



CALL FOR ABSTRACTS - International Conference

Margins in dialogue

Plural knowledge in fragile rural areas

18-19 March 2027, Rovigo, Italy

Fragile rural areas (mountainous, inland, insular or marginal coastal territories) today face crucial challenges related to depopulation, contraction of services, hydrogeological instability and the impacts of climate change (Carrosio 2019). In these contexts, socio-ecological vulnerability cannot be addressed only through standardized and top-down models (Lucatelli, Luisi and Tantillo 2022).

The 2026 conference showed that no technical solution can be evaluated in the abstract. An agrivoltaic plant, a flood detention basin or a wind farm must be tested against places, because each of them brings into play different agronomic, economic and social assets depending on where it lands (Scotti 2024). But doing so means mobilizing knowledge that is not in the same place, does not speak the same language and does not enjoy the same recognition. Consider a slope after heavy rain. The geologist who drew up the risk map knows it in one way. The technician from the land reclamation consortium knows it in another, and so does the shepherd who has been crossing it for forty years. The regional official knows the constraints, the local administrator must decide what to do with it, and the committee that opposes an intervention has learned to read its technical reports. None of these gazes, on its own, is enough: as Scott (1998) has shown, synthetic and remotely readable knowledge loses along the way precisely what makes a place governable.

The conference aims to explore the space of intersection, cooperation and potential conflict between the different forms of knowledge operating in fragile territories. Alongside scientific knowledge (academic, technological, quantitative) and popular knowledge (local, traditional, experience-based: Berkes 2018; Tengö et al. 2014), other knowledge is at work: the expert and technical knowledge of those who design and manage the territory - agronomists, foresters, geologists, engineers, planners - whose expertise is both a resource and a source of authority, and whose collective learning is anything but obvious (Collins and Evans 2002; Secco, Pettenella and Gatto 2011); administrative and regulatory knowledge, which establishes what is concretely feasible; peasant knowledge, made up of daily practice and co-production between society and nature (van der Ploeg 2008; Porsani et al. 2026); the intermediary knowledge of cooperators, community animators and third sector operators, who hold together care for people and care for the land, as shown by the experience of social agriculture (Genova and Tarsia 2025), and who know how to translate between different languages and build trust (Star and Griesemer 1989); the critical knowledge and counter-expertise that committees and movements produce in territorial conflicts (Corburn 2005).

Two of these types of knowledge deserve special attention, because in fragile areas they often belong to the only actors left when the market retreats and the administration thins out. The first is that of social cooperation. Social and community cooperatives know things that no one else knows: the history of families and farms, which land is disputed and which is abandoned, who can be involved in a project and who should be listened to first. It is knowledge accumulated over years of work and incorporated into hybrid organizations, which hold together business logic and social

purposes (Venturi and Zandonai 2016), and which precisely for this reason are able to act as a bridge between technical language, administrative language and everyday language. The second is that of banking, community and grant-making foundations. They see many territories together, compare projects, accumulate evaluations and learn from failures, and through calls for proposals and support tools they help to define the problems that territories work on. Experiences such as AttivAree have shown that a grant-making body can function as a cognitive infrastructure, and not just as a funding channel (Osti and Jachia 2020). On this point, the conference proposes a joint reflection with cooperatives, associations and foundations: how research and intervention agendas are built together, and under what conditions the exchange of knowledge between those who finance, those who work and those who study becomes truly reciprocal.

There are hierarchies of credibility that establish what counts as evidence and what is dismissed as opinion, emotionality or "resistance to change" (Wynne 1992). There are forms of epistemic injustice: those who inhabit a territory may be listened to less than those who study or design it from afar (Fricker 2007), and this asymmetry is added to the distributional asymmetry that marks environmental conflicts in fragile areas (Osti and Pellizzoni 2013). There is also a form of cognitive extractivism, parallel to that of resources, whereby the knowledge produced in the territories is collected, formalized and capitalized on elsewhere (Santos 2014).

However, it is not a question of overturning hierarchies or idealizing local knowledge. Local knowledge can also make mistakes, it can exclude and it can be captured by particular interests. In the same way, scientific knowledge is not a monolithic block. The problem is not to add the voice of the inhabitants to decisions already taken on technical grounds: knowledge and social order are produced together (Jasanoff 2004). The problem is to build arenas in which different forms of knowledge confront each other, test each other and produce shared objects, such as maps, indicators, plans, rules of use (Callon, Lascoumes and Barthe 2009; Star and Griesemer 1989; Ostrom 1990).

The aim of the conference is to understand how the encounter between these forms of knowledge, and their mutual testing, can generate strategies of adaptation, innovation and eco-social regeneration (Norström et al. 2020). Starting from the recognition that a plurality of forms of knowledge read problems from different standpoints, the conference addresses three questions: what knowledge matters in decision-making processes, in which spaces and with which practices it can be confronted, and under what conditions their dialogue produces more just and effective decisions.

The objectives

The conference aims first of all to recognize and describe the plurality of knowledge that operates in fragile territories. We want to understand how it is produced, circulated, transmitted or lost. Depopulation does not only empty villages: it erodes contextual knowledge, administrative skills and intermediation skills that are difficult to rebuild, and with them the awareness of place that makes it possible to take care of a territory (Magnaghi 2010).

A second objective is to analyze the power relations between forms of knowledge. We are interested in who determines what counts as legitimate knowledge in decision-making processes, such as impact assessments, planning, tenders and litigation (Collins and Evans 2002; Fricker 2007). We are also interested in the forms of exclusion, subordination or co-optation that derive from it.

The third objective is to investigate dialogue devices and practices. These include co-programming and co-design, river contracts, citizen science, action-research, community maps and hybrid forums (Corburn 2005; Callon, Lascoumes and Barthe 2009; Moriggi 2020). We want to understand under

what conditions they generate new knowledge and better decisions, and when they are reduced to a façade of participation.

A fourth objective concerns the figures and infrastructures of translation. We are interested in intermediaries, boundary objects, open data and platforms that allow different fields of knowledge to meet without one absorbing the others (Star and Griesemer 1989). We are particularly interested in the translation work carried out by social and community cooperatives, associations and foundations: who does it, with what skills, with what resources and with what recognition.

The conference also invites reflection on the position of those who do research in fragile areas. The questions concern the return of results to communities, reciprocity, co-authorship, the relational and emotional dimension of fieldwork (Moriggi, Soini, Franklin and Roep 2020) and the risk of transforming territories into mere data collection sites (Santos 2014; Norström et al. 2020).

Finally, the conference aims to contribute to the construction of the Observatory that the association is starting. The question is how to produce cumulative and comparable knowledge over time without crushing contextual knowledge: it is a matter of bringing quantitative indicators and situated readings into dialogue (Secco, Da Re, Pettenella and Gatto 2014; Tengö et al. 2014), building on experiences of territorial observation and support already tested in Italy (Osti and Jachia 2020), making the Observatory itself a device for co-producing knowledge rather than a simple measurement tool.

Thematic Axes

Contributions may address the main theme through one or more of the following research strands:

- Axis 1: Agroecology, biodiversity and peasant knowledge. Local seeds and breeds, mountain and slope agriculture, community management of pastures, forests and civic uses. How farmers' practices and agronomic and ecological research meet, and under what conditions they test each other instead of arranging themselves in a hierarchy.
- Axis 2: Risk, water and climate memory. Integration between technological monitoring (sensors, satellites, forecast models), hydraulic knowledge of consortia and administrations and historical memory of communities in the prevention of landslides, floods and droughts. River contracts, civil protection, local forms of alert and care.
- Axis 3: Energy transition, soil and knowledge conflicts. Who produces the appraisals and who contests them: impact assessments, counter-expertise of committees, public debate on wind and agrivoltaic plants, hydraulic and logistical works. Conflict not only as an obstacle, but as a place where new knowledge is produced.
- Axis 4: Participatory research, citizen science and methodologies. Co-design, community maps, action-research, transdisciplinary approaches, involvement of residents in data collection and interpretation. This also includes the position of the researcher, the return of results to communities, co-authorship and the risks of cognitive extractivism.
- Axis 5: Administration, public policies and knowledge skills. How decision-makers and offices integrate (or ignore) local skills; co-programming and co-design provided for by the Third Sector Code; the cognitive role of social cooperatives, community enterprises and foundations in territorial planning; administrative capacity as a scarce knowledge resource in fragile areas; SNAI, PNRR, Green Communities and cohesion policies.
- Axis 6: Knowledge infrastructures, data and observatories. Indicators, open data, archives, platforms and territorial observatories. How to build cumulative and comparable knowledge

over time without crushing contextual knowledge (an axis directly linked to the launch of an Observatory of fragile areas).

How to Participate and Guidelines for Authors

Researchers, professors, doctoral students, local professionals and representatives of associations and local authorities are invited to submit proposals for contributions. Proposals for contributions (abstracts) must be written in Italian or English and include: title of the contribution, name, surname, affiliation and contact details of the author(s), thematic axis of reference, text of the abstract (max 300 words), 4 keywords. Proposals must be sent using the appropriate form [here](#) no later than 31 December 2026.

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