

'Generative Spaces' - Investing in community building to diversify and rejuvenate a mountain territory

Reversing the negative effects of low population density by investigating ways to promote innovative activities that attract new residents and economic actors to rural mountain areas.

EAFRD-funded projects

Location: LAG Escartons and Valli Valdesi area, Italy

Programming period: 2014-2020

Priority: P6 - Social inclusion and local development

Focus Area: Local development

Measures: M19 - LEADER CLLD

Funding:

Total budget:	52 288 (EUR)
EAFRD:	19 674 (EUR)
National/Regional:	14 914 (EUR)
Private/own:	17 700 (EUR)

Timeframe: 06/2022 - 12/2023

Project promoter: LAG Escartons & Valli Valdesi

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Summary

The project addresses the issues of rural depopulation and outbound youth migration by promoting social aggregation in an innovative way. The project aimed to enable the creation of hybrid, multifunctional spaces in rural areas. Project activities included: data collection and context analysis; information, communication and awareness raising initiatives; and co-creation and participatory planning of 'Generative Spaces'.

The project resulted in enhanced community engagement and information provision for local actors on how to identify and set up hybrid spaces at the local level. At the same time, the project findings informed a number of successful funding applications. Importantly, the project also aimed to prepare the local context for implementing the 'Smart Villages Strategy' to address the challenges related to social isolation and the lack of community cohesion in rural mountain areas.

Project results

- A completed mapping exercise and engagement of 79 stakeholders.
- Up to six hybrid spaces were identified and a call for further development will be launched in early 2025.
- The project informed the successful funding applications of 14 experimental initiatives between 2022 and 2023. In most cases, this involved public bodies setting up partnerships and management agreements with private organisations and local actors. The financial investments ranged from EUR 50 000-140 000 for each funded project.

Key lessons and recommendations

This project immensely helped build and update the local CLLD strategy. It also helped a smooth transition between the previous and current planning period (2023-2017).



Context

The Italian LAG Escartons and Valli Valdesi (EEV) is active in the western part of the Piedmont region, bordering the French Alps. The region has a population of nearly 90 000 inhabitants and a large territory of 1 800km². This very low population density is a significant factor in hampering local development. For this reason, the LAG investigated ways to promote innovative and interesting activities to attract new residents and economic actors, especially after the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis showed that rebuilding a feeling of community via the hybrid use of available spaces could foster new development paths, especially for younger generations.

Objectives

The project aimed to engage local actors (public, private, and especially young people) in the design of the Local Development Strategy. This involved finding available spaces that could take on new functions and play a prominent role within the CLLD strategy.

The project further supported the analysis of assessing the feasibility of transforming the identified spaces into co-working and hybrid spaces (Generative Spaces) with a particular emphasis on their use for younger generations.

The project was also designed to help inform an ongoing project focusing on setting up smart villages in the LAG area.

Activities

Project activities included:

- Mapping the project's context and relevant stakeholders. This involved identifying key local and external stakeholders and their needs (via a questionnaire survey and direct interviews). In addition, a communication and awareness raising campaign informed the population about the development opportunities at the local scale.
- Collecting data and analysing the context along with information, communication and awareness raising initiatives, co-creation and participatory planning of 'Generative Spaces'.
- Organising four discussion sessions as part of the engagement activities to analyse the various options to be pursued. In addition, three meetings with local stakeholders were held to discuss the expected features and co-design the multiple steps involved in identifying and setting up the new spaces. This was followed by a deep analysis of the meeting outcomes to integrate them

into the CLLD strategy. Automatic content analysis of the transcriptions of the fieldwork was performed via IRAMUTEQ, a software that allows the identification of clusters and trends in texts.

- Preparing a report that describes the outputs of every activity. The document will also inform the forthcoming feasibility plan for creating and managing the new hybrid spaces in the LAG territory.



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The project activities followed the first three steps of the roadmap toolbox proposed by Smart Rural 21, which was designed to provide valuable context information to local actors embarking on drafting place-based, smart village strategies during the 2023-2027 programming period.

Main results

The project results included:

- A completed mapping exercise and engagement of 79 stakeholders in meetings and working tables/workshops.
- Several communication tools were launched, including a monthly newsletter with 1 266 contacts and several social media pages on Instagram, LinkedIn, Facebook and YouTube.
- Up to six hybrid spaces were identified and a call for further development will be launched in early 2025.
- The project informed the successful funding applications of 14 experimental initiatives between 2022 and 2023 (e.g. adapted physical activity for older people, co-working spaces, public hybrid spaces and residencies for local artists).



In most cases, this involved public bodies setting up partnerships and management agreements with private organisations and local actors. The financial investments ranged from EUR 50 000-140 000 for each funded project.

- > One report was issued about the overall project implementation process, which lasted two years.
- > The project experience was shared with other foreign LAGs (Spanish, German, etc.) that operate in similar mountain contexts in view of their smart village developments.

Key lessons and recommendations

- > This project immensely helped build and update the local CLLD strategy. It also helped a smooth transition between the previous and current planning period (2023-2017).
- > The project focused on younger generations, which required the communication tools and language used by the project to be appropriate for them. However, this proved less appealing for some stakeholders.
- > Finding a tailored way to manage very different kinds of spaces also proved quite challenging (e.g. from an administrative and economic point of view)

Quotes

“We were surprised to discover quite a number of available spaces for new uses, mainly owned by public authorities, but also run by families and/or small associations.”

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“Our experience shows that new generations can be attracted by a mountain context once given innovative and engaging opportunities where distinct knowledge can be shared.”

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“We may have undervalued the role of some public bodies that are usually slower to react and to participate in innovative projects; this will represent our effort for the future.”

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Additional information:

[‘Generative Spaces: Community places and co-working in rural areas’ project website](#)

[LAG Escartons & Valli Valdesi website](#)

[Local development strategy 2023-2027 of the LAG Escartons & Valli Valdesi](#)

