

Article

From Abandonment to Revitalization: Community-Based Tourism and Rural Regeneration in the South of Italy

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Abstract

The phenomenon of abandoned villages in peripheral and isolated areas constitutes a critical socio-economic and territorial sustainability challenge. Despite its relevance within debates on rural resilience and sustainable development, there remains a lack of systematic research examining how tourism can contribute to the regeneration of these fragile contexts. Grounded in the experience economy paradigm, this article investigates how diverse tourism experiences—co-created through interactions between visitors and local communities—can foster sustainable place-based development. Specifically, the study adopts a two-dimensional analytical framework that classifies tourism experiences according to: (1) the level of local community engagement, and (2) the degree of demographic decline and territorial marginalization of the destination. This framework enables the identification and critical assessment of distinct typologies of tourism experiences in relation to their potential to support social, economic, and cultural sustainability. Through a comparative analysis of selected evidence in Southern Italy, the study highlights how community-based and sustainable tourism initiatives can produce differentiated outcomes in addressing rural depopulation, enhancing local resilience, and promoting the sustainable revitalization of abandoned settlements.

Keywords: depopulation; ghost villages; sustainable tourism; authenticity; community-based tourism

1. Introduction

Depopulation in Europe is a widespread phenomenon whose analysis presents significant challenges due to its multifactorial nature [1]. Among the most relevant structural factors is the decline in natural population growth, accompanied by a limited body of specific scientific research on this issue within certain territorial approaches [2].

However, European demographic dynamics cannot be explained solely through natural population degrowth [3]. Processes such as emigration and population ageing play a decisive role in intensifying demographic decline [4,5]. In fact, in recent decades Europe is facing a profound and structural demographic crisis: the population is becoming increasingly older, and immigration is currently the main driver of demographic growth. Without external inflows, Europe's population would already be in decline: since 2012, the natural population balance (the difference between births and deaths) has been negative, reaching −2.6 per thousand in 2023. The share of people aged 80 in 2024 is 6.1%. At the same time, birth rates in 2024 remain among the lowest in Europe, with Italy ranking near



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the bottom at 1.2 children per woman. The result is an increasingly older population. Today, the average age in Italy is 48.7 years, the highest in Europe. Only Iceland, Malta, and Luxembourg still maintain an average age below 40, although they too are ageing more slowly. Fertility rates have fallen to 1.53 children per woman across the EU, well below the replacement level of 2.1 [6].

In 2024 Italy's resident population fell by around 37,000. This trend is particularly acute in the south of the peninsula, where the population has decreased by 75,000 residents. Despite a positive net migration figure at the national level (+244,000), the population in the southern regions continues to decline: the sharp natural decline is compounded by a negative internal migration balance (−52,000) [7].

From a sustainability perspective, these demographic trends pose significant challenges to territorial balance, service provision, and socioeconomic cohesion, especially in ghost villages or towns [8]. In this sense, the phenomenon is directly related to several of the Sustainable Development Goals defined by the United Nations. In this context, tourism emerges as a potential tool for territorial revitalization, especially in areas affected by demographic decline [9,10]. However, its impact depends largely on the degree of integration of the local community and the structural characteristics of the territory [11,12]. Through the literature review, a research gap was identified regarding the complex relationships between population decline, community engagement, and tourism development. In fact, although substantial research exists on each of these dimensions separately, their combined effects remain insufficiently explored. In particular, the literature lacks a comprehensive framework that captures how varying levels of population decline and community engagement interact to give life to new sustainable tourism development processes and outcomes and why some declining communities successfully leverage tourism for local revitalization, while others continue to experience economic and social decline.

A further gap concerns the limited empirical investigation of the relationships among these dimensions. Existing studies tend to focus either on demographic change or on community participation in tourism development, without systematically examining their combined effects. Consequently, little is known about whether strong community engagement can offset the constraints associated with population decline or under which conditions tourism can contribute to community resilience. Moreover, few studies have tested typological or matrix-based approaches that classify destinations according to the two variables. This limits scholars' ability to identify distinct development pathways and to understand how different combinations of these factors shape tourism outcomes.

As a consequence, we believe that further research is needed to develop and empirically validate an integrated "population decline–community engagement–tourism development" framework that could explain the various trajectories of tourism development in communities facing demographic decline. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the relationship between the development of sustainable tourism experiences and depopulation processes in European regions. It employs a two-dimensional analytical framework that classifies destinations according to (i) the level of local community engagement, and (ii) the degree of demographic decline and territorial marginalization. The goal is to assess the potential contribution to territorial sustainability, in line with the principles established by the United Nations in the 2030 Agenda. Consequently, the research revolves around the following question: How does the interaction between demographic decline and community engagement shape tourism development trajectories in rural communities affected by depopulation?

1.1. The Challenge of Depopulation

The trends described underlie the phenomenon of depopulation in many small towns, some of which are turning into ghost villages. All of this is closely linked to multiple structural factors, including the physical isolation of many settlements from major transportation networks and the limited accessibility to essential public services such as healthcare and education [13–15].

Additional causes of village abandonment include natural hazards—such as earthquakes, landslides, volcanic eruptions, floods, and wildfires—as well as long-term environmental constraints, including hydrogeological instability or the scarcity of natural resources, particularly water. In some cases, abandonment may also result from epidemics. Furthermore, anthropogenic factors play a crucial role, including environmental contamination, governmental neglect, political decisions, and armed conflicts.

Nevertheless, in many cases, the gradual abandonment of settlements is primarily driven by interconnected economic, social, and demographic dynamics, such as high unemployment rates, pronounced population decline, ageing communities, and persistent geographic marginality [16–19]. This phenomenon gives life to sustainability, social and environmental problems, considering the role of these isolated and rural settlements as custodians of natural and socio-cultural resources [13,20].

Demographic decline and the shrinking of an urban centre—whether small or large—may stem from a range of interrelated factors associated with processes of territorial marginalization [14]. As highlighted by Alonso et al. [21], marginalization can first be interpreted in geographical terms, namely as limited accessibility, often rooted in the peripheral or isolated location of a settlement, distant from and poorly connected to the main urban nodes of the region [22–24]. However, accessibility should not be reduced to mere physical distance: it also encompasses the quality, frequency, and affordability of transport systems and infrastructures, as well as digital connectivity, which increasingly shapes opportunities for inclusion in contemporary socio-economic networks. In this sense, infrastructural deficits contribute not only to spatial isolation but also to a form of functional disconnection from broader development dynamics. Such limited accessibility tends to drive significant portions of the population—particularly younger cohorts—towards better-served and more easily accessible areas, which offer improved quality of life both in terms of employment opportunities and leisure activities.

Economic and occupational fragility constitutes a further critical dimension. The scarcity of stable and well-paid employment opportunities, coupled with limited prospects for professional advancement, drives especially younger and working-age populations to relocate to more dynamic urban areas [25]. This selective out-migration produces a dual demographic effect: on the one hand, it accelerates population ageing; on the other, it contributes to declining fertility rates, thereby undermining the long-term demographic resilience of the area.

Among the main policy instruments adopted by the Italian government to address depopulation and its consequences, perhaps the most important is the National Strategy for Inner Areas (*Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne*, SNAI). Introduced in the 2010s, this strategy is explicitly designed to counteract long-term depopulation trends by enhancing liveability and reducing structural marginalization. Rather than focusing solely on economic subsidies, SNAI adopts a place-based development approach, aiming to improve service accessibility while fostering local development through territorial cooperation, innovation in public services, and sustainable economic activities. Complementing this framework, Italy has increasingly invested in the regeneration of historic rural settlements, commonly referred to as “*borghi*”. These small towns and villages represent a significant component of Italy’s cultural and territorial heritage but are particularly vulnerable to

abandonment. Recent initiatives—especially under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR)—introduced after COVID-19 pandemic—include dedicated funding lines for the revitalization of borghi through cultural tourism, digital transition, housing rehabilitation, and support for local entrepreneurship. These interventions aim to reposition borghi as nodes of cultural economy and sustainable tourism rather than solely heritage conservation sites.

Finally, at the European and international policy level, these initiatives align with broader concepts of Rural Transformation Development (RTD) [26], which emphasize integrated rural renewal through economic diversification, digital connectivity, ecological transition, and community-led development. In the Italian context, RTD is operationalized through a combination of EU Cohesion Policy instruments, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) rural development funds, and national recovery investments. Overall, Italy's policy framework reflects a gradual shift from traditional compensatory regional aid toward a more holistic territorial development paradigm.

1.2. Revitalizing of Ghost Villages Through Sustainable Tourism

Abandoned villages may be either totally or partially deserted; in some cases, they become entirely uninhabited following the relocation of their populations to newly established nearby settlements. Depending on the previously described causes of abandonment and on subsequent management strategies, these settlements may present varying states of conservation, ranging from complete ruin to relatively intact or even well-preserved built environments [27,28].

In recent decades, significant efforts have been directed toward the revitalization of ghost towns and villages, frequently through tourism-led development strategies. As outlined by Torlak [29], these approaches include adaptive reuse for cultural or educational purposes (e.g., cultural centres or industrial archeology museums), the promotion of ghost settlements as destinations for short-term visits or longer stays, their use as film locations, and the creation of “museum-towns” or living history environments.

In cases where the physical fabric remains substantially preserved, such sites may undergo processes of “musealization,” whereby they are reinterpreted and managed as heritage attractions. This transformation often entails the codification and storytelling of local history, architecture, and memory into curated experiences for visitors. Notable examples in Italy include Cracow, Santo Stefano di Sessanio, and Pentedattilo, which have been repositioned within cultural tourism circuits as emblematic “open-air museums” of abandonment and resilience, an approach well-documented in the context of Western American ghost towns [30,31].

More recent studies highlight how such initiatives are increasingly embedded within broader frameworks of sustainable and heritage-based development. Abandoned and depopulated villages are often reimagined as sites for experiential, rural, roots and creative tourism, attracting excursionists, residential tourists, and niche visitor segments interested in local lifestyles, authenticity, intangible heritage, and vernacular traditions [32–34]. These dynamics contribute to the diversification of local economies, the depersonalization of tourism flows, and the valorisation of endogenous cultural and territorial resources.

Sustainable tourism offers a potential pathway to address, and in some cases counteract, the phenomenon of depopulation. By preserving and enhancing a place's natural and cultural resources, it contributes simultaneously to the improvement of quality of life and various dimensions of local well-being.

1.3. Local Residents and Community Engagement

In the context of sustainable development, the local community is defined not merely by geographical proximity to a destination, but as a group of individuals sharing mutually recognized interests in the resources of a specific area [35]. Community is “a place-oriented process of interrelated actions through which members of a local population express a shared sense of identity, while engaging in the common concerns of life” [36–38].

Within the tourism sector and the socio-territorial debate, the local community is at the centre of a dual challenge: on the one hand, the need to redefine tourism development models that move from the extractive logic of massification to a sustainable development [39]; on the other, the urgency to counter depopulation and the marginalization of inland areas and small towns [40,41]. In the tourism perspective, local community is often conceptualized as a stakeholder group consisting of residents who are directly or indirectly affected by tourism development and whose support is essential for its sustainability [42]. Authors [43] refer to the community as a collective actor with rights over resources, decision-making processes, and benefit distribution, implying a degree of cohesion, shared interests, and capacity for collective action [44].

In a context of depopulation, the weakening of community ties reduces economic mobility and the ability to respond to complex problems, making collective action necessary to restore connections between neighbours and local organizations [45].

In our work we identify local community across three dimensions: the spatial dimension, lying on a specific geographical area, mostly villages and small towns [46]; the social dimension as the set of regular interactions, relatives links and solidarity focusing on the creation of formal and informal cooperation activities [47]; and the psychological dimension, as sense of community with a shared identity and trust which lead resident empowerment and active participation in the decisional process [48].

The role of community engagement and participation has gained increasing attention within tourism studies, particularly in the context of shifting toward more sustainable and place-sensitive development models [49]. Community participation in the tourism sector has been widely conceptualized as both a normative principle of sustainable development and a practical mechanism for improving tourism outcomes. Tosun [50] proposed a typology of engagement (spontaneous, induced, and coercive), highlighting that not all forms of “engagement” imply genuine power-sharing: “community participation refers to a form of voluntary action in which individuals confront opportunities and responsibilities of citizenship”. Engagement could have different intensities, in terms of activities, and how the same engagement is structured. Studies focus on the role of stakeholders [51], associations and consortia [52], local agencies [53], intermediaries [54], social networks, assets [55], and infrastructures [56]. More complex forms include CBT (community-based tourism) (for a review, see [57]) and another form of collaboration such as eco-tourism. Specifically, CBT has gained strong attentions from scholars and tourism actors.

Community-based tourism (CBT) refers to a tourism development pattern in which local communities are directly involved in the planning, management and operation of tourism activities. It ensures that this form of tourism contributes to residents’ well-being and empowerment while fostering sustainable development and preserving local cultural and natural resources [58]. CBT emerges as a participatory model that places residents at the centre of planning and management, and the distribution of benefits from tourism activities. Unlike conventional top-down models, CBT focuses on bottom-up empowerment, where active community involvement is essential for fostering a sense of ownership, which ensures that tourism development aligns with local values and that economic benefits—such as employment and entrepreneurship—are equitably distributed [57]. Furthermore, as historical inhabitants of the area, residents have a greater incentive to balance economic

growth with environmental conservation for future generations [59,60]. It is quite challenging to categorize CBT initiatives due to the heterogeneity of destinations and community starting conditions and evolutions [61].

Structural approaches focus on observable dimensions, including engagement in governance bodies, stakeholder collaboration, and access to decision-making forums. More recent frameworks integrate multi-dimensional indices, combining factors such as trust, social capital, and co-creation practices.

In terms of measurement, community engagement has been operationalized through both perceptual and structural indicators. Perceptual approaches assess residents' perceptions of involvement, influence, and benefits derived from tourism. Within the Social exchange theory (SET) framework [13] support for tourism is typically high when perceived benefits—such as jobs and infrastructure—outweigh costs like congestion or increased cost of living.

Effects of engagement could be categorized at social, economic and environmental levels. At social level engagement favours inclusion, and recognition [62], sense of belongingness and ownership fostering members to be active part of the decision-making process [63].

Community engagement in the form of CBT, for instance, leads a more sustainable development of the community, fostering better understanding and awareness of the protection of natural environment. Ruiz & Ballesteros [56] in the same line shows how CBT reduce the pression on the environment, it creates new job opportunities, fosters initiatives that mitigate the depopulation, and it preserves authenticity. Engagement in tourism initiative reduces poverty.

CBT is the key factor for the sustainable development of a community [54], and it generates economic benefits. It is important to underline that the business initiative and activities (i.e., hosting and tourism services) are owned and managed by the community. Residents become “ambassadors of the place” and guardians of resources, promoting tourism that does not exploit the territory but regenerates it [64]. In summary, community engagement drives the directions of the tourism development.

On the other hand, several studies demonstrated how low engagement, low stakeholders' interrogation and collaboration could favour poor results [65,66]. Conflicts between residents and stakeholders, poor or insufficient infrastructures, lack of entrepreneurship, managerial and marketing skills of local communities [67], low degree of collaboration and cooperation [68], and the foreign ownership and lack of government support [69] could discourage engagement and make the CBT models not applicable.

Rather than addressing depopulation, heritage revitalization, sustainable tourism, experience economy, community participation, and territorial sustainability as independent phenomena, this study focuses specifically on the interaction between two key variables: the degree of demographic decline and the level of community engagement in tourism development. We argue that these two dimensions constitute the primary mechanisms through which tourism can contribute to local regeneration in declining rural areas. Consequently, concepts such as heritage revitalization, experiential tourism, and territorial sustainability are treated as outcomes of this interaction rather than as independent analytical dimensions.

2. The Interpretative Model

The proposed model aims to provide a clearer conceptual understanding of the different trajectories of depopulation and of the role played by local communities in addressing this challenge through sustainable tourism development initiatives. Given the scarcity of research examining the interconnections between depopulation, community-based tourism,

and local development, this study employed an explanatory multiple-case study approach. The objective was to provide initial insights into these dynamics and to contribute to the development of theoretically grounded and potentially generalizable propositions.

As mentioned, the conceptual framework developed for this research classifies depopulated communities according to two dimensions: (1) the intensity of depopulation (low or severe) and (2) the degree of local community engagement in tourism-related development processes (engaged or disengaged) (see Figure 1). The combination of these dimensions generates four distinct analytical quadrants, each representing a different path of local development through sustainable tourism initiatives.

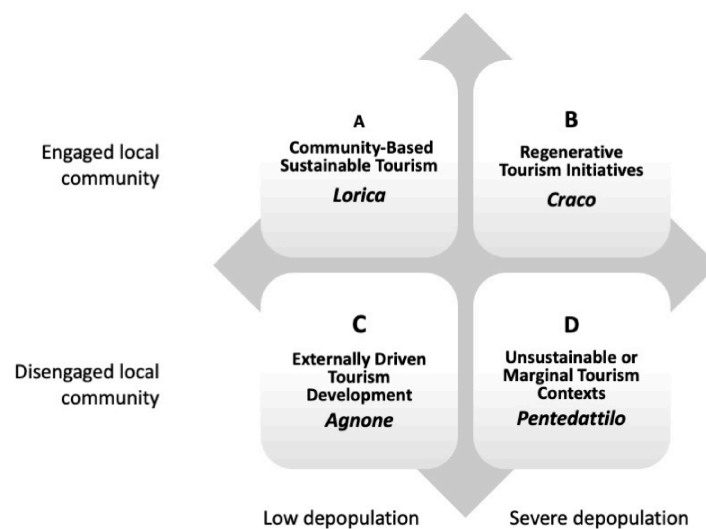


Figure 1. The proposed model and the 4 quadrants (A, B, C, and D).

The first dimension of the framework draws upon the literature on territorial marginalization and shrinking communities, which interprets population decline as a manifestation of broader processes of socio-economic and spatial vulnerability. The second dimension is grounded in the community-based tourism theory, which considers local participation, empowerment and collective action as key determinants of sustainable tourism development.

The interaction between the two dimensions can be interpreted through the lens of social capital and community resilience theory. According to the last one, local communities mobilize endogenous resources, social networks and collective capacities to respond to external pressures and long-term decline. Drawing on the literature on shrinking communities, community-based tourism, social capital and community resilience, we argue that tourism development trajectories in depopulating areas can be better understood through the interaction of two key dimensions: the degree of demographic decline and the level of community engagement. While previous studies have largely examined these dimensions separately, their combined effects remain underexplored. This study therefore aims to integrate these perspectives.

The purpose of the framework is not to classify only the four cases which will be presented and analyzed later in this study. Rather, it is proposed as a transferable conceptual model that may be applied to other rural and peripheral communities experiencing demographic decline. The four quadrants represent ideal types that capture different combinations of demographic pressure and collective capacity. Communities may evolve over time from one quadrant to another as demographic conditions, governance arrangements, and levels of local participation change. Therefore, the model should be interpreted as a dynamic analytical framework capable of explaining different tourism development trajectories across a variety of geographical and institutional contexts.

In our study we refer to small communities that are directly involved in tourism activities, whether because they run small businesses, work in tourism-related fields, or simply interact directly with tourists, serving as hosts and in some cases participate in the decision-making process [70]. The figure presents the model with the different quadrants that give rise to different forms of tourism and examples from regions in Southern Italy. The model distinguishes among different forms of tourism development, ranging from sustainable and community-based initiatives to externally driven and less sustainable forms of tourism. The proposed quadrants are outlined below.

Within the literary field, we can find various categorizations of tourism models [71,72]. This article focuses on theoretical models, which act as frameworks linking the practice of tourism management with theoretical concepts. Their objective is to serve as a tool that facilitates the understanding and analysis of tourism in order to create relevant tourism models. The fundamental characteristics of theoretical models include their consistency, inclusiveness, and clarity of understanding, and they are a widely accepted scientific tool in the literature.

Engagement ranges from a low level—where the community passively and inevitably witnesses socio-demographic decline—to an active form, where, through varying degrees of engagement, the community actively promotes the area's tourism resources, preserves and protects local traditions and culture, and actively manages business activities directly related to tourism. Many studies have shown that both simple and complex forms of engagement can give rise to sustainable tourism development. An active community shares a common place, several common interests, including survival first and a strong sense of attachment. Engagement, indeed, is an adaptive co-management [71].

The distinction between high and low community engagement, as well as between severe and moderate demographic decline, should be understood as an analytical simplification rather than a rigid classification. Both variables are inherently continuous and multidimensional. The quadrants therefore represent ideal-type categories intended to facilitate theoretical interpretation and comparison. Communities may occupy intermediate positions between quadrants and may move across categories over time as demographic conditions and levels of participation evolve.

From the sociology of tourism, community-based tourism development theory [73] argues that the participation of the local population in tourism planning and management can help reduce the effects of rural depopulation by strengthening social capital [74,75], generating economic opportunities, and reinforcing territorial identity. However, in practice, levels of community participation are not always homogeneous or equal across all territories.

The community-based tourism theory posits that tourism development should actively involve the local community so that the economic, social, and cultural benefits remain within the region. Thus, tourism is understood not only as an activity aimed at attracting visitors but also as a tool for sustainable development and improving the quality of life for the resident population [9,12]. However, in reality, there are diverse situations where participation is not uniform, resulting in a variety of cases that reflect different realities.

2.1. Evidence from South of Italy

The current research adopted an explanatory multiple-case study methodology. Four cases were chosen employing a purposive sampling strategy to select cases that would provide the greatest analytical value for exploring the relationships among depopulation, community engagement, and tourism development. Consistent with the logic of explanatory multiple-case study research, cases were not selected to be statistically representative but rather to capture theoretically relevant variation and facilitate comparison across different situations.

To ensure representation of all theoretically relevant configurations, one case was selected from each quadrant. Candidate communities were initially identified through demographic statistics, regional development reports, and secondary documentation on tourism initiatives in Southern Italy. Cases were then assessed according to predefined criteria. The intensity of depopulation was evaluated using population change trends over recent decades, while community engagement was assessed through evidence of local participation in tourism activities, community-led initiatives, heritage preservation investments, tourism entrepreneurship, and residents' involvement in local decision-making processes.

The final cases were selected because they exhibited specific characteristics corresponding to the four quadrants of the model and provided sufficient variation to enable cross-case comparison. By selecting cases that represent contrasting conditions, the authors try to enhance the explanatory power of the findings and support the development of theoretically grounded propositions regarding the role of community engagement in addressing depopulation through tourism-based development.

2.1.1. Quadrant A: Community-Based Sustainable Tourism

This quadrant includes urban centres in which local communities actively foster sustainable and participatory tourism models, thereby strengthening territorial resilience and social cohesion. In these contexts, innovation and investment are frequently promoted by young people who have either remained in the area or returned after acquiring professional and personal experience elsewhere. As a result, tourism development tends to be strongly embedded within local cultural, social, and economic structures.

As evidence we analyzed Lorica, which is a small hamlet in Southern Italy, located on the Sila Plateau at an elevation of 1314 m above sea level. Administratively, it lies within the municipalities of San Giovanni in Fiore and Casali del Manco. Unlike the fully abandoned settlements analyzed in this study, Lorica remains a living community with approximately 300 permanent residents. For this reason, it should not be considered a ghost village in the strict sense. Instead, it represents a depopulating mountain community facing significant demographic and territorial challenges while maintaining an active resident population and functioning tourism economy. Originally a remote mountain village, Lorica gained prominence in the 1930s following the construction of the dam that created Lake Arvo, which positioned the settlement along the lakeshore. Although situated in the Mediterranean region, the area is characterized by climatic and landscape features commonly associated with northern mountain environments, including cold winters and rainy summers [76]. The natural environment is marked by extensive forests, woodlands, and waterways. Approximately 90% of the territory is protected under forestry legislation, which promoted reforestation policies after the Second World War, following extensive logging activities carried out during the war period.

Lorica hosts ecosystems of scientific interest, including mixed forests of coniferous and deciduous species. Local fauna includes wolves, wild boars, martens, foxes, otters, wildcats, and squirrels. The local economy is based on livestock farming, particularly sheep, goats, and pigs, combined with dairy production, fodder cultivation, and agricultural products such as IGP-certified potatoes, berries, ornamental flowers, and mushrooms. Tourism also represents an important economic sector, with both summer and winter mountain activities. Facilities include Nordic and Alpine skiing infrastructure, with ski lifts connecting the village to Mount Botte Donato, the highest peak in the Sila region and one of the southernmost ski resorts in Europe. Additional activities include camping, trekking, sailing, canoeing, and windsurfing on Lake Arvo. In recent years, a national Olympic rowing centre with accommodation facilities has also been established.

The village is situated inside Sila National Park, which covers 73,695 hectares and was designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 2014. Since 2002, Lorica has hosted the headquarters of the park. The accommodation sector includes two officially registered hotels, second homes, and several informal guesthouses [76].

The geographical isolation, the difficult climatic conditions, the lack of basic social services (schools, pharmacy, and above all, the medical Centre), make the number of permanent residents meagre. Additionally, tourism suffers of high seasonality, with the highest volumes occurring in December, July, and August. Despite all this, the local community is very close-knit and resilient. There have been, and continue to be, many challenges that it has had to overcome. The main transport routes do not pass through Lorica, making travel—especially in winter—very difficult. The tourism industry has experienced fluctuating cycles. Whilst Lorica was one of the country's leading destinations in the late 1960s, in the years that followed, a lack of investment—both public and private—the absence of strategic planning, and the presence of other similar destinations nearby (such as Camigliatello) have rendered Lorica unattractive and in decline.

Since the 2000s, with the establishment of the park's headquarter, investments in new ski lifts, the redevelopment of the lakeside area—including the construction of a footbridge—and a new post-pandemic appreciation for rural life, Lorica has enhanced its appeal and expanded its range of tourist attractions, including not encompassing not only sports but also culinary experiences, authenticity and culture. It is worth noting the presence of a small community of expats, including British and Dutch nationals. On the flip side, at a community level, there have been tensions between the various stakeholders (funding bodies, public institutions, private entities) and the local community, over issues relating to the direction of tourism development, labour disputes, and the impact on the economy. Many initiatives have been perceived as being imposed from above, driven more by electoral politics than by a desire to foster genuine economic development.

Despite everything, the community is very active, whether out of sheer necessity, a deep connection to the local area, or a sense of environmental responsibility. The few resident families combine farming with various tourism-related activities: for example, one family runs a shop renting out ski equipment and, in summer, organizes trips on the lake in a solar-powered boat. Another family runs a climbing park and a restaurant. The bonds (and interests) are strong, enabling the community to survive and thrive. Communication is direct, and numerous formal meetings are organized to make decisions affecting the whole village. In the past, one of the main social aggregators has been the local priest, while nowadays all the community lies on. It is important to highlight the contribution of new second-home owners, who on the one hand, boosts all activities related to the restoration of flats and villas, and on the other, brings fresh impetus in terms of professions, stability and new bonds with long-standing residents.

2.1.2. Quadrant B: Regenerative Tourism Initiatives

This category refers to villages and small urban centres that have been significantly affected by depopulation, but where local actors employ tourism as a strategy for territorial regeneration, socio-economic revitalization, and community recovery. In these contexts, tourism initiatives often aim not only to attract visitors, but also to preserve local identity, reactivate social networks, and create new development opportunities. The case that we selected for this quadrant is that of Craco.

It is a village in Southern Italy, located a short distance from Matera, now completely uninhabited but revitalized by tourist flows and cultural initiatives. Its origins date back to the Iron Age (9th century BCE); however, beginning in 1963, the settlement was progressively abandoned due to severe geological instability, particularly a landslide, which led

to its evacuation over the course of approximately twenty years. The population, which numbered 1931 inhabitants in 1963, declined sharply as a result of relocation following the 1980 earthquake to the nearby new settlement of Craco Peschiera, as well as concurrent migratory processes. In the years following its abandonment, Craco attracted the interest of the film industry, becoming a location for numerous productions, including *Christ Stopped at Eboli* by Francesco Rosi and *The Passion of the Christ* by Mel Gibson.

An initial process of recovery and enhancement of the village began in the mid-1990s, grounded in the principle of “returning to life while preserving silence,” that is, promoting access to the site without altering its identity or re-establishing permanent habitation, but by seeking to enhance its value. Within this framework, safety interventions were undertaken to enable public access, accompanied by research activities aimed at the creation of a Scenic Museum Park (Parco Museale Scenografico) through the establishment of a public–private partnership. In 2002, the restoration work on the Convent of San Pietro was completed, and the local community finally began to believe that Craco could be saved. In 2010, the site was included in the World Monuments Fund’s list of endangered sites.

The valorisation strategies developed over time have pursued the objective of preserving and promoting Craco’s landscape and historical memory through an integrated approach that combines research, tourism, artistic production, and cultural innovation. These initiatives have involved a wide range of actors, including universities, research centres, cultural associations, artists, and visitors, both Italian and international.

Over time, the village has come to be configured not only as a tourist destination, but also as a venue for artist residencies, masterclasses, workshops, cultural events, and youth mobility programmes, including the Erasmus Programme. The initiation of this trajectory can be attributed to the efforts of the then-mayor, Giuseppe Lacicerchia, who advanced a vision for the recovery of the historic centre in a context initially marked by limited interest and widespread scepticism within the local community.

Currently, the local tourism system employs approximately 12–13 guides, organized in a cooperative structure and drawn both from the municipality and from surrounding areas (for reasons of safety and heritage protection, access to the site is permitted only through guided tours.). Tourism represents the primary economic activity, with around 30,000 visitors annually, and has fostered the emergence of several entrepreneurial initiatives. A significant share of ticketing revenues is reinvested in maintenance interventions, services, and infrastructure, as well as in local promotional and development activities.

Recently, the interactive application “Craco Accessibile” has been introduced with the aim of enhancing inclusivity and improving site accessibility. The project, funded by the Basilicata Region and developed through the involvement of more than fifty stakeholders—including companies, universities, and research centres—is based on the collection and digitization of both public and private documentary sources. Through three-dimensional reconstructions, diachronic iconographic comparisons, and audio–visual materials, the application enables the reconstruction of the village’s historical evolution. This is complemented by three immersive installations that further enrich the visitor experience.

In the current context, Craco can be understood as a laboratory for experimentation in the use of innovative technologies and advanced models of cultural heritage valorisation. It also represents one of the main tourist resources of the Basilicata region and one of the most well-known examples of a “ghost town” in Italy. The appeal generated by abandonment, combined with careful and sustainable management, contributes to attracting a heterogeneous audience, both national and international. The site’s social and territorial marginality has facilitated the preservation of cultural practices and land-based values across the Montagna Materana area [77].

For this reason, the maintenance of local traditions continues to play a significant role in shaping the identity of the place. Among the most important events is the feast of Saint Nicholas, the town's patron saint, celebrated annually in May through rituals, folkloric events, and food-related practices. The village also hosts exhibitions, craft workshops, and other cultural initiatives, demonstrating the continuity between historical memory and contemporary practices.

Finally, the principal cultural and tourist attractions include the Scenic Museum Park, the Emotional Museum, the Media Library, the Palace of Culture, the Amphitheatre, and the Atelier. These spaces structure an integrated offer that combines immersive visitor pathways, exhibition activities, cultural production, and services for artists and visitors, thereby contributing to the definition of a model of valorisation based on the interaction between local community and its tangible and intangible heritage.

Craco represents a distinctive form of community-based tourism. Although the historic centre is uninhabited and therefore lacks a resident community directly involved in daily tourism activities, the regeneration process has been strongly driven by local actors and institutions with the objective of preserving cultural heritage, strengthening territorial identity, and generating socio-economic benefits for the local community. In particular, the valorisation of the site has involved local authorities, cultural associations, universities, research centres, entrepreneurs, and residents of the wider municipal area. Furthermore, tourism revenues are partially reinvested in site maintenance, infrastructure, and local development initiatives, while employment opportunities have been created through guided tours and related entrepreneurial activities. The preservation of local traditions, such as the feast of Saint Nicholas, and the promotion of cultural events also contribute to maintaining and passing on community identity and social memory. Therefore, while Craco differs from conventional community-based tourism models because it lacks a permanent resident population, it embodies several core CBT principles, including local participation, heritage preservation, community benefit, and sustainable territorial development.

2.1.3. Quadrant C: Externally Driven Tourism Development/Waiting Community

This quadrant encompasses areas characterized by relatively limited depopulation, where tourism development is primarily promoted by external stakeholders and investors, with limited engagement from local communities. Community with an increasing level of depopulation cannot support active forms of tourism, lacking demographic resources [78].

As a consequence, residents often remain in a state of waiting, expecting solutions to their problems to come from elsewhere. Consequently, tourism initiatives in these contexts in many cases produce weaker sustainability outcomes and lower levels of community empowerment. In some cases, these centres are also characterized by an ageing population, resulting from prolonged economic crises and outward migration processes. Agnone represents a significant case to be placed within Quadrant C, as an example of a small urban centre experiencing demographic decline that, while not among the most severe in the region, is characterized by a local community that appears only marginally active, engaged, or involved in identifying effective strategies to address urban crisis and decline. Agnone is a small medieval town located in the inner areas of the southern Apennines and is renowned for hosting the Pontificia Fonderia Marinelli, one of the oldest continuously operating companies in the world. The foundry produces bells for churches worldwide and represents a major example of Italian artisanal excellence.

Depopulation affects the entire region of Molise, in central-southern Italy, where the phenomenon concerns not only small villages but also larger urban centres. One municipality experiencing a high—though not among the highest—rate of population decline is Agnone, whose population decreased by 10.4% in the last ten years. In the 1950s,

the municipality had more than 10,000 inhabitants; today, its population has fallen to fewer than 4500 residents [79].

The situation in Agnone is made even more critical by the exceptionally high ageing rate of its population. Indeed, the town records the highest ageing index in Molise and one of the highest in Italy (372% compared to the national average of 180%), meaning that residents over the age of 65 account for more than 30% of the total population. This condition is clearly linked to geographic isolation, but even more so to limited employment opportunities and the modest provision of services—particularly healthcare and commercial services—which drive young people and families to seek more dynamic and better-equipped places to live. In particular, the town suffers from a pronounced phenomenon of “youth outmigration”: many young residents pursue education elsewhere and rarely return to settle permanently in the community. The consequences include a weak social and economic fabric and a strong dependence of the local economy, given its limited tax revenues, on public funding.

The town itself appears relatively static, with few innovations or initiatives aimed at counteracting depopulation and fostering local development. Investments in healthcare services, including home-care assistance—especially considering the advanced average age of the population—would be necessary, together with initiatives aimed at addressing the loneliness and vulnerability of elderly residents. But it would also be very important to design programmes to attract younger generations and families.

In this context, an important role is played by Caritas, which operates through a network of volunteers. The religious organization recently received an award for its commitment to combating depopulation in the town through the establishment of two geriatric listening centres, where specialist physicians monitor not only the physical but also the emotional well-being of elderly residents.

Another actor promoting forms of “permanence” or “restanza” is the local newspaper *Eco dell’Alto Molise*, which is widely followed by emigrants from Molise living abroad and seeks to maintain continuous contact with them, potentially also encouraging forms of roots tourism. Some artisans, particularly in the goldsmithing sector, have reopened workshops, which may represent a positive sign of local resilience. In addition, a number of proposals have emerged with the aim of raising public awareness and drawing attention to the town’s condition. One example is the proposal to establish a “Spop-Art Museum,” intended to collect and promote artworks dedicated to territorial decline, with the broader goal of encouraging the revitalization and rebirth of small villages.

Nevertheless, there does not yet appear to be a genuine awareness in Agnone of the kinds of initiatives that could effectively foster local development and interrupt the ongoing processes of emigration and demographic decline. Local policymakers have not identified a coherent development strategy linked to potentially promising and sustainable forms of tourism, such as roots tourism, cultural tourism, and slow tourism. The same can be said of the local community itself, which—also as a consequence of the advanced average age of residents—shows limited entrepreneurial spirit, creativity, and capacity for collective planning and project development.

2.1.4. Quadrant D: Unsustainable or Marginal Tourism Contexts

This category includes territories experiencing both severe depopulation and limited community involvement. In such contexts, tourism development is either absent, poorly integrated into local socio-economic dynamics, or largely unsustainable. The lack of local engagement and investment frequently undermines the capacity of tourism to function as an effective instrument for territorial regeneration and long-term development.

The case of Pentedattilo, an ancient village located in the Grecanica area of Calabria, in the municipality of Melito di Porto Salvo, in Southern Italy, completely fits such a quadrant. Perched on the slopes of Monte Calvario, whose distinctive rocky formation resembles a gigantic hand with five fingers—from which the village derives its Greek name (pènte dáktylos)—Pentedattilo represents one of the most emblematic ghost villages in Southern Italy. Founded during the Greek colonization period and later developed under Byzantine and Norman domination, the village progressively declined as a consequence of repeated earthquakes, hydrogeological instability, and socio-economic marginalization. The 1783 earthquake severely damaged the settlement and accelerated depopulation processes, while during the twentieth century the progressive migration of residents towards the coastal areas ultimately led to its almost complete abandonment by the late 1960s [80].

Despite its abandonment, Pentedattilo has progressively undergone processes of cultural and tourism revitalization grounded in local engagement, heritage valorisation, and experiential tourism initiatives. Beginning in the 1980s, groups of volunteers, artists, associations, and cultural actors from different European countries initiated restoration and recovery activities aimed at preserving the village's architectural and cultural heritage. Over time, abandoned houses and spaces were partially transformed into artisan workshops, exhibition areas, small hospitality facilities, and venues for cultural initiatives. Today, the village hosts craft activities related to ceramics, wood and glass production, as well as cultural festivals, artistic residencies, guided tours, and events connected to local traditions and the Grecanic cultural identity.

Pentedattilo therefore represents a meaningful example of tourism-led territorial regeneration in a context of severe depopulation and marginality. Similar to the case of Craco, the village has not experienced a full demographic repopulation; however, tourism and cultural initiatives have contributed to reactivating social, cultural, and economic dynamics while preserving the historical identity of the site. The village increasingly functions as a symbolic and experiential space where memory, abandonment, and local culture are transformed into tourism resources through forms of co-creation involving visitors, artists, associations, and local actors. Furthermore, its integration into broader cultural and environmental itineraries of the Grecanica area has strengthened its visibility as a destination for sustainable and experiential tourism. In this sense, Pentedattilo demonstrates how abandoned settlements can evolve into laboratories of cultural resilience and heritage-based development, where tourism contributes not only to economic valorisation but also to the preservation of local identity and collective memory.

3. Discussion

Depopulation reduces demand for services and housing, leading to closures, disinvestment, and the underutilisation of the built environment. Consequently, the physical and functional degradation of settlements—visible in vacant buildings, deteriorating infrastructure, and declining public spaces—negatively affects both the perceived and actual attractiveness of these territories. This contributes to the erosion of social capital, weakening community networks, collective identity, and local capacity for action [9,10]. The cases analyzed in this study clearly illustrate how demographic decline, territorial marginality, and socio-economic fragility are deeply interconnected.

Within this context, tourism emerges as a potentially important instrument for territorial regeneration, although its effectiveness depends strongly on the degree of local community engagement and on the structural characteristics of the territory [14]. The findings reinforce the previous literature on community-based tourism and sustainable development by showing that tourism contributes positively when it is embedded within broader place-based and participatory governance strategies. In particular, sustainable

tourism can strengthen local welfare through the valorisation of local products and services, the diversification of rural economies, and the more equitable distribution of tourism-related benefits [12,14,15]. Furthermore, tourism experiences based on authenticity, cultural heritage, gastronomy, memory, and local traditions may reinforce social cohesion, civic pride, and residents' sense of belonging, while also improving visitor satisfaction and reducing tensions between hosts and guests. Specifically, some scholars [13,20] refer to the community tourism model to point out that this type of tourism has been conceived as an offer of competitive, quality and sustainable services in small non-urban localities that become an alternative source of income and, at the same time, a means to overcome poverty with community economic benefits that implicitly promote fair, equitable and sustainable economic development.

The comparative analysis of the four quadrants highlights that community engagement constitutes a decisive factor in shaping tourism development trajectories [73], although a quantitative comparison cannot be undertaken. Consistent annual visitor statistics for the period 2015–2025 are not available for all four case-study areas. Furthermore, two of the selected cases (Lorica and Pentedattilo) are small villages that function as administrative subdivisions rather than independent municipalities, while official tourism statistics are generally collected only at the municipal, provincial, or regional level. In addition, in Italy, visitor data are typically unavailable for individual attractions, with the exception of museums and archeological sites. Consequently, comparable longitudinal visitor data for the principal attractions are not publicly available across all case-study areas.

To address this limitation, a comparative table has been included (see Table 1), identifying the main tourism generators and tourism specializations of each destination. This provides a clearer understanding of the tourism resources underpinning the development trajectories discussed in the paper. Regarding the national or international tourist attractiveness of each destination, although reliable statistics on visitors' countries of origin are not available for the four case-study destinations, several indicators suggest that they have achieved varying degrees of international visibility. These include the presence of multilingual official tourism websites, inclusion in regional tourism promotion platforms targeting international audiences, references in international travel literature, and the existence of user-generated content and travel accounts produced by foreign visitors. Nevertheless, the absence of systematic data on international arrivals prevents a precise assessment of the extent to which these destinations can be classified as international tourism destinations.

A cross-case comparison reveals important differences in how community engagement, tourism governance mechanisms, revitalization outcomes, and existing challenges interact across the four cases. In fact, although all destinations are affected by demographic decline, they follow distinct development trajectories. These four places represent very different tourism models, showing how Italy's inland areas can develop a wide range of visitor experiences. Overall, these four cases illustrate a clear continuum ranging from complete abandonment to full tourism infrastructure, passing through intermediate forms of cultural reuse and community-based slow tourism.

Lorica (Quadrant A) represents the strongest example of community-based tourism, where local residents directly participate in tourism-related businesses and collective decision-making processes [76]. Tourism development is largely embedded within the local socio-economic structure and generates diversified benefits through hospitality, outdoor recreation, local products, and small-scale entrepreneurship. The main challenge is not the lack of community participation but rather the coordination between local actors and external institutions.

Table 1. Main tourism generators in the four case-study areas.

Study Quadrant	Main Tourism Generators	Tourism Typology	Evidence of Tourism Attractiveness	Visitor Services
<i>Lorica</i>	Lake Arvo, Sila National Park, mountain sports facilities	Nature-based and outdoor tourism	Seasonal tourism flows linked to summer and winter activities	Accommodation Structures: 45–60 Units (Hotels: 8–12; B&B: 12–18; Apartments/residences/aparthotels: 15–20; Guesthouses/chalets/holiday homes: 8–10. Estimated bed number: 1200–1800) Visitor attractions: Outdoor activities (hiking and trekking routes in Sila National Park; mountain biking and e-bike rentals; horse-riding excursions; skiing and winter sports (ski area nearby); lake activities (canoe, pedal boats, fishing)). Events (summer festivals and outdoor concerts; food and wine events featuring local products; winter tourism events linked to the ski season; nature-based events (foliage, trekking festivals)) Additional Tourism Services: tourist information points; equipment rental (bikes, skis, boats), guided excursions and trekking services, shops selling local products (cheese, cured meats, Sila potatoes; ski lift and adventure park infrastructure nearby)
				No accommodation, restaurants, or bars are available within the settlement; these services can only be found in nearby areas. Visitor attractions: Craco Historical Center—guided access to the abandoned medieval ghost town. MEC Museo Emozionale di Craco, presso il Convento di San Pietro—museum and interpretation centre dedicated to Craco's history. Torre normanna—historic Norman tower and landmark. Craco—Esperienze Mozzafiato—experiential tourism activities and panoramic visits. Film-tourism locations associated with productions such as The Passion of the Christ, Quantum of Solace and The Nativity Story. Different types of guided tours. Events: theatre and cultural performances, sagre, live music events and concerts
<i>Craco</i>	Ghost village, film tourism, immersive heritage experiences, Craco Accessibile project	Heritage and experiential tourism	International visibility and growing cultural tourism appeal. Not subject to seasonality	

Table 1. Cont.

Study Quadrant	Main Tourism Generators	Tourism Typology	Evidence of Tourism Attractiveness	Visitor Services
<i>Agnone</i>	Marinelli Bell Foundry, historic centre, religious heritage	Cultural and roots tourism (Roots tourism refers to a form of heritage tourism in which emigrants and their descendants visit their country or region of origin to explore, rediscover, and strengthen connections with their ancestral roots and cultural heritage)	National recognition of artisanal heritage. Not subject to seasonality	Accommodation Structures: 10–15 Units (B&B: 7–10; agriturismo 2–4; guesthouses/small inns/apartments: 1–3 Estimated bed number: 120–220) Visitor attractions: Industrial heritage (bell foundry; Museo della Campana); medieval historic centre; religious architecture (Churches of San Francesco; Sant’Emidio; San Marco; Sant’Antonio; Santa Maria); strong cultural festival identity (Ndociata); local gastronomy
<i>Pentedattilo</i>	Ghost village, cultural festivals, craft workshops, Grecanic heritage	Cultural and experiential tourism	Increasing role within regional cultural itineraries. Not subject to seasonality	Accommodation Structures: 3–6 Units (Rural guesthouses/diffused hospitality houses: 2–3 Holiday apartments in restored buildings: 1–2 Occasional seasonal or experimental stays (event-based): 1–2 Estimated beds number: 20–40) Visitor attractions: Dramatic geological landscape (five-finger rock Monte Calvario); medieval ruins and ghost village structure; religious and historical architecture (Church of Saint Pietro and Paolo); strong cultural festival programming (Paleariza Festival; Pentedattilo Film Festival); creative reuse of abandoned buildings (artisan and cultural spaces); scenic and hiking-based tourism

Craco (Quadrant B) follows a different pattern. While the historic settlement no longer hosts a permanent resident population, tourism development is supported by local institutions, cultural organizations, researchers, and residents from the wider municipal area. The tourism model is based primarily on heritage valorisation, cultural production, and experiential consumption. The main outcome has been the preservation of cultural heritage and the generation of tourism-related economic opportunities rather than demographic recovery [77].

Agnone (Quadrant C) illustrates a situation in which valuable cultural and artisanal resources exist, but community engagement remains limited. Tourism initiatives are fragmented and largely dependent on external support or isolated local actors. Consequently, tourism has generated only modest revitalization effects and has not significantly altered long-term demographic decline. The principal constraint is the limited entrepreneurial capacity associated with population ageing and youth outmigration.

Pentedattilo (Quadrant D) presents a hybrid situation. Despite severe depopulation, tourism activities have emerged through the intervention of associations, volunteers, artists,

and cultural organizations [81]. However, the absence of a stable resident population limits the extent to which tourism can contribute to broader community regeneration. The principal outcome has been cultural and symbolic revitalization rather than socio-demographic recovery.

Overall, the comparison suggests that the degree of community engagement influences not only the type of tourism developed but also the nature of revitalization outcomes. High levels of participation tend to generate diversified local benefits and stronger territorial resilience, whereas lower levels of engagement are associated with more limited economic impacts and weaker capacities to transform tourism into a long-term development strategy. The cases also demonstrate that tourism can contribute to heritage preservation and place valorisation even in contexts of severe depopulation, although its capacity to reverse demographic decline remains limited when broader structural constraints persist.

Beyond the differences observed across the four cases, the analysis suggests that community engagement operates as a key mediating factor between demographic decline and tourism development outcomes. The findings indicate that demographic conditions alone do not determine whether tourism contributes to territorial regeneration. Rather, the capacity of local actors to mobilize resources, participate in governance processes, and articulate a shared development vision appears to be equally important.

The comparison reveals that territories facing similar demographic challenges may follow markedly different development trajectories. In contexts characterized by strong local participation, tourism tends to generate broader socio-economic benefits, including economic diversification, strengthened social cohesion, heritage preservation, and enhanced territorial resilience. Conversely, where community engagement is weak, tourism initiatives often remain fragmented, externally driven, or unable to produce substantial long-term impacts on local development.

The findings also challenge the assumption that tourism-led regeneration necessarily implies demographic recovery. The experiences of Craco and Pentadattilo demonstrate that tourism can successfully contribute to cultural revitalization, heritage conservation, and economic activation even in the absence of significant repopulation processes. In these cases, tourism functions primarily as a mechanism for preserving collective memory, enhancing territorial visibility, and creating new forms of cultural and economic value rather than restoring permanent residential communities.

At the same time, the study highlights the limitations of tourism as a standalone response to depopulation. The case of Agnone illustrates that the existence of cultural resources and tourism potential is insufficient when local agency, entrepreneurial capacity, and strategic governance remain weak with a low level of community's engagement. This finding reinforces broader debates on territorial resilience by suggesting that sustainable development depends not only on the availability of resources but also on the institutional and social capacities required to mobilize them effectively.

More broadly, the results support the argument that tourism should be understood as one component of an integrated place-based development strategy rather than as an isolated economic solution to demographic decline. The long-term sustainability of tourism initiatives depends on their capacity to interact with broader processes of governance, accessibility, service provision, economic diversification, and community empowerment. Consequently, policies aimed at addressing rural decline should focus not only on attracting visitors but also on strengthening the social and institutional conditions that enable local communities to actively participate in and benefit from tourism development.

Overall, the proposed framework demonstrates that different combinations of demographic decline and community engagement generate distinct tourism development trajectories. By examining these interactions, the study contributes to a more nuanced

understanding of how tourism can support territorial regeneration in marginal and depopulating areas while also acknowledging its structural limitations in addressing the deeper causes of demographic decline.

4. Conclusions

This study reinforces the idea that tourism development in marginalized and depopulated areas depends fundamentally on the active participation and cooperation of host communities. In community-based tourism contexts, participation should not be understood simply as formal involvement, but as a shared collective responsibility based on local identity, social cohesion, and territorial attachment. Local communities possess unique knowledge of their cultural, historical, and environmental heritage, which represents a crucial resource for developing authentic, place-based tourism initiatives. Overall, the study confirms that effective community participation is essential not only to foster inclusion in tourism planning and management processes, but also to strengthen long-term socio-territorial sustainability, improve local resilience, and support more balanced forms of rural regeneration. The four Southern Italy cases presented illustrate that different types of tourism have emerged as a result of depopulation, but each requires a distinct strategy to address it.

The findings of this study confirm that depopulation in rural and marginal areas should not be interpreted merely as a demographic phenomenon, but rather as a multidimensional process involving spatial, economic, social, and institutional dimensions. Limited accessibility interacts with structural deficiencies in service provision, generating cumulative effects on both residents' quality of life and the tourism competitiveness of peripheral destinations. In many inland and mountainous areas, the progressive reduction in healthcare, education, retail, cultural, and leisure services reflects broader processes of demographic contraction and fiscal fragility, while simultaneously accelerating out-migration and discouraging in-migration. At the same time, the erosion of local labour markets weakens the economic base, reducing municipal revenues and limiting the capacity to maintain infrastructure, services, and business activities.

This study contributes to the literature on tourism and rural regeneration by examining the relationship between demographic decline, community engagement, and tourism development.

A key contribution of the study is the development of a simple interpretative framework based on two dimensions: the degree of demographic decline and the level of community engagement. The framework helps explain why communities facing similar demographic problems may experience different tourism development trajectories. The results indicate that community engagement plays a crucial role in determining whether tourism contributes to local resilience, heritage preservation, social cohesion, and economic diversification.

The study also shows that tourism can generate value beyond its economic effects. In the analyzed cases, tourism contributes to preserving cultural heritage, strengthening local identity, and supporting territorial regeneration. This suggests that tourism should be considered as part of a broader place-based development strategy rather than as an isolated economic activity.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of integrating tourism policies with wider rural development strategies. Improvements in accessibility, public services, digital connectivity, and local governance remain essential for enhancing the attractiveness and long-term sustainability of rural areas. The results further underline the importance of community participation in tourism planning and management, as

communities with higher levels of engagement tend to show stronger resilience and more sustainable development outcomes.

The study also demonstrates that tourism success in highly depopulated or abandoned settlements should not be evaluated solely in terms of population growth. Cases such as Craco and Pentedattilo show that tourism can support heritage conservation, cultural revitalization, and local economic activity even when demographic recovery remains limited.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study is based on four qualitative case studies from Southern Italy and therefore the findings cannot be generalized statistically. In addition, community engagement is a complex and dynamic phenomenon that cannot be fully captured through simple categories. Future research should test the proposed framework in other geographical contexts and explore how communities move between different development trajectories over time.

In addition, as already mentioned, a quantitative comparison among the four case studies cannot be undertaken because consistent annual visitor statistics for the period 2015–2025 are not available for all areas. This limitation underscores the need for more analytically robust tourism monitoring systems, capable of collecting data at the level of individual attractions and small settlements. The establishment of standardized visitor-counting mechanisms, the integration of digital tracking technologies, and the systematic collection and public dissemination of tourism statistics and qualitative surveys by local authorities would significantly enhance the availability of comparable longitudinal data. Moreover, such systems could provide valuable tools for local tourism enterprises. These measures would facilitate more robust evaluations of tourism dynamics, support evidence-based planning, and improve the assessment of the relationship between community engagement and tourism development outcomes.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a useful framework for understanding how demographic decline and community engagement interact to shape tourism development in rural areas.

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