

ETHNOGRAPHIC INVESTIGATION AND CREATIVITY. A COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITY IN THE  
MADONIE REGION

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# COMMUNITIES' SUSTAINABLE EXPERIENCES

EDITED BY  
Salvatore Di Dio

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## CREATIVE PEAKS

The “Creative Peaks” initiative, a part of the Madonie Living Lab, was structured as a week-long residency in Petralia Sottana, promoting research and innovation through direct community interaction. Participants, encompassing experts in fields such as territorial development and structured finance, engaged in action research with local stakeholders, focusing on areas such as pastoral practices, design for inner areas, and traditional crafts. The program included daily checkpoints for sharing research progress, with activities led by residents aimed at deepening the understanding of local practices and developing sustainable innovations. The diverse backgrounds of the participants fostered a rich exchange of ideas, fostering an environment where creativity and local value production met. The methodology adopted emphasized action research and participatory design, with a clear intention to generate solutions that resonate with the territorial specificity of the Madonie region. The collaborative nature of the program was designed not only to produce individual projects but also to cultivate a collective wisdom that underscores the resilience and potential of the local community and environment. This chapter sets the stage for the abstracts of research conducted by participants and has also a contribution from the local activist Carolina Lo Nero, showcasing their journey from initial concept to actionable insights within the unique socio-cultural and environmental context of Madonie.



A selection of pictures from residency.

## MADONIE, RESILIENT COMMUNITIES “WE LACK EVERYTHING, WE NEED NOTHING”

VINCENZO PACE

The residency in the Madonie territory was the tool for revising and validating a research-action paradigm, the “convivial city,” proposed for doctoral research. In particular, through this approach, it is intended to investigate the relationship between communities and climate changes by assessing their resilience through interaction with various stakeholders and local realities. The Madonie territory strives to counter and limit the profound transformations due to various factors; a community that resists by reinventing itself, starting from the importance of local culture. The major factors of the territory’s transformations are linked to depopulation, the abandonment of agriculture and livestock farming, and climate changes.

Activities in the municipality of Petralia Sottana were divided into two macro-groups: community meetings and meetings with local stakeholders. The community meetings primarily focused on the impacts of climate change on the community and the community’s sustainability/vulnerability. Crucial was the meeting with numerous local actors who represent bastions of resistance in the territory. In particular, siblings Giovanni and Luciana, aged 22 and 20, who decided to continue the family business carried on by their father Giacinto, inherited from his father. Giovanni and Luciana expressed their desire to continue being a shepherd and shepherdess in their territory, however, seeking to innovate the livestock and cheese production system. The problems are certainly multiple: climate changes and the presence of “pest” animals are the main ones. The effects of climate change are reducing the areas designated for grazing, increasingly dry and arid, causing a substantial reduction in the quality and quantity of milk produced by the livestock. Their willingness to continue this activity drives them to find new solutions and new pastures to continue producing traditional cheeses (such as ricotta and caciotta) and to experiment with new products. Lucia, on the other hand, a Palermitan who moved to the Madonie to become a farmer, is a strong woman who demonstrates her great capacity for resistance in a system where “the foreigner” is not well seen or accepted. She too faces the same problems as the shepherds: climate changes and “pest” animals. The wheat fields, due to the heavy rains last spring, were almost entirely destroyed. Hers, fortunately, were saved because, due to a delay in the planting period, they matured later. Today, Lucia begins to think that, due to the ongoing changes, it may be necessary to revise the planting and sowing period to escape the long periods of rain and heat.



Figure 1. - The workshop held by Vincenzo Pace in Petralia Sottana

## INVESTIGATIVE STUDY ON THE MADONIE FOR A POTENTIAL INITIATIVE TO PROMOTE THIS TERRITORY WITHIN A GENERAL PROJECT ON INNER AREAS

ARMANDO PUGNO

The goal of my residency was to gain a deeper understanding of the Madonie territory as this area was among those shortlisted for the launch of my project on Inner Areas, aimed at making these territories attractive to Millennials, both those residing in the area and those from large metropolitan areas, by promoting micro-enterprises in various sectors (primarily agriculture), participation in Renewable Energy Communities (CER), and the reevaluation of cultural and artistic heritage. The days were intense, centered around Petralia Sottana, and featured meetings with the GAL (Local Action Group Madonie), Sosvima (the local development agency of the Madonie), and some entrepreneurs (agricultural/touristic, etc.), culminating in the final three days marked by engaging conferences/workshops where, alongside general topics on inner areas, there was the opportunity to delve into interesting initiatives of the area and meet other local entrepreneurs. To synthesize the findings at macro, meso, and micro levels potentially useful for the research, the initial feedback can be summarized as follows:

**Macro:** The Sicilian Region has extremely long decision-making times not compatible with the project's timelines, hence the emerged indication is the necessity to remodulate the approach considering this aspect.

**Meso:** At this level, the meetings with the GAL and Sosvima were very useful, particularly noteworthy and significant was the ability to generate projects and intervene with public/private co-design in many areas, not to mention the robust network of relationships with the different territory actors. The members of the Petralia Sottana council that I had the opportunity to hear/meet, favorably impressed me with their clarity, competence, and motivation to act to improve the situation.

**Micro:** Many of the small entrepreneurs met have managed to clearly define their business model pursuing economic sustainability, without neglecting environmental and social sustainability. The impression received is that of a community of citizens/entrepreneurs, some returning, others who have moved by choice, but also locals, capable of having an overall vision and potentially receptive to systemic proposals for the reactivation of the area. Overall, the residency allowed me to have a first positive impression, obviously to be deepened with further stays, also to expand the analysis not only to Petralia Sottana but to the Madonie as a whole. Certainly, the territory has confirmed itself as a candidate for the project I am developing. However, despite recognizing the overall vivacity of the territory for the presence of many projects, I am left with the underlying feeling that, in the absence, to my knowledge, of a systemic analysis of the territory (it should be noted that very few realities have had the chance to have one), the many commendable initiatives, each undoubtedly useful, have little chance collectively to change the trend of population depletion of the area. The siloed approach, that is, many initiatives, each interesting, but without being sufficiently interconnected, does not allow, in my opinion, to activate a truly systemic process capable of generating that spark for a real, autonomous, and lasting movement to enable a persistent change in the territory's trend. In this context, the Madonie Living Lab could represent a moment of profound reflection and challenge. On one hand, it could act as the much-awaited catalyst, but on the other, there is the danger that, once the startup phase is over, the initiative may not be able to find economic balance and, even more importantly, develop an autonomous capacity to become a point of reference and engine of innovation. This risk could be mitigated by considering an adequate integration of the Madonie Living Lab into a network, at least at a regional level. In this way, external actors would know they can take a first approach to the territory through this center, while the locals would know they can establish a first contact with external actors in this space.



Figure 2. - Armando Pugno during the Communities' Sustainable eXperiences conference

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## ETHNOGRAPHIC INVESTIGATION AND CREATIVITY. A COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITY IN THE MADONIE REGION

SERGIO DEGIACOMI

An analytical experience, an introspective journey in search of design creativity. This could be one definition of the residency experience in the Madonie. A week full of rich and prolific experiences that allowed this research to immerse itself in a socio-cultural context that was different and disciplinarily diversified. It is precisely in such a context that the research was intended to be developed. The objective of this stay and experience was to investigate the meanings, role, and impact that creativity—as a mediating element within projectuality—has, defining a qualitative and organic mapping. An ethnographic cross-section of reality, from which to extract needs, potentialities, and projectual suggestions, starting from design but then expanded into a multidisciplinary scenario.

In particular, this analytical process is actually part of a second step, preceded by a desk-based qualitative and quantitative analysis that allowed the study from a disciplinary point of view—in the first place—and then socio-cultural—as a consequence guided by the research—of the concept of creativity and its implications in the projectual field. From this desk research, therefore, the need emerged to immerse oneself in a specific context to identify a confirmation of this analysis, and subsequently, third-party insights useful for the continuation of the project.

As a result, the ethnographic investigation carried out in the Madonie and particularly in the urban context of Petralia Sottana, involved a series of informational interviews with people representing local realities and, in a sense, unique projectualities. In a second phase, a shared experience was designed among some of the interviewed people, together with others involved in the exploration phase. The panorama of such involved people demonstrated a rich disciplinary and socio-cultural diversity—given by age, gender, origin, educational background, and work field. The structured experience also brought out a series of individual definitions of the concept of creativity; common needs useful for enhancing one's own field of study and work; and finally, improvement proposals both for one's own projectual field and to stimulate and enhance personal needs, aimed at enriching one's creativity.

In conclusion, this experience was a first, and successful approach to this type of analysis. Subsequently, this activity will be reiterated in different contexts and with different people, to enrich the qualitative and evaluative panorama of the concept of creativity, and its role and impact in multidisciplinary projectual fields of design.



Figure 3. - The workshop held by Sergio Degiacomi in Petralia Sottana

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## INVESTIGATING ESSENTIAL SERVICES IN THE MADONIE: “WE LACK EVERYTHING, WE NEED NOTHING”.

SAMUELE MORVILLO

The “Creative Peaks” residency in Petralia Sottana has offered a singular opportunity to delve into a participatory research experience. Fieldwork has not only enabled a thorough analysis of the territory but also facilitated the establishment of a significant network. This networking allowed for forging connections with the local community and developing valuable collaborations with fellow researchers. The ambitious aim of this study was to identify and map out the needs and frustrations of local stakeholders, focusing particularly on essential services. The next phase following the needs mapping will involve differentiating these needs into explicit, implicit, and latent categories. Through this process, qualitative data were gathered, which subsequently aided in crafting interview templates pivotal for creating User Personas for future developments. The added value of this journey stems from its multidisciplinary nature: researchers from various fields engaged in a broad range of themes, merging their investigations and uncovering unexpected commonalities. We can also posit that, indirectly, a research methodology was adopted that enabled a diverse group to explore a singular theme through the lens of multiple disciplines.

In the Madonie, the conducted interviews have yielded an authentic snapshot of the local users' perceptions. We investigated and understood the state of essential services and, more critically, perceived a potential direct correlation between their absence and the abandonment of the

territory a notion intimately intertwined with the major frustrations voiced by the inhabitants of Petralia Sottana. This sentiment sometimes also transforms into an awareness of a frustrated resignation, a reflection of the Gattopardian concept that nothing ever changes, as poignantly expressed in the “Key Quotes” from an interview with a farmer, who responded to a question about the lack of services in the area with: “We lack everything, we need nothing.”

Another critical issue that surfaced is the closure of the maternity ward at Petralia Sottana’s hospital, an event that signifies a considerable loss for the entire Madonie area. This closure has spurred a widespread feeling of frustration, powerfully articulated by the statement: “Here one cannot be born, only die.” In conclusion, this investigation has been a successful initial phase in my research trajectory. I have been able to experiment with new methodologies, deepen my understanding of an unfamiliar territory, and establish a network with other researchers and local organizations such as So.Svi.Ma and GAL Madonie. This work will significantly contribute to my doctoral thesis and will be included in future publications, as well as serving as a robust starting point for the next stages of my research.



Figure 4. - Samuele Morvillo (on the left) during the Communities’ Sustainable eXperiences conference

## SYNERGIES AND INNOVATION: AN ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE ON LOCAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE MADONIE

MIA SCOTTI

I am an economist specialized in local development. For several years, I have been involved in projects and policies supporting development in marginalized areas in Italy at both national and regional levels. My motivation for participating in the Creative Peaks WePush: Residency in the Madonie was multifaceted. The Madonie area is a vibrant territory, one where something significant is happening despite the strong dynamics of depopulation affecting it and the high degree of peripherality of its municipalities. Over the years, it has managed to attract and leverage various funding opportunities both at national and European levels (e.g., Territorial Pact, GAL Leader, PIT, PIST). Thus, it is a territory with a cultural and professional fabric open to European-level project design. Currently, several projects and experiments have been launched, including the actions promoted within the National Strategy for Inner Areas 14-20 still underway. The territory, where the agricultural and agro-industrial sector plays a central role in the productive specialization of the area, boasts an agriculture percentage nearly three times higher than the regional and national average (2.9% versus 1% - 2011 census). Among various initiatives, the territory is also about to launch the second school of training for Young Shepherds, a project by CREA and Riabitare l’Italia, which I had directly collaborated with in northern Italy. In this context, the residency offered the opportunity to come into contact with the Madonie territory, to know its actors and inhabitants, to have a first informal contact with those who live in this territory daily, as well as with the key players in local territorial planning and research. It offered the chance to see some projects that have been realized or are in progress in the territory.

The five days of the residency were characterized by a succession of meetings, exchanges, and shared experiences with the local community. The main areas of exploration that guided my activities during the residency were related to the projectual experience of the area and the local productive fabric, with particular reference to the fields of cheese-making and extensive livestock farming. Thanks to the residency, I was able to meet some key players operating in the territory, such as the GAL ISC Madonie and the development agency So.Svi.Ma, but also small and medium-sized production realities, including the Barreca Farm and the Richiamo alle Capre project, in addition to some local shepherds and young people active in the territory. The journey was enriched by the opportunities for exchange and discussion with other researchers in residency. The diversity of the disciplinary paths of the involved researchers indeed allowed highlighting different aspects during meetings with local actors but also identifying possible areas of synergy and interesting research insights.



Figure 4. - Mia Scotti (on the right) interviewing the president of SO.SVI.MA.