coast [26], or in Belice Valley in the western lands [27] after the 1968 earthquake and reconstruction.

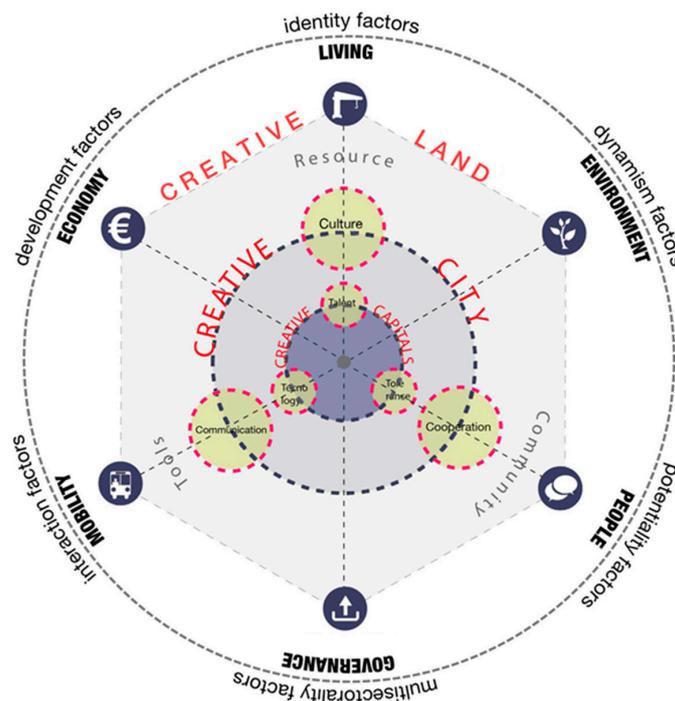
Otherwise, as shown in the introduction, in the Neanthropocene transition, the cultural dimension must be the most effective sustainable dimension of development [7], but only if it will be able to deeply interact with other dimensions, constituting their fertile base for developing.

This is possible if the new culture-based growth interacts in a creative environment: This environment—and its industry—has its origin in individual creativity, skill, and talent, and which has a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property. In other terms, communities need to match up the cultural identity with the creative skills to start up a creativity-based growth model [28,29].

In this generative vision, creativity is the enabling device for culture-based sustainable development, and it can act as an “upgrader” for cities and communities that want to enter in the Neanthropocene, characterized by a more sensible, intelligent, and resilient action of people on the planet.

The switch from a culture-based to a creativity-driven development strategy is the point on which a new strategy is going to be settled [7]. According with this statement, we have drafted components, opportunities, and operational actions that are typical of a creativity-based growth trend, as shown in Figure 2. Three enabling factors of creativity-based growth have been recognized:

- The first is Culture, the territorial identity, steeped in history yet also extending into the future. Tangible and intangible culture is the most distinctive and competitive urban/rural resource, its identity and diversity as products of its history. Because the talent of a community could generate value, it must be submerged in the virtuous circle of the culture economy, the geography of experience, and the design of quality. Culture, therefore, plays a part in the field of resources, enabling cities to become more creative in the sustainable development sectors of living, economy, and environment.
- The second is Communication, namely an urban ability to inform, divulge information, and involve in real time its citizens and multitude of users, using all kind of technology and making possible interventions aimed at cutting down congestion and deterioration: A community which makes effective use of innovation technology is, indeed, also one which cuts down on travelling, keeps a check on pollution, and improves the way we work, delocalizing services and repositioning their centrality. Communication provides the setting of tools for development acceleration in the fields of economy, mobility, and governance. At last, it improves the ability of medium- and small-sized cities to be involved in global networks, even without a strong physical mobility network.
- And finally, the third factor is Cooperation, because, in global and multicultural cities, tolerance implies that the challenge faced by creative/generative land lies instead in the explicit collaboration among diversities, through cooperation among all users, between city centers and suburbs, between urban and rural functions. The creative land is not merely more open, multicultural, and multi-ethnic, but it must be capable of mobilizing its diverse component parts in the pursuit of a plan. Cooperation, therefore, redefines the community, assigning it new roles and clearer objectives for empowering smarter people relationships with governance and environment.



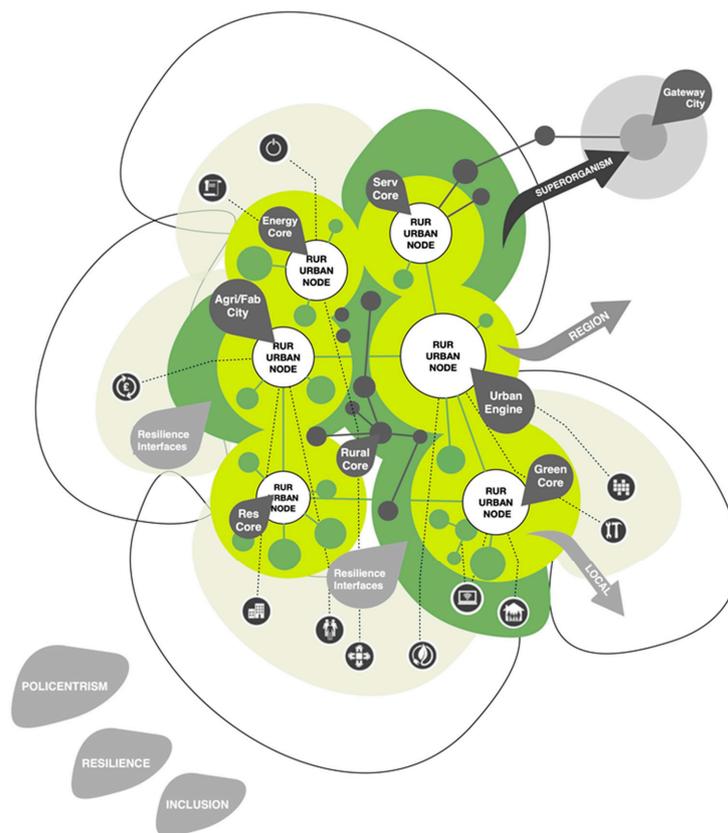
**Figure 2.** The Creative Land Diagram: Culture, Communication, and Cooperation as active interfaces between local capitals and development goals [30].

Otherwise, what happens in a non-metropolitan context, or in an inner area, far from the metropolitan hub? Is it possible and useful to draft a creativity-centered growth model? Is it possible to recognize examples of towns and territories that get the cultural resources to spark a creativity-centered policy? To do so, have they got a critical mass in terms of population, services, infrastructures? What shapes and networks are needed to establish a creative land?

These questions are the focus of a last step of research that the authors have conducted since 2017 on Belice Valley in the western Sicily, starting from the theory of “Territorial Archipelago”.

#### 2.4. The Theory of Territorial Archipelago: Method and Applications in Belice Valley

In Italy, already before the Covid-19 pandemic, numerous resilient—and brave—communities worked to preserve their cultural identity [11], rethinking the role of cultural heritage and activities for general growth. Once they were flourishing mountain, rural, or coastal communities, or vibrant urban neighborhoods of community life or historical centers full of productive and commercial activities, today they are fighting against a decline that risks overwhelming them completely. For example, communities of people take care of the nature and culture of their territories, which experience a new circular urban metabolism, the recovery of craftsmanship and innovative manufactures, the local rooting of sustainable mobility infrastructures and the global connectivity of digital infrastructures, the interconnection between green networks, cultural frames and slow life cycles, and the diffusion of technological skills and innovation within local administrations. They have been called “archipelago communities”, as in Figure 3, arisen out of the non-metropolitan territories. These communities are made by people who remain in small- and medium-sized cities and in inland areas, contributing to slow down the depopulation process.



**Figure 3.** The conceptual scheme of the rur-urban archipelago: Nodes, interfaces, and connections [30].

For example, these communities aim to preserve the agricultural landscapes by maintaining traditional production, or they take care of the urbanized mountains from small, but still vital, inhabited centers. In a glance, we can define the “archipelago community” as a framework of communities connected by the network of people and arts, reinforced by the weft of artisans and farmers, and in which the functions and facilities are settled in a polycentric way in order to reinforce the local settlement framework [11].

The studies about new geographies of jobs [31] show how, starting from the U.S., but with increasing evidence in Europe, the functional relationships and mobility flows between cities no longer follow a traditional gravitational model. The more adequate representation of this “post-metropolitan” relation [32] is a dense network of nodes and lines that draw complex and multiple relations, not referable to a univocal client–server relationship, but more similar to cloud computing.

The above non-linear relations among nodes, interfaces, and connectors of the “archipelago community” are fed by a complex synesthesia, generated by landscape identity as defined by European Landscape Convention [10]: In these territories, mountains and coasts, villages and peripheries, vineyards and olive trees co-generate landscape related to original inhabitants and communities, new communities of artists and migrants who carry new ideas and identity.

The community identity and relations generate new complex metabolisms involving urban–rural settlements as mutant hubs in permanent innovation and redefinition of their life cycles. Really, in “archipelago communities” across Italian regions, the peculiar alliance between historical heritage and creative innovation has been recognized in recent years, that produced several experiments of creative-based urban regeneration oriented to catalyze new social capital.

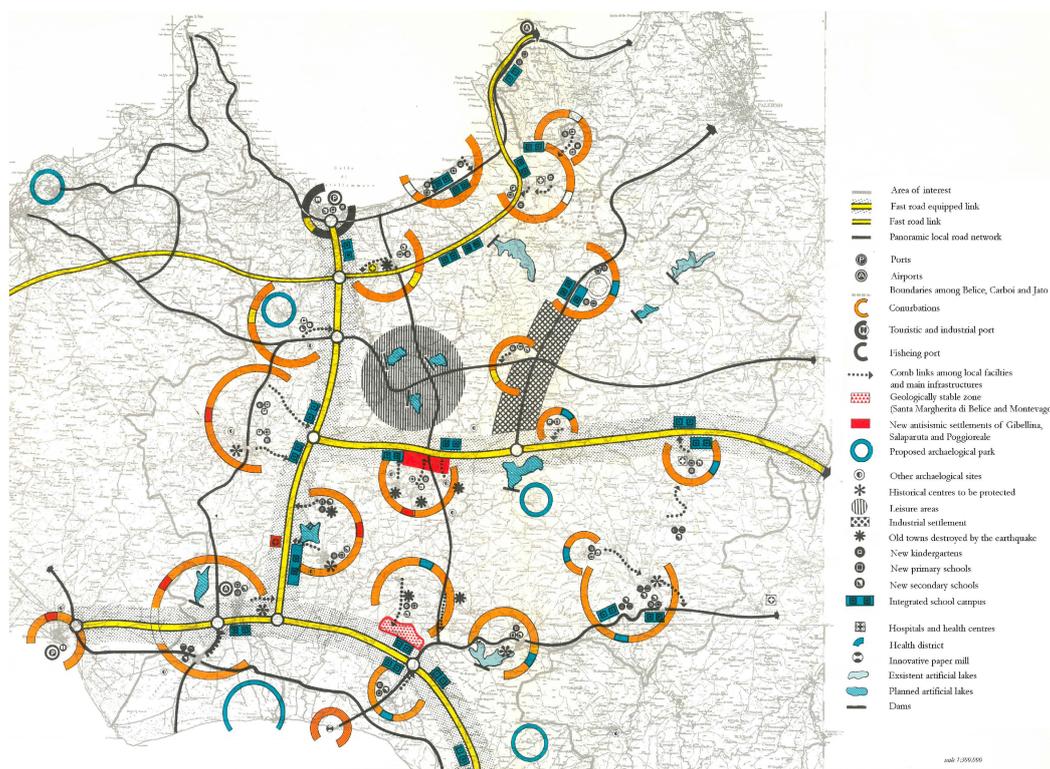
Based on this results [11], we can argue that small- and medium-sized town communities are developing a model of city fed by the interaction of resilience, recycling, and reactivating human capital, and offering themselves as a precious laboratory for a powerful regeneration of places and communities, spaces, and relationships.

They are the evidence of the metamorphosis that we are going through. The social and economic relevance of the cultural resources developed, or reactivated, in the areas in decline must also change, connecting the new cultural policies with the policies of human growth. It is therefore necessary that the cultural capital, composed of fixed capital, but increasingly from the social capital, enters structurally into the stock exchange of regeneration and development, distributing in an extensive and equitable manner the dividend that it is able to generate and contribute to the distribution of the effects of the renewed cultural dimension of development in the everyday life of communities [33]. If we point at the suburbs and small towns, we will generate and distribute a real creative and cultural dividend [7] of the conservation and enhancement policies of the landscape heritage, of recovery and building redevelopment, of stimulating entrepreneurship, to guarantee security. New centralities are designed into the territorial archipelago by reshaping spaces and economies.

### 2.5. Steps and Application of Methodological Framework in Belice Valley Archipelago

The Belice Valley is in western Sicily. It is characterized by the presence of many small-sized towns, and it is a fertile land for the olive tree and the vineyards, which have been cultivated since the Phoenician era.

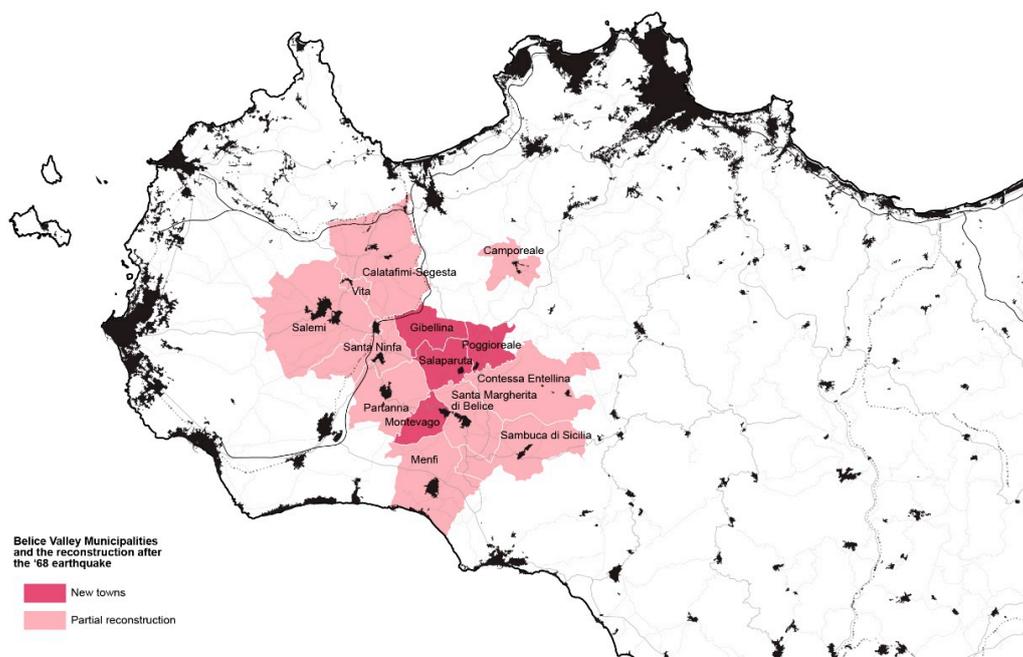
However, the large estates, the exploitation of the laborers, and the general economical backwardness are the basis of one of the most serious conditions of absolute poverty in Italy in the 1950s and 1960s. Danilo Dolci [34], Lorenzo Barbera, and other visionary people engaged with social struggle and proposed plans and programs to solve the backwardness, as in the Democratic Plan for Belice, Carboi, and Jato Valleys [35], shown in Figure 4.



**Figure 4.** The Democratic Plan for Belice, Carboi, and Jato Valleys: The design for infrastructure, urban settlement, and facility development [35].

The Democratic Plan, many years before the establishment of National Strategies for Inner Areas [36], defined in what way services and facilities for the local communities (e.g., health, school, business and production, transport and mobility) must be localized in relation to the rank and demographic size of each municipality, but looking at a whole rur-urban settlement framework.

On 14 January 1968, whole towns were destroyed by an earthquake. The media, in addition to the destruction, documented the backwardness of those places. With the reconstruction, the national government attempted to remedy it by designing some new towns, far from the social and cultural context of rural Sicily, and the towns were re-built using two different approaches: Gibellina, Poggioreale, Salaparuta, and Montevago were re-built as new towns, and the other ten towns were partially re-built with additions to the old cities, as in Figure 5.



**Figure 5.** The municipalities knocked down by the Belice Valley earthquake: Map of the reconstruction strategy.

In the 80s, in Gibellina, the administration of Mayor Corrao tried to give back to the valley and identity through artistic and cultural operations that attracted in the city the greatest contemporary artists, but it was not enough to fill the great emptiness of the new urban spaces, which today are in a state of decay and neglect, partly due to depopulation (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** The towns of the Belice Valley population statistics: They are recognized as the 14 towns that were, partially or totally, destroyed by the 1968 earthquake.

Town	Population (2019)	$\Delta$ of Depopulation 2001–2019 (%)	Old-Age Index (2019)
Calatafimi-Segesta	6495	−13.29	232.8
Contessa Entellina	1744	−11.92	269.4
Camporeale	3193	−13.91	151.8
Gibellina	3981	−14.81	223.1
Menfi	12,413	−2.89	193.9
Montevago	2929	−5.46	216
Partanna	10,337	−9.06	215.1
Poggioreale	1478	−13.77	239.6
Salaparuta	1639	−10.44	180.6
Salemi	10,532	−8.96	225.4
Sambuca di Sicilia	5770	−6.26	186.7
Santa Margherita di Belice	6327	−3.64	180.1
Santa Ninfa	4969	−2.47	211.6
Vita	1946	−19.81	298.3

Source: elaboration by the authors.

Based on the experiences of those years, the experimentation has been carried out on the 14-town cluster for a total of about 74,000 inhabitants, which the “seismic scar” still defines the crater recalling the tragic night of the earthquake.

The analysis has been conducted starting from a set of maps and indicators:

- Statistical maps are produced to define socio-economic background:
  - Demographic analysis, as in Figure 6, concerning total population and old-age index. Between 1951 and 1971, the average percentage of depopulation was 18.2%. Between 1971 and 2001, the average percentage of depopulation was 9.6%. Between 2001 and 2019, the decrease process continued with a peak of 19.1% in Vita and of 13.91% in Camporeale. Today, in these territories the average value of the old age index highlights that younger people are constantly decreasing (the benchmark regional average is 1537).
  - Unemployment rate. If we look at the unemployment rate 2004–2012 as the “percentage ratio between job seekers and the total labor force” referred to the Local Labour Systems, the ranking is between 14% and 23%.
- Relevance of each municipality is investigated through:
  - Peripheral status, according to National Department for Development and Territorial Cohesion [36] in Belice Valley, there are “belt” (Salemi, Santa Ninfa, Partanna), “intermediate” (Calatafimi, Camporeale, Vita, Gibellina, Salaparuta, Poggioreale, Montevago, Menfi), and “peripheral” (Sambuca di Sicilia, Santa Margherita di Belice, Contessa Entellina) municipalities with weak connections to the nearest metropolitan cities and facilities.
  - Map of cross-check with the Local Cultural Systems. The map checks in what way the regional policies can support the structure of a territorial archipelago. The LCS boundaries and the archipelago do not necessarily overlap one on another.
  - Locations of high schools. High school offer is linked to technical-commercial training in Partanna, Menfi, and Salemi, and professional training for tourism and commercial activities in Menfi and Santa Ninfa. There are, however, also five high schools mainly linked to social disciplines.
  - Local partnership capacity and local coalition map. The map describes how many municipalities are engaged with the Local Action Group funded by Leader+ program. It is relevant in terms of capacity building and opportunity in future development.
- Local assets in rur-urban context are recognized and mapped, as an in-depth analysis of strengths on which the research group has built the vision:
  - Map of abandoned buildings and areas. Many lifecycles were cut by the earthquake effects and abandoned quarries, mines, disused railways, toll booths, obsolete infrastructure, and derelict productive settlements are elements that have gone through territorial transformations while maintaining their shape (entirely or partially) but losing functional and relational aspects.
  - Map of agricultural production and utilized agricultural areas (UAA) statistical analysis. This map is based on CORINE land cover and supports the analysis on utilized agricultural areas as statistically defined by National Agriculture Census. A strong reduction in UAA is evident in Belice, but on the contrary we can recognize a large mechanization and specialization in olive tree production and vineyards more than in the previous decades.
  - Map of quality brands in food and wine sector. This map describes the consistency of food and wine brands and certifications, such as the Italian Protected and Controlled Designation of Origin or Typical Geographic Indication. It is needed to qualify the economic potential in the agricultural sector.

- Map of main wine cellars. This map is cross-referred to the previous two maps and it assesses the wine production. It is based on local commercial and business registers.
- Map of the food and wine routes. This map contributes to complete the wine economy framework with wine tourism activities. It is based on a regional touristic database.
- Map of contemporary architecture and new towns. A peculiar thematic is the count of new towns, buildings, and public spaces made after 1968. It is based on direct survey and cross-check in national, regional, and municipal archives [27].
- Cultural identity framework is completed with the collection of imagery and bio-profiles of local personalities who played a significant role in recent local events:
  - Collection of historical images and maps. It is needed to detail and confirm the historical evolution of towns and territory, and to do a quality assessment of the lost social structure.
  - Recognition of beacon personalities in recent local history and in the present. In Belice Valley, this work—often based on direct survey—contributes to set up the community identity.

All the maps are Geographical Information System based, paged on ArcMap 10.x and released at the scale 1:100,000. The database is linked to the regional GIS system, and contributes to the general database of Local Cultural System research.

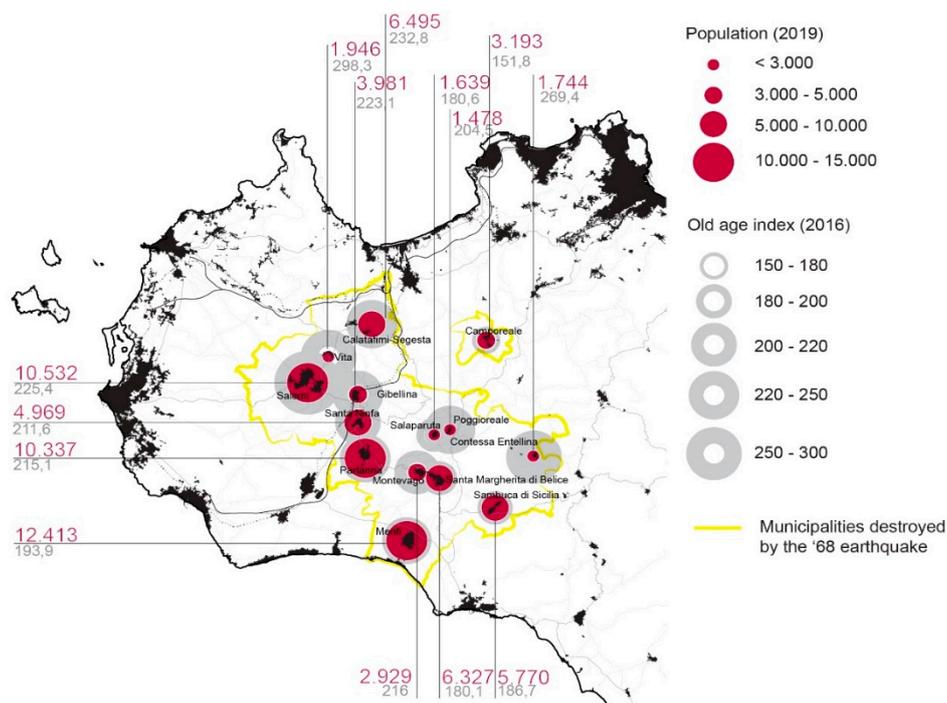


Figure 6. Belice Valley demographic analysis.

The analytic set has supported the definition of a vision and policies. Each policy has been drafted up by:

- A map that describes a cluster of towns and territories that have the resources and opportunities to implement the strategy.
- Some models of application designed as examples, as suggestions for further design.
- Some engaged user simulations to check in what way it is possible to attract new abroad users.

### 3. Results: Creativity for Sustainable Development

To relaunch Belice as a territorial archipelago, the research group has delivered a policy statement and a set of strategies and addressed them to Belice community—joined in the Local Action Group—and worldwide from the Architecture Biennale of Venice 2018 [11].

The vision is based on the reactivation of latent potential excluded from the current reconstruction model based on a levelled-out territorial policy. Belice Archipelago aims to reconnect the relationship with the rural dimension: It is still today a vital cycle of the territory and can be put at the base of a different development model, if strengthened through a new alliance between creativity and productivity, between urbanity and rurality.

The overall strategy aims to transform the “islands” of excellence of the territorial network—able to operate as protective armor for culture based development—of Belice (the high-value agricultural production, the still vital historical centers with their architectural heritage and folk arts) in a cultural and creative archipelago, where connections are as important as nodes and where relational and context landscapes are the places of transition between identity and innovation, between heritage and creativity, between residence and production. The “archipelago” geography requires us to define not only the functions of highest quality places, but also the roles of connective spaces with powerful resources: Food and wine products, cultural landscape, specialized training, energy from renewable sources, public spaces to be shared. The strengthening of rural–urban relations in Belice passes through reticular settlement strategies, capable of enabling the towns and productive cycles, using infrastructures and buildings in obsolescence for social opportunities and as new urban beacons.

Although it is true that the demographic power of 70,000 inhabitants could guarantee a very high level of provision of services, comparable to that of a provincial capital or a small metropolis, it is also true that these centers are spread over a non-isotopic territorial surface: The Belice Archipelago project, therefore, is based on the implementation of a polycentric and reticular system that works on three main strategies that hybrid the different vocations and potentials and produce three epicenters: Agriculture and business innovation in Gibellina and Partanna, villages and rural tourism in Menfi and Sambuca, and heritage and creativity in Salemi and Ancient Poggioreale.

The territory project is thus integrated through main nodes and community centers, strengthening the current situation for the construction of development relations.

Three development policies have been recognized and described below.

The first is Agriculture and business innovation policy. Gibellina will be “epicenter” for training in innovative agriculture, business incubation, and creativity: Qualification and specialization of human capital operating in the fields of agriculture, agro-industry, support self-entrepreneurship, and support for increasing knowledge among farmers. Land art is supported. A selected group of towns in the Local Action Group will work to close supply chains, diversify and qualify production to organic conversion, generational turnover in enterprises, to strengthen the direct relationship between producer and consumer, such as short chain, direct sales, market areas, and farmers’ markets. A support network of logistic infrastructures has been planned, as in Figure 7.

The second is Small town and rural tourism policy. Menfi and Sambuca of Sicily will be “epicenters” for integration of tourist vocation in Menfi and strengthening of the offer linked to the enhancement of small towns. A selected group of towns in the Local Action Group will work to encourage the creation, start-up, and development of extra-agricultural economic activities for the enhancement of the small towns. The enhancement is envisaged in an integrated development policy for environmental, cultural, historical, and productive resources, as in Figure 8.

The third is Creativity and cultural heritage policy. Gibellina and Salemi will be “epicenters” for on-ground training in urban regeneration. A selected group of towns in the Local Action Group will work to encourage the integration of the cultural offer and facilities and to organize a network of cultural uses and events at the ruins of the five towns destroyed by the earthquake (Gibellina, Montevago, Poggioreale, Salaparuta, and Santa Margherita Belice) and a network for valorization of newly established cities and their contemporary art and architecture, as in Figure 9.

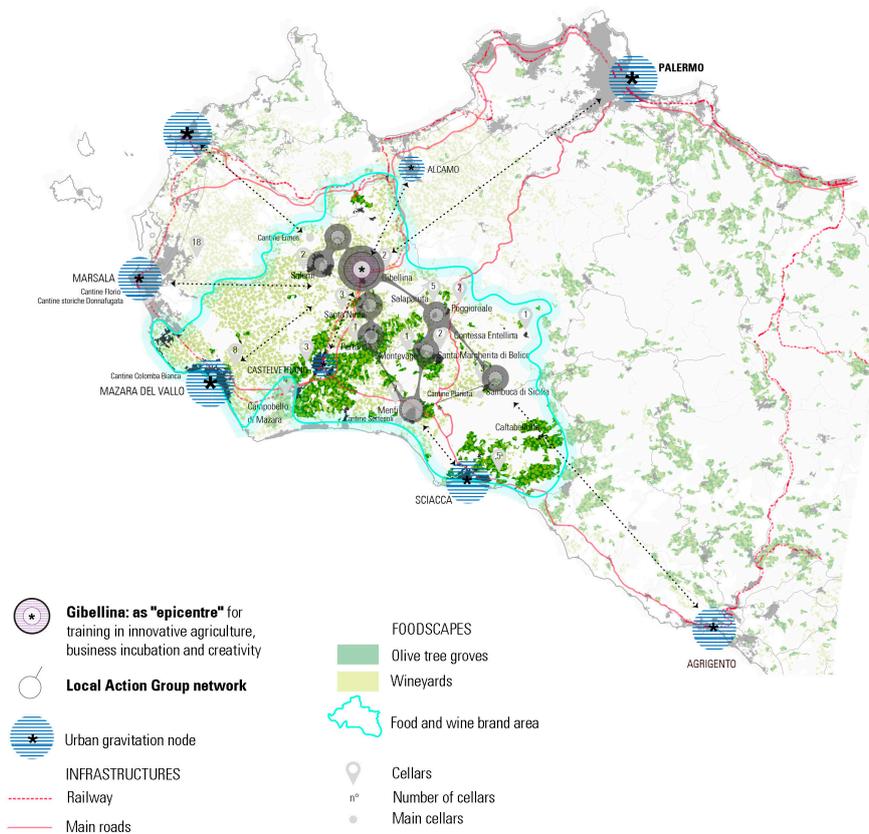


Figure 7. The draft for Agriculture and Business Innovation policy (elaboration by the authors).

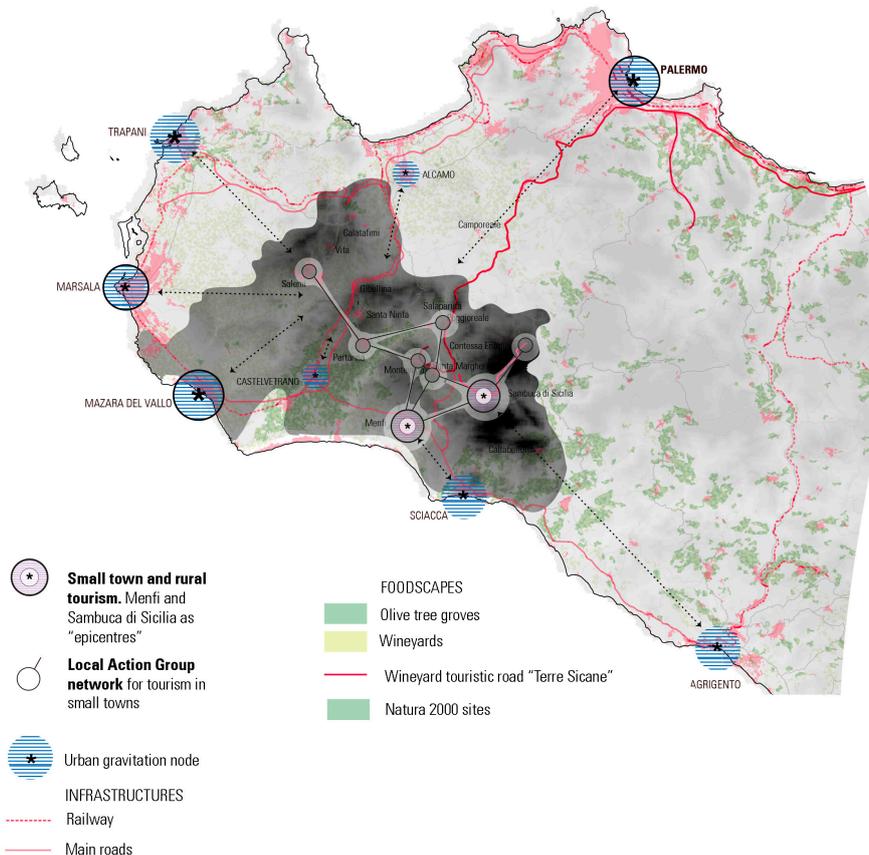


Figure 8. The draft for Small Town and Rural Tourism policy (elaboration by the authors).

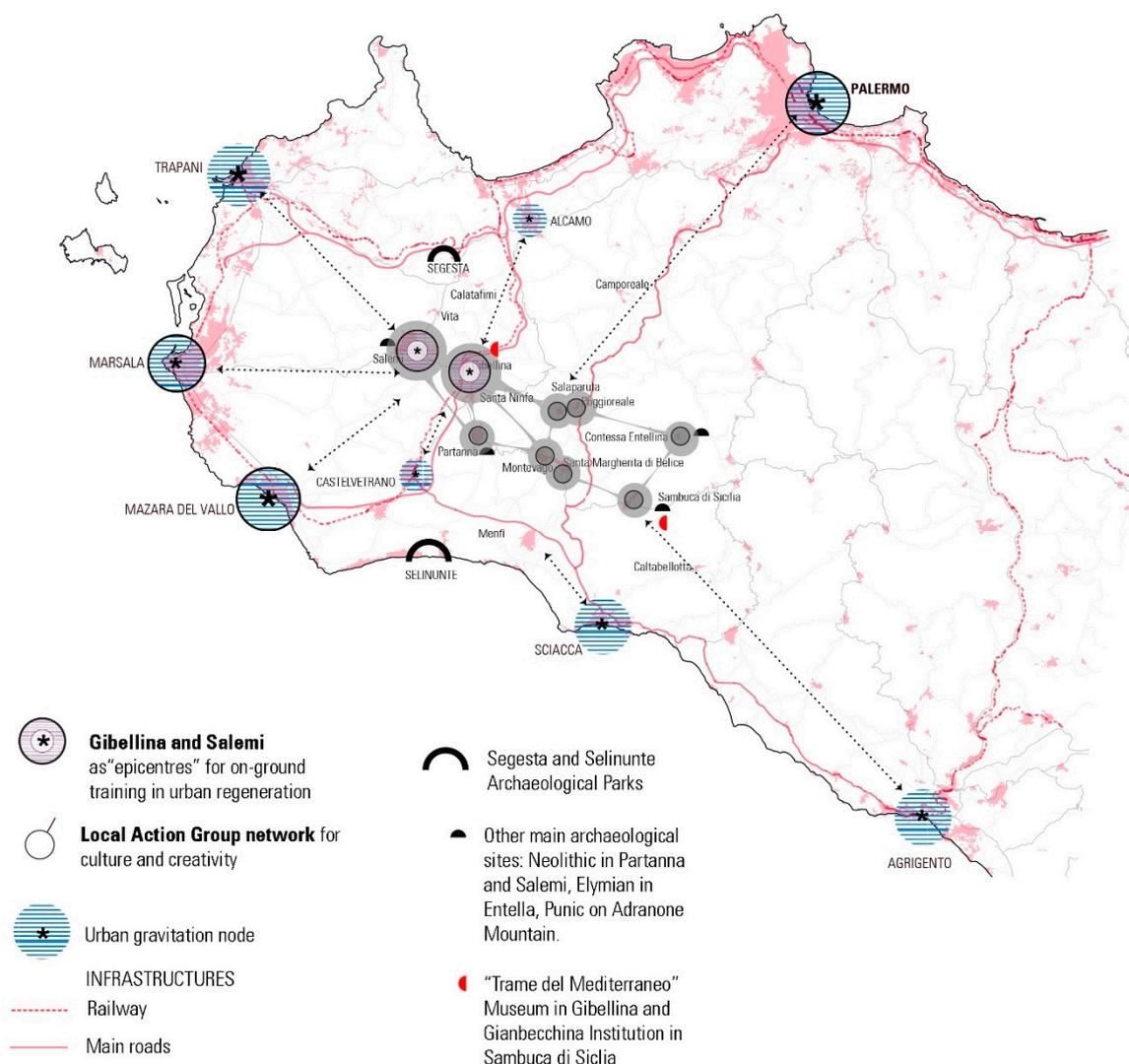


Figure 9. The draft for Creativity and Cultural Heritage Policy (elaboration by the authors).

#### 4. Discussion

##### 4.1. The Belice Archipelago as Living Lab for a Post-COVID-19 Creative Land

In the public debate, we have recently listened to a dirge for the overpopulated and unsafe, dead metropolis [2,37]; the suggested solution has been to go back to small towns and villages to escape from the infection as in Boccaccio’s Decameron.

On the contrary, the research outcomes demonstrate that small towns and villages are the places for a new growth model. The territorial archipelago is a network of places where everyone should go back to live (perhaps with more safety for health) or from which they will no longer flee, attracted by the metropolis. The territorial archipelagos would be places to take care of territory and people together, to build a healthy proximity and worldwide links to study, work, and take care of ourselves, and not only a place for disruptive “touristification” [38].

The challenge—as tested in Belice Valley—is to re-build our communities, managing the relationship between humankind and the environment. Really, and starting from the presence of a well-settled health facility network—a main hospital in Salemi and local health services in each municipality—and other core services as described above, is possible to improve the culture-based growth model. So, in this new context, culture is more than the tangible part of sustainable development through the heritage or the intangible part through the creativity, but it is the “operative system” of

the sustainable development: The collective intelligence that puts in connection tangible heritage and intangible identities, cultural infrastructures and creative economies, historical sites' conservation and urban innovation. As already mentioned, this operative system for being powerful and context-oriented must be opensource, built by the several "coders" that act in the cultural ecosystem following a collective urban agenda for augmented cities and communities.

So, an effective creative urban agenda asks for practical actions, all grounded in local contexts and formulated and implemented through a collaborative approach, and a panel of initiatives that could act as the beta testers of the new creative-driven paradigm of sustainable development.

#### 4.2. A Cultural Transition Agenda in Belice Valley

In a near future, we'll experiment with five operative tools that could be implemented and tested for using culture and creativity as active tools in a further step of the cultural transition:

1. **Creative Labs:** Integrated urban regeneration programs based on the development and consolidation of creative districts as living labs and incubators of ideas, culture, production, and social development within which integrate and enhance public demand and decision-making, talents, resources' consumption reduction, energy efficiency, and incentives with the opportunities for private entrepreneurship.
2. **Covenant of creativity:** Drawing up of creative regeneration agreements or action plans formulated in highly participative ways in support of environmental and social sustainability, accompanied by monitoring benchmarks based on parameters related to the metabolism of buildings and public spaces, mobility, the waste cycle, and the digital infrastructure. The value of culture and creativity for generating income and jobs has been largely proven. What should be measured first now is what is the cost of not valuing culture and creativity in urban planning.
3. **Creative capacity building:** Activation of project-oriented, economic-driven, and management-based local agencies or steering committees to enhance the creative cooperation at the city level contributing to foster the development of public-private-civil society partnerships and to attract investments, connected to a responsible simplification and to a greater effectiveness of the administration in the field of culture and creativity policies.
4. **Convergence and cross protocols:** Developing positive convergences between the different creative sectors, but also between them and the other sectors of the economy following integrated and transversal approaches and operative protocols based on exploration, co-creation, experimentation, and evaluation. Creative urban policies must encourage spill-overs and spin-offs and cross discipline collaboration.
5. **Creative dividend:** Designing innovative tools for the creative city governance through the promotion of new culture-based frameworks for spreading the creativity's impact in everyday life. The creative dividend, through the six factors drawn in the external circle of the Figure 2. (identity, dynamism, potentiality, multisectorality, interaction, and development), acts on quality of life and spatial equalization, on environmental active protection, on people empowerment and social innovation, on multilevel governance and management incentives, on sustainable mobility, and on taxes and fiscal leverage. The structural interaction of six factors of creative dividend can enhance the social return on investment in culture and creativity and the spread of positive effects and effective impacts. The ethical dimension of culture and creativity needs a creativity dividend as an active instrument to improve the values' generation for reduce inequality and differences. We are moving from the creative economy to creativity in the economy as creativity is a catalyst leading to new business models in every sector, building notably in the opportunities offered by the alliance between digital technologies and social innovation.

The creative dividend must become an active part of the new rights to city and a money in the new marketplace of cultural capitalism. However, creativity on its own does not stand a chance for the cities. It is a contextual practice, one that needs spatial relations, efficient planning, and responsible

community. It asks for collaborative planning, sharing of ideas, and active participation of the citizens. The creative dividend is the booster of raising cultural welfare because new perspectives are opening up for reshaping cultural policies with strategic and multidisciplinary alliances in favor of urban welfare. In the Augmented City, the players in the cultural processes will have no option but to steer towards a new alliance between institutional competences and social challenges. For the first time at the global level, the United Nations Sustainable Development Agenda for 2030 acknowledges the key role of culture, creativity, and cultural diversity to solving sustainable development challenges. It highlighted the dual nature of cultural activities, goods, and services: They have both an economic and a cultural dimension, providing jobs and revenues, driving innovation and sustainable economic growth, and at the same time conveying identities and values, fostering social inclusion, and a sense of belonging. We need to reshape cultural policies to redefine the role of culture and creativity in sustainable development [7], but even more we must witness the multiple advantages of this fertile alliance, as a force for both social and economic sustainability, as a driver to promote human rights and fundamental freedoms.

So a creative-oriented urban agenda will bring about a positive transformation of the entire sphere of the arts, design, and culture, a deep change in the mechanisms of price formation and distribution, a coming together of cultural communities, a development of more refined tastes, and an improvement in the material situation of the creative class. The city augmented by creativity will make it possible to co-ordinate cultural initiatives targeted at territorially dispersed groups of consumers with demand, and will reshape the demand itself. It will help to enhance and spread cultural activities in order to make knowledge, cooperation, social innovation, and to reactivate a productive metabolism.

## 5. Conclusions

The research demonstrates that the local growth could be changed if the communities and administrations rethink the development model, reshaping the spatial patterns, the economic relationships, and the cultural visions.

Therefore, a new settlement strategy is needed because it can facilitate the development of Sicilian rur-urban archipelagos starting from the renewed value of the cultural dimension of development, both in the post-pandemic crisis phase, but even more in the phase of endemic crisis in which we live. The strategy can be declined through five incremental options:

- Rethinking the places of living from a centripetal model towards more distributed (but without soil consumption) hybrid and flexible forms that allow the settlement of different life cycles with variable intensity.
- Redesigning, modernizing, and making healthy large-area services for the inhabitants of the archipelagos, often temporary, who continually redefine human and spatial relationships.
- Reinforcing the systemic cooperation of services for social inclusion and for the new welfare, especially with reference to the smaller towns, which in the polycentric perspective, will be the new connecting hinge areas of the wider territories, through the localization of the new cultural ecosystem.
- Redefining the relationships between metropolitan cities and archipelagos in collaborative forms in attracting the most suitable segments of the production chains by redistributing them along the networks of local development, also according to a principle of greater resilience to crises.
- Finally, redefining the governance processes and tools for large area policies, according to an effective enabling subsidiarity of the new local cultural ecosystems.

The visions and operational options summarized above constitute for the Sicilian territorial archipelagos—and for extension and differentiation also for the Italian ones—the challenge to act within a renewed territorial capitalism, in which the primary resource is constituted by territorial excellence, and landscape, from the geographical position, from the management of relational flows, from the offer of urban sustainability, from the protection of public health and from social connectivity.

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