

The Young Shepherds School: Training for *Restanza* in the Italian Alps¹

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses an innovative place-sensitive training experience in pastoralism implemented in rural and mountainous Italian areas: the Young Shepherds School. Adopting a methodology based on learning-by-doing and an experiential teaching approach, the School offers its participants—essentially urban young people interested in living and working in rural contexts—an unprecedented learning opportunity and the possibility of setting out on a path towards the shepherding profession. At the same time, the involvement of local actors and the post-training pathway represent concrete steps towards the participants' project ideas taking root in the area and the development of micro-enterprises in the field of pastoralism, aimed at personal income as well as environmental care.

KEYWORDS

Pastoralism; mountain; experiential training; young shepherds; new highlanders; *restanza*.



The call of the mountains and the new aspiration to rurality

European literature on migration and the mountain-city relationship has focused in recent decades on the determining factors of rural emigration: in the face of the long-term socio-economic and cultural crisis that characterises the mountain areas of many European countries, like Italy, many analyses and research studies have focused on those who leave their home villages and valleys. This has resulted in decades of investigations and reflections centred on rural youth outmigration, on the "brain drain," and on the policies to be implemented to curb the haemorrhage of youth towards metropolitan areas or abroad (Balduzzi, Rosina and Sironi 2019; Ballatore and Mariani 2019). Underlying these analyses is in many cases a dichotomous and reductive perspective on the relationship

between cities and rural/mountainous areas, which tends to conceal the historical interconnection between what have always been the poles on a continuum, within a rich and complex space of interrelationships, nevertheless today dominated, on a symbolic as well as political-economic level, by urban centres and industrialised plains.

This approach—based indeed on impressive quantitative data concerning the demographic collapse of a large part of the small rural and mountainous municipalities on the European continent (Meloni and Farinella 2017)—has overshadowed opposite processes, which have been ongoing for at least a couple of decades now in various European countries, starting precisely with the Alpine Arc. As shown by the important scientific data collected by the Alpine Convention's Demography Group (Alpine Convention 2015), there has been a reversal in demographic dynamics since the early 1990s,

Martor 29/2024 - Dynamics of Intangible Heritage. Shepherding

with a timid recovery or at least a stabilisation of the population in many contexts, often closest to the plains, but also in quite a few inland and remote areas, especially those with attractive natural and landscape resources and some kind of connection with the cities. Scholars have long connected this, mostly unexpected, phenomenon with primarily the arrival of new residents, i.e., with a positive migratory balance.



In the context of the Italian peninsula, the “neo-rurals” and “new highlanders” have different and diversified profiles: they are the so-called “amenity migrants,” i.e., generally middle-aged or elderly active men and women who have discovered mountain areas as tourists and decided to return and permanently settle there once they retired (Moss 2006; Glorioso and Moss 2007); they are also international migrants often attracted by seasonal work opportunities in the mountains or asylum seekers and refugees relocated to these areas by the national reception and protection systems (Dematteis, Di Gioia, and Membretti 2018; Membretti, Kofler, and Viazzo 2017; Perlik, and Membretti 2018). Then there are those who, young adults in general, after spending a period in the city, in Italy or abroad, decide to return to their native country or to another inland area that they choose for a new start (Barbera and Membretti 2020). These dynamics of mobility towards the highlands and small villages of the Italian Alps and Apennines identify an unprecedented “call of the mountains” and a broader desire for rurality, which in recent years, particularly with the advent of the pandemic and the impacts of climate change in metropolitan areas (Membretti, Barbera, and Tartari 2024), has translated into a growing aspiration to live, work, and spend increasingly longer periods of time in small rural centres, even remote ones (Gretter et al. 2017).

This significant attraction to the mountains is accompanied by an unprecedented drive to actively remain in these places manifested by significant quotas of people, especially youth who were born there. In this regard, it seems important to quote the data collected through

the *Giovani Dentro* national survey (Membretti et al. 2023), conducted by the association Riabitare l’Italia between 2020 and 2021, and aimed at investigating the motivations, interests, training, and professional needs of the population aged between 18 and 39 years residing in inland, rural, and mountainous areas in Italy.² The research shows a cross-section of young people characterised by a high level of education, good job placement, large social networks, and above all a strong desire to remain in their places of birth or to return there permanently, after periods spent elsewhere. More than 50 per cent of the respondents, the majority of whom were girls and young women, declared in fact that they wanted to invest in their local area, whose resources (environmental, cultural, social, etc.) they appear to be aware of and which they see as their future.

In view of the growing and widespread desire for rurality and for different ways of living in the mountains, the knowledge, skills and abilities to read and intervene in the territory that young people above all (but also other age groups interested in remaining or settling in the highlands) possess or that they can acquire through training appear to be decisive.



A school for “aspiring shepherds” in the Italian Alps: investing on the new appeal of agro-pastoralism

The Young Shepherds School³ is an experiment, carried out for the first time in 2021–2022,⁴ the offspring of the multidisciplinary reflections of the National School of Shepherding (SNAP), a network set up in 2019 with the involvement of numerous actors (universities, associations, professionals, etc.) engaging in various capacities in pastoralism in Italy—reflections that have found confirmation and new insights in the data collected by the *Giovani Dentro*

research mentioned above. In fact, this research has a specific focus on the agrosylvo-pastoral sector, investigating the level of interest of young people living in inland areas with respect to the professions specific to these areas.

According to the data, 34 percent of interviewees stated that the main motivation for working in agriculture was the possibility of having greater contact with nature and animals and the search for a simple lifestyle, while for 18 percent the choice was linked to continuing the family business. Only 9 percent of respondents considered working in agriculture as a fall-back solution, in the absence of other employment opportunities. It was also noted that the least relevant motivation was the consistency of this aspiration with previous studies/education, often very far from any agro-pastoral background. However, despite this widespread interest only 4 percent of the respondents actually worked in agriculture (Membretti et al. 2023).

The picture depicted by these data highlights a mismatch between how young people imagine nature and the mountain agricultural landscape, influenced by aesthetic-value variables, and their actual knowledge of mountain/rural economies and professions, such as that of shepherd, as well as the needs in terms of workforce and competencies expressed by the mountain areas themselves. The aspiration of young people to become involved in agriculture thus appears unbalanced with respect to the actual opportunities to transform these motivations into practice, through the application of specific knowledge and the development of concrete entrepreneurial paths.

It is against this backdrop that in 2021 the project of a school for accompanying and training young shepherds was launched, thanks to the collaboration between Riabitare l'Italia Association and CREA (National Council for Agricultural Research) and with the support of a private bank foundation (Fondazione Cariplo). Focusing on specific training in pastoralism and mountain pasture farming,



Fig. 1. Photo taken during the first edition of the Young Shepherds School, 2021. Copyright: Riabitare L'Italia Association (<https://riabitareitalia.net>) and CREA (<https://www.crea.gov.it>).

the first edition of *Scuola Giovani Pastori* was implemented through residential modules in Valle Stura (an inland depopulated small valley in the province of Cuneo, Piedmont, on the border with France) and with subsequent online modules. In a second stage, the School provided participants with accompaniment on a targeted path to business development in the sector, in a few Alpine and Apennine mountain areas, between Lombardy and Piedmont.

Based on a needs assessment and data analysis, the School set out to develop both the participants' hard skills (i.e., the technical competences needed in a very specific professional field, such as extensive and mountain pasture farming, together with the processing of animal products) and transversal and more general soft skills (e.g., communication, digital skills, capacity of reading the territory, marketing, etc.), useful to contextualise the professional profile in question, based on the role of carer for the landscape that the shepherd can play.

In order to offer this training opportunity to a wide audience of interested young people, in the 18–39 age bracket, participation in the School was free of charge: board and lodging were covered by the organisation, and only the travel to and from the location of the activities remained the responsibility of the participants. While this favoured the participation of those who would not have been otherwise able to afford paid training, the burden of



Training Young Shepherds in the Alps of Italy: an opportunity for new peopling and youth *restanza*

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Context & Background

A physical and symbolic-cultural space identified by fluid, reciprocal and circular relations between metropolitan areas and inner valleys, a renewed system of exchange of goods/services, flows of people and cultural meanings that is emerging in recent years, after decades of ethno-centric narratives and policies. (Barbera & Di Rossi, 2021)



The G2 action research represents the first collection of data on the topic of aspirations to stay among young adults (ageing 18-35) living inside Italian inner Areas



- Modular: offers thematic modules calibrated on the participant's profile, a socio-economic analysis of the area and its needs/requirements
- Nomatic: this is a place-based and place-sensitive training offer, whose modules are supported by training structures in the area and the expertise of local enterprises
- Interactive: a practical approach that focuses on first-hand experience in the field, with a learning-by-doing and peer-to-peer exchange perspective

EMERGED NEEDS

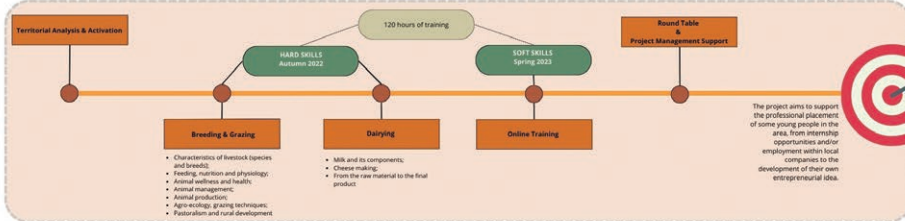
- Specific trainings
- Foster territorial networks
- Support entrepreneurship
- Retro-innovation

Pastoralism may foster new peopling and *restanza* (willingness to stay) in these territories?

What kind of training can enhance and support these dynamics?



The School's training offer



Locations - Provinces



The training days occurred in autumn 2022. The core of the offered course consisted of **two weeks** of intensive and residential training at **Borgata Paratoulo**, in the Stura Valley, in the province of Cuneo (Piedmont).

Methodology

The methodology applied are based on **experiential education**, meaning that teaching and learning techniques focusing on **learning-by-doing**, on **peer-to-peer exchange** among participants and with experts, on group discussions following **horizontal and non-hierarchical modes of interaction**, characterized by **dialogue** and co-construction of knowledge, and on the **place-based** and **place-sensitive** dimension of lived experience.

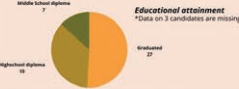


Participants



Candidates

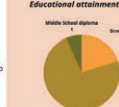
50 candidates applied to attend the School's training, the average age was 30,6 years old, while men represents the 52%.



The selection criteria guaranteed gender balance and gave priority to those candidates who:

- came from Lombardia region and Cuneo Province (Piedmont)
- have gained experience in the agropastoral sector and/or aimed at developing a personal entrepreneurial project
- were younger

15 participants took part into the School activities, the average age was 28,4 years old.



The present case study moves from the belief that it is necessary to **equip the inhabitants of the highlands** (especially young people and/or those coming from the cities) **with knowledge and skills** (basic or specialised, related to soft or hard skills) in order to support their **"capability to stay"**, sustaining the will to remain (*restanza*) and to transform the mountain's demand into a conscious act of re-populate those areas. It is important to emphasize that these training experiences go in the direction of **fostering the revival of mountainous areas** in accordance with a **protection and preservation of local heritage** (cultural and environmental).

- The role of policies is pivotal in this regard to:
- offer **subsidized credit and financial support** to facilitate local investments
 - create **networking opportunities** at local and regional level
 - support in the **development of strategic entrepreneurial projects**
 - foster the provision of **services**

** This contribution is the result of a common reflection among the authors which were all involved in the young shepherds school implementation, Daniela Storti as the scientific coordinator, Mia Scotti as the project manager, Andrea Membretti is a member of the advisory Board, and Caterina Salvo supported the stakeholders analysis

Fig. 2. Poster created by Andrea Membretti and Caterina Salvo, 2023.

the production vocation of that land and to the specificities of the area, were all explored in depth.

To complete the training offer, the School has therefore planned an online didactic part to deal with some general themes, such as the culture linked to pastoralism and the role of the shepherd today as custodian of the territory (the “shepherd gardener”) or the importance of knowing how to relate to a workforce that is often coming from abroad, bringing very different cultures in the professional sphere and with respect to the local tradition.

Lastly, this distance learning was followed by a process of accompaniment of participants with respect to the implementation of their project ideas in some specific mountain contexts, between Piedmont and Lombardy: starting from initiating round-table discussions with the main local stakeholders (companies, professional bodies, municipal administrations, etc.), the objective was to encourage the creation of local conditions for the development of micro-businesses or for the integration of new shepherds in already active farms, while re-evaluating at the same time the role of the shepherd as co-agent of local development.



Capable to stay: place-sensitive shepherding training as a factor of territorial rootedness

In considering the socio-demographic and migratory dynamics affecting European and Italian mountain and inland/rural areas, we recalled at the beginning of this contribution how literature in this field has long focused on phenomena such as youth emigration, the “brain drain,” the crisis of traditional economies, and the ageing of populations “left behind” in areas often represented as increasingly marginal compared to urban and lowland areas. As a result, the factors of *restanza*—an Italian neologism defining active rootedness in rural contexts, introduced by the

anthropologist Vito Teti (2022)—and the new attractiveness of mountain and rural areas, especially with respect to certain categories of young people, have often received little attention, not only at the level of analysis but also at the level of policies.

In more recent years, however, reflection has been developing on measures to counter these negative phenomena, on the basis of studies and research highlighting the factors that can revitalise mountain areas and reconnect them first and foremost with urban areas, such as infrastructure (roads, connections, public transport, digital connection, etc.), services (health, personal, cultural, etc.) and investments (public or private) to innovate and revive local economies (support for entrepreneurship, construction, calls for tenders and funding, etc.).

While all these factors appear to be very relevant and depopulation and ageing certainly continue in many mountain and remote areas, the most recent demographic trends and the data cited in connection with the “return to the mountains” offer an articulated and non-homogeneous picture, rich in prospects that until recently were difficult to imagine.

It is this aspiration to live in the mountains, expressed by various and growing categories of people who already live there or who look to it for their future, that highlights the potential for local development linked precisely to the demographic variable and, in particular, to the individuals capable of transforming the “call of the mountains” into sustainable and lasting projects actually “staying” in the area. These individuals are, or can become, capable of staying, developing what we can define—in the wake of immobility studies (Schewel 2019) and following a capability approach (Sen 1985)—a “capability to stay” (Salvo, Tomnyuk, and Membretti 2023).

The example of the Young Shepherds School shows that it is necessary to equip the inhabitants of the highlands—especially young people and/or those who come from the cities—with knowledge and competences (basic or specialised, connected to soft or hard skills) that would enable their settlement and





Fig. 3. Photo taken during the first edition of the Young Shepherds School, 2021. Copyright: Riabitare L'Italia Association (<https://riabitarelitalia.net>) and CREA (<https://www.crea.gov.it>).

ensure that their life and work projects are not ephemeral or clash with previously idealised representations.

The School therefore focuses on an innovative reading of the phenomena underway, where the key factor favouring the revival of mountain areas is identified in the knowledge, skills, and also the awareness that both the people remaining and the new inhabitants, and in particular the young people, must have. A very special training background is offered to the School's participants, one that stems from direct experience of the land, from the interrelation with local players, from the peer-to-peer relationships with the trainers/activators and those among the participants, from the strongly empirical dimension of an approach based on forecasting scenarios of a performative nature, i.e., able to

become reality, given certain conditions, in a future shaped by the expectations and targeted actions of the actors involved.

All this by adopting a didactic methodology that gives a central role to the relational dimension (both among people and with the environment and animals) and the spatial context in which the training unfolds, with the students being co-actors in the process, and not mere recipients of it. In addition to the accompaniment of the emergence of project ideas and the management of group interactions, attention is paid to the values and personal motivations that move the aspiring shepherds. In fact, this motivational and values-based heritage, which takes on the features of a strong ethical tension and a psycho-social drive, seems to be the greatest resource in which to invest

in order to make a training pathway towards the concrete realisation of challenging life choices, often against the tide, and certainly not easy to implement.

From a critical perspective, this first experimentation has revealed the challenge of rooting the projects created by the participants in the areas that they are attracted to, in order to realise their idea of life and work in the mountains in the field of pastoralism.

Most of the School's participants did not show strong previous links with the contexts in which they intend to settle and develop their activities: considering that these are often fragile areas, affected by the ageing of their population and socio-economic crisis, it seems essential to set up networking and mediation paths, including cultural ones, particularly between new inhabitants and historical





Fig. 4. Photo of a young shepherd in the mountains of Piedmont. Copyright: CREA (<https://www.crea.gov.it>).

residents, as well as between young and old, to develop a welcoming environment for the aspiring shepherds.

A second critical aspect is that of economic sustainability: the micro-businesses outlined by the participants show evident weaknesses, relating primarily to the lack of an entrepreneurial background and of tools such as those needed to define a business plan or to read the local markets and job opportunities; it therefore seems necessary to identify further and subsequent training and accompaniment paths that can integrate the missing skills necessary for the overall success of the participants' proposed initiatives.

On the policy front, finally, Italy seems to lack a regulatory and governance framework that favours processes of learning, maturation, and accompaniment aimed at those who want to live permanently and work in the highlands and rural areas, particularly with respect to the setting up of agro-pastoral businesses. Aspiring shepherds need in fact policies dedicated to them, which, starting from good practices activated from below, invest in cultural capital at least as much as in infrastructures or in the redevelopment of villages that otherwise risk remaining empty of productive and social

functions. “*Metro-montane*” policies (Barbera and De Rossi 2021) should be centred on the promotion of new alliances between cities and mountains, and between shepherds and other social actors (e.g., city dwellers buying their products or slow tourism developers), based on the exchange of knowledge and on an integrated and innovative vision of the development of areas that a growing number of people no longer perceive as marginal places but, on the contrary, as fundamental spaces of life, work, and personal fulfilment.

In terms of future research and education development, the two cases analysed above show the opportunity to deepen and fine-tune the experiential teaching methodologies used in this type of training, in order to better tailor them to the mountain and rural contexts in which they are applied.

In addition, projects such as those analysed here offer the possibility of outlining specific action-research paths, which should focus on the nexus between training and the “new peopling” or *restanza*, investigating the performative role of learning skills (specialised or transversal ones) that are fundamental for a conscious and lasting rootedness in mountain and inland areas.

NOTES

1. The contents of this article have already been partially published in Italian, in Andrea Membretti and Caterina Salvo (eds.). 2023. "Imparare la montagna. Due esperienze di formazione a confronto nelle Alpi italiane"; in Stéphane Gal, Anne-Marie Granet-Abisset, Luigi Lorenzetti (eds.). *A l'école de la montagne – La scuola della montagna – Das Gebirge als Schule. Histoire des Alpes – Storia delle Alpi – Geschichte der Alpen* (28). Zürich: Chronos Verlag, pp. 205–17.
2. For more details, see https://riabitareitalia.net/RIABITARE_LITALIA/the-challenge-of-youth-restanza/.
3. Scuola Giovani Pastori: https://riabitareitalia.net/RIABITARE_LITALIA/scuola-nazionale-di-pastorizia/.
4. The second edition of the School has been organized in Sicily, in the Madonie mountains (Palermo), in spring 2024.

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