

ICH in the South-Western Alps: Empowering communities through youth education on nature and cultural practices

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Abstract

The South-Western Alps, across Italy and France – broadly corresponding to the Occitan Valleys, inhabited by the linguistic and cultural Occitan community – are an area of long-lasting and significantly dense presence of diverse intangible cultural heritage expressions, resulting from the peculiar forms of relation and adaptation between the communities and the mountain ecosystems. In addition to the Occitan culture, with its specific traits, those expressions are present, for instance, in the traditional agricultural migratory routes (the Transhumance, part of the UNESCO Representative List of the ICH since 2019); in food-related practices (see the “The Food Atlas of the Monviso territory and of Occitan Valleys” and the archive generated by the AlpFoodWay project, promoting the nomination of the Alpine Food tradition to the UNESCO ICH List); and in other practices (for instance Alpinism, part of the UNESCO Representative List of the ICH since 2019).

Analogously to what happens in other peripheral and mountain localities, this area is currently facing a number of challenges: difficult transport and information accessibility, shortage of primary public services and commercial activities, aging population and depopulation, digital divide, urge of finding adaptive measures to climate change. Significant challenges also directly affect tangible and intangible cultural heritage: rural historic buildings often lie in a state of abandonment, several artisanal practices are disappearing, and the transmission of traditional knowledge and of the Occitan language is at risk. The recent events relating to COVID-19 have well highlighted the threats, and some opportunities as well, connected to living in the area.

Many interesting experiences recorded during the last decade illustrate how communities are able to build up resilience and contributing to shining new vitality on the territory. Among them, the widely diffused common element is the link between local development and the different expressions of intangible cultural heritage present in the area. A virtuous case is represented by the youth empowerment programmes promoted by the Monviso Park (managing organization of the UNESCO Transboundary Biosphere Reserve of Monviso) who, together with a number of local NGOs, is implementing a strategy for raising public and youth awareness about the role of cultural heritage in local development. Santagata Foundation has partnered with the Monviso Park for the design and implementation of youth programmes, with a specific focus, since 2018, on initiatives dedicated to population aged between 15 and 18, involved in the elaboration of proposals and demands for culture-based responses to the current development challenges, to be then addressed to the institutions responsible for managing the area. The educational

activities are being implemented in close relation with local players. Among them: new entrepreneurial initiatives based on traditional food practices, like cheese-making and brewery; tourism players valorizing the local heritage; and local cultural organizations. The programme positively impacted on strengthening the collaboration among the various stakeholders (institutional, private, and the civil society), and to unveil the potential of contributing to resilience and to sustainable paths of development by investing in the future generations and in their awareness of local cultural resources. Starting from this promising experiences, analogous initiatives are currently under planning in other territories and communities in Italy.

Keyword(s):

ICH, resilience, youth, education, sustainable development, South-Western Alps

ICH in the Western Alps: context and challenges

Italy is a relatively small but densely populated country, counting about 60 million citizens. In 2019, small municipalities (those with less than 5.000 inhabitants) accounted for 69.5% of the total of municipalities, with an overall population of about 10 million people, representing only the 16.5% of the overall Italian population. At the national level, we witness a growing sensibility over the challenges faced by small municipalities: a shortage of basic public services and commercial activities, an aging population and depopulation, urge to find adaptive measures to climate change, deterioration of abandoned buildings, to name a few. Specific urgencies are posed by small municipalities located in mountainous areas that are also suffering from limited physical accessibility and lack of IT infrastructural support. Aware of their impelling necessity, in 2014, the Italian Agency for territorial cohesion, the national governmental body dedicated to the promotion of economic development of the country, has inaugurated the National Strategy for Inner Areas⁶³, preparing specific plans and allocating resources to contrast the demographic decline that has characterized the most peripheral areas of the country. Such areas are defined as those territories characterized by a significant distance from the main centres offering essential services; with high availability of important environmental and cultural resources, and that are subject to dynamics of depopulation.

Piedmont, where lies the largest portion of the Italian South-Western Alps, is the region with the highest number of small municipalities, counting 1,181, the 88.5% of the total of the region. Its inner, peripheral areas are inhabited by 510,000 people, living in around 450 municipalities, all of them located in the mountainous alpine area at the border with France. Studies conducted by Baetzing⁶⁴ first and Bartaletti⁶⁵ more recently identified this portion of the Alps as one of the more affected by depopulation trends over the twentieth century. In particular, in the alpine

⁶³ Agency for Territorial Cohesion, National Strategy for Inner Areas (2013). The Inner areas represent approximately 53% of the Italian municipalities, host 23% of the Italian population, equal to over 13.54 million inhabitants, and occupy a portion of the territory that exceeds 60% of the national surface.

⁶⁴ BÄTZING W., *Le Alpi. Una regione unica al centro dell'Europa*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2005

⁶⁵ BARTALETTI F., *Le Alpi. Geografia e cultura di una regione nel cuore dell'Europa*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2011 ⁴ Report of the National Strategy for Inner Areas, Region of Piedmont, 2018

municipalities of the province of Cuneo, the outflow of population from 1901 to 2010 has been of -21%, with a peak of -40% recorded in the past 40 years in the ultra-peripheral municipalities of the province (the less accessible and farther from basic services like health, education, public transport).⁴

Since 2014, the area of the South-Western Alps around the Monviso peak – the highest mountain in the Cottian Alps, famous for its pyramid-like shape and identitarian symbol of the area – has become core zone of a Transboundary Biosphere Reserve, part of the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Network, extending over 400,000 hectares and gathering 108 municipalities: 87 in Italy and 21 France. The establishment of the Biosphere Reserve has been the stimulus for systematizing, thanks to a long-lasting process participated by the local communities, all the efforts for the conservation of local biodiversity and for defining plans for sustainable development especially leveraging on the safeguard of the local cultural heritage and on the promotion of culture and nature resources-based sustainable tourism initiatives. Joint actions are also attempting to find mitigation and adaptive measures to the adverse effects of climate change by reducing the environmental impact of human activities, as the continuous increase of temperature is putting at risk the very existence of the peak Monviso, subject to major landslides⁶⁶, and transforming the ecosystem and the livelihood connected to it.

More recently, the events relating to the COVID-19 emergency have well highlighted the threats connected to living in this inner, mountainous area and unveiled some possible opportunities as well. Whilst a favorable balance between communities and the environment has secured a better quality of life during the harsh weeks of lockdown (March - April 2020), the restrictions posed by the situation have stressed the already existing difficulties: the digital infrastructure was insufficient to allow distance-education, the high dependency on the larger centres in the low valley for services and shopping exposed the state of desertification of the mountain economy, the absence of tourism inflows determined a sensible decrease in local income. Nevertheless, many interesting experiences recorded during the last decade illustrate how communities are able to build up resilience and contributing to shining new vitality on the territory. Among them, the widely diffused common element is the link between local development and the different expressions of the intangible cultural heritage present in the area.

The Occitan Valleys: transmission of ICH to the new generations

Along the border between Italy and France, the South-Western Alps broadly correspond to the so-called Occitan Valleys, inhabited by the linguistic and cultural Occitan community. It is a territory of long-lasting and significantly dense presence of diverse intangible cultural heritage expressions, including music, dance, crafts, social practices, resulting from the peculiar forms of relation and progressive adaptation, along centuries, between the inhabitants and the mountain

⁶⁶ Regional Agency for Environmental Protection of Piedmont; “Landslide of the Northeast side of Monviso” 3rd of July 2020. Press release available at: <http://www.arpa.piemonte.it/news/crollo-dalla-parete-nordest-del-monviso-rilievo-digiugno>.

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ecosystems. On the one hand, part of this intangible cultural heritage elements is not subject to intergenerational transmission anymore, and several artisanal practices are slowly disappearing: this is the case, for instance, for the knowledge and skills connected to wool and hemp spinning and weaving and for the production of traditional costumes. Having fallen into disuse since the second half of the twentieth century, the precious objects and processes relating to this heritage form today part of the historical collective memory and are exposed at community museums, as it is the case, in the Varaita Valley, for the Museum of Costume and Textile Craftmanship of the village of Chianale. On the other hand, expressions of intangible cultural heritage have found recognition and protection in national and international registers: the traditional agricultural migratory routes of the Transhumance, a practice largely present and rooted in this area, have become part of the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage since 2019⁶⁷, and so has the practice of Alpinism⁶⁸, which finds in the Monviso one of the most representative and iconic peaks of the entire alpine chain. Food-related traditions have been also well documented, and the related information is accessible through inventories like “The Food Atlas of the Monviso territory and of Occitan Valleys”⁶⁹ (developed by the University of Gastronomic Sciences within the Interreg project MOVE⁹ – Monviso and Occitan Valleys of Europe), as well as through the digital archive generated by AlpFoodWay, a transboundary project conducted within the Interreg programme Alpine Space, aimed to promote the nomination of the Alpine Food tradition to the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List.⁷⁰

Over the past century, the Occitan culture, with its specific traits, has faced several challenges, especially linked to depopulation and to the negative impacts of the increasing globalization. Although the Occitan language has entered the list of endangered languages and is today spoken by only about 20,000 people in the Italian valleys⁷¹, several locally promoted initiatives are succeeding in securing the liveliness of the peculiar Occitan cultural expressions. An interesting experience is constituted by the Occit’amo Festival¹², an event that since 2016 has created momentum around the long-lasting musical traditions of Occitania, the motherland of the Troubadour school of the late middle ages. The Festival, an event diffused in all the area, has become a beloved annual rendezvous for the locals as well as for visitors, acting as a meeting point for already established artists and new emerging talents. It also play a very relevant symbolic role to reaffirm, through culture and music in particular, the identity and history of this communities, transmitting sense of belonging to the new generations. Another virtuous initiative, especially conceived for the children and youth attending schools in the valleys, is the

⁶⁷ Transhumance page on the UNESCO Intangible Heritage list:

<https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/transhumance-the-seasonal-droving-of-livestock-along-migratory-routes-in-themediterranean-and-in-the-alps-01470>

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⁶⁸ Alpinism page on the UNESCO Intangible Heritage list: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/alpinism-01471>

Last check: 02/10/2020

⁶⁹ Atlante dei sapori delle terre del Monviso e valli occitane / a cura di Paolo Olivero. Savigliano: Artistica, 2017 ⁹ See the project webpage <https://www.visitmove.it>

⁷⁰ See the inventory on the project webpage <https://www.alpfoodway.eu/>

⁷¹ REGIS, R. Su pianificazione, standardizzazione, polinomia: due esempi. 2012.

¹² See the Occit’amo Festival webpage <https://www.occitamo.it>

programme “Fai a ment - Occitan culture for school,” developed by the association Espaci Occitan⁷². Aimed at raising awareness on the Occitan linguistic and cultural heritage, it encompasses a series of workshop activities, differentiated based on the age group of students, diffusing knowledge on the local literature, music, folk stories, traditional professions, and architectural styles.

Empowering communities through education on natural environment and culture practices

In this context, aware of the fact that the current challenges cannot be faced without investing in preparing the new generations, a group of different actors, both from the public, private and civil society sectors, started to reflect on how to put in place a long-lasting strategy and process for improving the overall awareness about the territorial resources, and about the importance of their safeguard and correct use.

In 2018, the Monviso Park (managing authority of the UNESCO Transboundary Biosphere Reserve of Monviso), in collaboration with the Santagata Foundation⁷³ and other public bodies and local NGOs, took action to draft and implement an innovative programme of non-formal education directed to local youth aged between 15 and 18 years old, the MaB UNESCO Monviso Youth Camp⁷⁴, with the goals of enhancing the territorial resilience capacity towards the ongoing changes, of accelerating communities development ambitions, and of embedding these two goals within the transmission of cultural practice, through youth involvement.

Following UNESCO’s addresses and policy guidelines on Education for Sustainable Development⁷⁵, the Monviso Youth Camp works with the goal of creating capacities and empowering young people to act for the change needed for creating a sustainable future. During the week of residential camping in the inspiring setting of the Monviso Reserve, young people are engaged in interactive learning activities aimed at understanding the values associated with local cultural, natural, and communitarian resources and at deepening the understanding and implications of the sustainable development goals of the UN 2030 Agenda “Transforming our world.”

⁷² See the association dedicated webpage: <http://www.espaci-occitan.org/news/news/fai-a-ment-cultura-occitana-per-lescuole/>

⁷³ The Santagata Foundation for the Economics of Culture is a no-profit research foundation based in Turin, Italy, working on investigating and transferring knowledge on the relation between cultural resources and socio-economic development (<https://www.fondazioneasantagata.it/en>).

⁷⁴ The Monviso Youth Camp is an initiative born from the collaboration between Monviso Park, Fondazione Santagata for the Economics of Culture (Turin, Italy), Consorzio Monviso Solidale and ApprossimAZIONI (Saluzzo, Italy), in collaboration with Fondazione Amleto Bertoni and Saluzzo Municipality, Association Culturelle Sociale et Sportive du Queyras and MJC du Briançonnais (France). The project was sponsored by the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Cuneo and supported by the Italian National Commission for UNESCO and profited from the technical partnership of several municipalities and local businesses.

⁷⁵ See the dedicated webpage at: <https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-sustainable-development>

Special attention is posed towards the local intangible cultural heritage, unveiling its potential of contributing to resilience, of enabling sustainable paths of development, of fostering responsible tourism, as well highlighted also by the UNWTO⁷⁶ (2012), and of involving the young participants in the elaboration of proposals and demands for culture-based responses to the current threats and the consequent development challenges. All the educational activities are implemented in close relation with local players to favour intergenerational exchange and knowledge transmission. Among the actors involved, there are entrepreneurial initiatives based on traditional food practices (bakers, cheese-makers, and brewers); traditional agroecological activities (beekeepers, wild herbs and infusions makers), craftsman preserving traditional techniques (construction workers specialized in bioconstruction and construction with traditional local materials, like wood) and local cultural organizations promoting other expressions of intangible cultural heritage, for instance, Alpinism, and the relating touristic activities.

In a logic of bottom-up activation, inspired by the contents of the educational programme and by the meetings held during the Camp days, the young people involved, averagely 25 per edition, coming from both Italy and France, formulate common proposals in a participative manner to encourage the rise of new ideas, the sharing of good practices, and to address them to the decision-makers and the institutions responsible for managing the area, with the goal of enabling them of better complying with the future generation demand and expectations.

The first two editions of the Camp, held in 2018 and 2019 respectively in the Maira Valley and in the Po Valley, positively impacted on strengthening the collaboration among the various stakeholders and territorial communities belonging to the UNESCO Transboundary Biosphere Reserve, both in Italy and in France, and were able to generate continuous flows of information exchange and to revive the capacity for setting international cooperation initiatives.

In addition, working with youth revealed all its potential to generate sharings, to facilitate cross-generational and sectorial dialogue, to push for the adoption of new languages and tools (including the digital ones) and the capacity to adopt alternative narratives of community values, effective in reaching and mobilize the interest of many more actors.

The 2020 edition (October 2020) was planned in a blended format due to the restrictions posed by the COVID-19 emergency: the educational activities were complemented –upon an initiative by the former participants- by the constitution of a Youth Board, composed by the past attendees and potential future participants to the Camp, aimed at maintaining the high level of participation of the youths along all the year and not just during the training activities, thus increasing its function of stimulus towards the other actors and stakeholders, and its overall potential impact.

⁷⁶ World Tourism Organization (2012), *Tourism and Intangible Cultural Heritage*, UNWTO, Madrid.

Future developments: replicability, adaptation and open questions.

The MaB UNESCO Monviso Youth Camp experience was positively acclaimed at the national and international levels. Among other recognitions, it was presented as a good practice at the First Meeting of the Italian Biosphere Reserve, organized by the Ministry of the Environment and the UNESCO National Commission (November 2018), it was selected as a representative of Italy for the Michel Batisse international prize for Biosphere Reserves, and it was a candidate and presented as good practice representative of Italy at EUROMAB 2019 (Dublin, April 2019). Thanks to the visibility offered by those occasions, the concept of joining the action and finding innovative solutions through investing in the transmission of values and knowledge to the future generations have generated the attention of many other actors and communities, especially those ones benefiting from a UNESCO designation, in Italy as well as in other countries.

Other networks of actors and institutions have shown interest in this approach and in planning and organizing analogous programmes for youth empowerment for sustainability, shining value on the peculiar cultural heritage resources of their territories and leveraging on intangible cultural heritage for coping with the most pressing social, economic and environmental challenges. Editions of the Youth Camp are currently under planning in other territories and with other communities in Italy. In the Lanzo Valleys of Piedmont⁷⁷, an area proxy to the city of Turin and characterized by the transhumance and associated rituals; in the Sacred Mountain of Crea World Heritage site⁷⁸, characterized by the spiritual values associated to pilgrimage traditions; and, in the Eastern Alps, in the Marine Biosphere Reserve of Miramare (Trieste)⁷⁹, part of the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Network and partially characterized by the “art of dry stone walling, knowledge, and techniques,” registered from 2018 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

The future establishment of these youth groups advocating for the culture-led sustainable development of their territories, joining voices and forces for the fulfillment of actions of active citizenships, may together contribute to approaching and providing a concrete response, at the local community level, to the major global issues connected to the Sustainable Development Goals. Indeed, the programme would benefit also from the interaction with youth groups at the international level.

Besides its replicability, the participative format of the Camp showed the capacity to favour inclusive learning and facilitate access to innovative knowledge in remote areas. In addition, thanks to the potential of its adaptation, the Youth Camp poses the bases for the creation of resilient forms of education, which is key to answer the questions of current times and assumes

⁷⁷ Through the project “Youth Power”, developed in collaboration with Ageenda WiFi, Caracol, and with the support of Time2 Foundation.

⁷⁸ Through the project “The Sacred Mount of Crea, between nature, culture and production”, promoted by the *Associazione per il restauro delle cappelle del Sacro Monte di Crea* and financed by Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation within the programme Luoghi della Cultura.

⁷⁹ Organized by WWF Italy, Marine Protected Area of Miramare and Natural Park of the Giulie Prealps.

peculiar significance during the pandemic, attracting attention and consideration from schools, formal education systems, and local authorities in general.

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