

## **TOURISM TRANSITION: THE LUCAN DOLOMITES MODEL**

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### *Abstract*

This work presents the case of Castelmezzano and Pietrapertosa, small towns in the Lucan hinterland, in South Italy, that were initially less-favoured but have built a solid tourist economy while observing environmental constraints. The paper examines the territory, which has the status of a less-favoured area, where the morphological characteristics have for decades determined phenomena of marginalisation. It then analyses the resilience process that began with the opening of the Volo dell'Angelo (Flight of the Angel), a tourist attraction that has restored the area's socioeconomic fortunes by exploiting local physical barriers. The analysis concludes by explaining the strategic role of participatory planning in balancing opposing factors such as protecting biodiversity and safeguarding of economic interests.

### **1. Introduction**

In recent decades, the topic of territory/landscape has become increasingly intertwined with local planning strategies and hence opportunities to activate lasting and sustainable enhancement and development processes. The idea of "local development" belongs to the sphere of regional economic geography and social sciences. It refers to a process whereby the local economy and society undergoes an endogenous transformation aimed at overcoming existing difficulties and challenges using resources available to the territory, with the participation of existing local actors.

This means that territory/landscape is no longer seen as a blank slate on which a pyramid of top-down development strategies can be built, but as an active element and social product, "the territory of a community and a space to experience" (Ceccarini, 2014, 2), where local forces are called upon to participate directly in empowerment processes. According to this approach, the community is responsible for enhancing and managing all the tangible and intangible components that go to make the landscape it inhabits and builds and on which it exercises a constant action of redesign and reorganisation (L. Mumford, 1989) "differentiated, layered and memorable" (Bianchetti et al, 2015, p. 70).

This new type of planning facilitates a shift from a traditional government approach to a form of governance characterised by rules, processes and behaviour based on openness, participation and the shared accountability of all actors involved. This bottom-up model is implemented by many actors (public and private) that share the objectives, measures and actions underpinning the local empowerment process in a holistic manner.

This viewpoint also changes the way development policy is assessed. Economic growth is no longer the only yardstick: the general social, cultural and political growth of the community are also considered. We also need to measure qualitative growth in terms of community involvement, cohesion and welfare.

One of the themes that has dominated territory-based production system planning strategies in recent decades is “rural regeneration.” This means that many substantially peripheral areas become proving grounds for endogenous development practices.

Until local development policies became more established, these areas were typically seen as intractable places characterised by overarching negative trends (population decline, little economic dynamism and cultural backwardness), which stood in the way of any hopes of development and revitalisation.

Regeneration strategies for rural areas often see tourism as one possible solution to the meltdown of traditional economies, “a passport to development” (De Kadt, 1979). Tourism is generally considered a stimulus for local, inclusive economic growth and a catalyst for economic competitiveness, given its positive influence on gross income, employment and production.

However, as MiBACT emphasised in its Guidelines for a National Strategy for Interior Areas (2016, p. 4), we must be clear that “tourism is not a universal panacea for problems of underdevelopment.”

Some experiences seem to suggest that it is not always sustainable in practice, particularly in financial terms. Some interesting studies in this area (Lindberg, 2011; Sarrasin, 2012) have shown that tourism is sometimes far from being a strategic pillar for the economic development of an internal area. Such areas are often unable to retain capital and inward investment because they are marginal.

The discrepancy between expected benefits and actual results can be explained by an overestimation of the true attraction and competitive potential of the area and by the inability of social capital and institutional governance systems to generate an innovative development pathway. Weak local expertise and poor business fabric can sometimes undermine the strategic suitability of local areas for tourism.

Over and above the local context, social capital is the cornerstone of development strategies and long-term adaptive resilience due to its dynamic capacities. “Active” social capital can develop a creative vision of the future, anticipate and predict scenarios - and gather and reinterpret external signals and innovations able to determine the overall and lasting success of a development project.

This paper sets out to analyse the impact of Volo dell’Angelo (Flight of the Angel) in the Lucan Dolomites. This was seen as a lever for increasing local communication skills, adding tourism value and developing the community.

A qualitative and quantitative approach was adopted to analyse the tourist development effect of Volo dell’Angelo on Castelmezzano and Pietrapertosa, in South Italy. Data on tourism provided by the Basilicata Local Promotion Agency, and on businesses, taken from the Unioncamere register, were combined with statements collected during telephone interviews with local actors who supported or witnessed the metamorphosis that the area has undergone with the launch of this major attraction. We prioritised witness statements given by the Mayors of both communities, the sole director of the Volo dell’Angelo company and the Director of the Gallipoli Cognato e Piccole Dolomiti Lucane Regional Park. Their account of events, supported by quantitative data, made it possible to define the Flight’s impact in its decade of activity.

During the last decade, the challenge for local actors has been to reverse the marginalisation process by relaunching local development while respecting the local heritage resources and biological diversity in the ecosystems present. The area has been governed by shared policies that have given rise to processes of local growth and cohesion and consequently improved the quality of life of residents.

## **2. Lucan Dolomites and Volo dell'Angelo area**

European Directive 268/75 classifies Castelmezzano and Pietrapertosa, two small internal municipalities perched on the Piccole Dolomiti Lucane, in South Italy, as less-favoured farming areas, particularly among totally delimited municipalities. The National Strategy for Internal Areas states that Basilicata is the Italian region with the highest percentage area (92.3%) occupied by marginal land and describes these villages as peripheral municipalities. The limited anthropic impact, a consequence of decades of local geographical, economic and social isolation, has preserved habitats and biodiversity and allowed the establishment of a regional park, the Parco Naturale di Gallipoli Cognato e Piccole Dolomiti Lucane, and three Special Areas of Conservation (SAC).

As in many marginal areas, the economic and social structure has been subject to patchy development given the orographic constraints, the small population size (about 2500 inhabitants in total), which is also subject to population decline and ageing (the population has fallen by 19% since 2000), and difficult links with basic service provision centres. Due to all these factors, both municipalities have long been affected by a low level of independence in their planning capacities (Salvatore et. al, 2018).

As evidence of the fragility of the economic system, the Mayors of both communities told us that the basic industries in both villages changed in the 1990s. Smallholdings, crafts and beekeeping, which previously represented the main activities, gave way to post-earthquake construction (Irpinia, 1981). However, when the financial flows from building work began to decline in the mid-2000s, a genuine employment emergency began to spread to all economic sectors: “by 1999, the last butchers shop had closed, there were two bars and the village’s long-standing hotel was about to shut down” (Mayor of Castelmezzano).

Faced with this emergency, tourism and enhancing the potential pulling power of the Dolomites began to be considered as a possible solution. The process of building the destination began in 2001, when Castelmezzano was one of the 37 municipalities that founded the lesser-known Italian network “I Borghi più Belli d’Italia” (Most Beautiful Villages in Italy). This national network fed, albeit to a limited extent, tourist flows to the area and tourist entrepreneurship. Joining it raised awareness that a tourist attraction accelerator was required that would position the destination competitively on the market.

Local tourist planning was affected by the environmental constraint of a protected area and three Special Areas of Conservation. These delimited lines of development by imposing a need for sustainable planning and the creation of new income through enhancement of natural capital.

Firstly, the presence of protected areas made it necessary to manage one of the most important and complex aspects when managing areas subject to constraints, i.e. the possible conflict between exploitation for tourism and environmental conservation. The European Habitats Directive clarifies that in areas of Community importance, when balancing opposing interests, environmental protection takes precedence over

economic needs relating to tourism, folklore and commercial events, stating that the “favourable conservation status” of habitats and plant and animal species must be maintained. The system for protecting an area of particular environmental value is therefore incompatible with running an activity that could cause a mass influx of people and ecosystem deterioration.

To address the problem of the local ecological load capacity, it was therefore necessary to plan non-invasive interventions and adopt infrastructures with low environmental and landscape impact.

At a time when the demand for tourism began to consider growing environmental awareness and a demand for innovative and experience-based products in authentic destinations little-affected by mass tourism, these communities began to have an inkling that one possible way out of the crisis in traditional rural economies could be to become a tourist destination. The attributes that were previously considered limiting factors now represented new opportunities for the area (Brown & Hall, 2000), provided that the proposed tourist destination offered a living and dynamic image of the local area and a state-of-the-art way of enjoying the landscape.

In 2002, the local administrators sealed an agreement with the patent holder of Fantasticable, a system of linking two mountain peaks by a steel wire with a harness for passengers. This type of attraction had until then only been seen in Gerarmer near Strasbourg and Chatell in Haute-Savoie, where the infrastructure was used to deseasonalise winter tourist flows in advanced tourist areas.

The EU-funded Integrated Territorial Programme (PIT) offered a financial opportunity to establish an attraction capable of turning two marginal areas into tourist destinations and boost a service supply that accounted for only 5% of the local economic mix in 2006, the year before the Flight was opened.

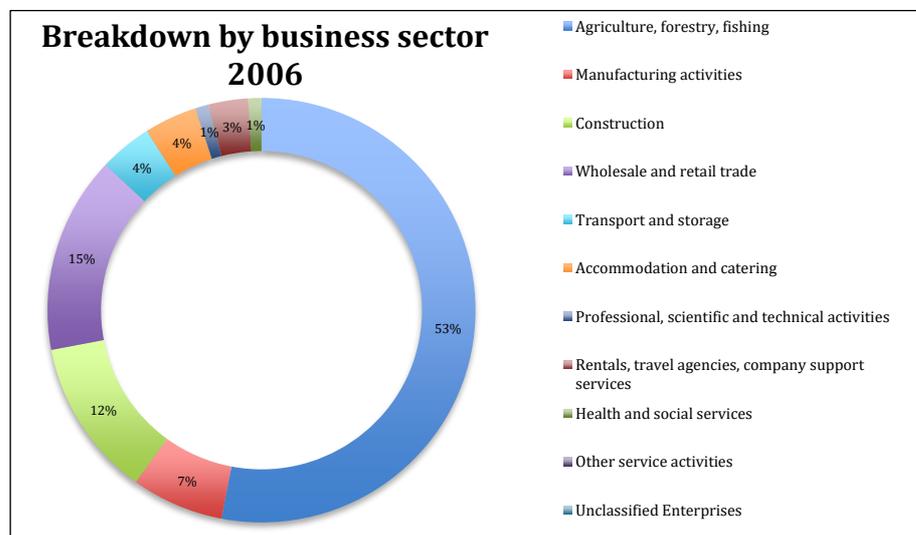


Figure 1: Economic breakdown by business sector, 2006.

Source: FEEM chart based on Basilicata APT data.

Statistical data from the Local Promotion Agency show that in that year the accommodation offered by both communities consisted of only eight facilities and 130 beds, 67% of which were located in the three hotels present, with gross use amounting to 5% of all available beds.

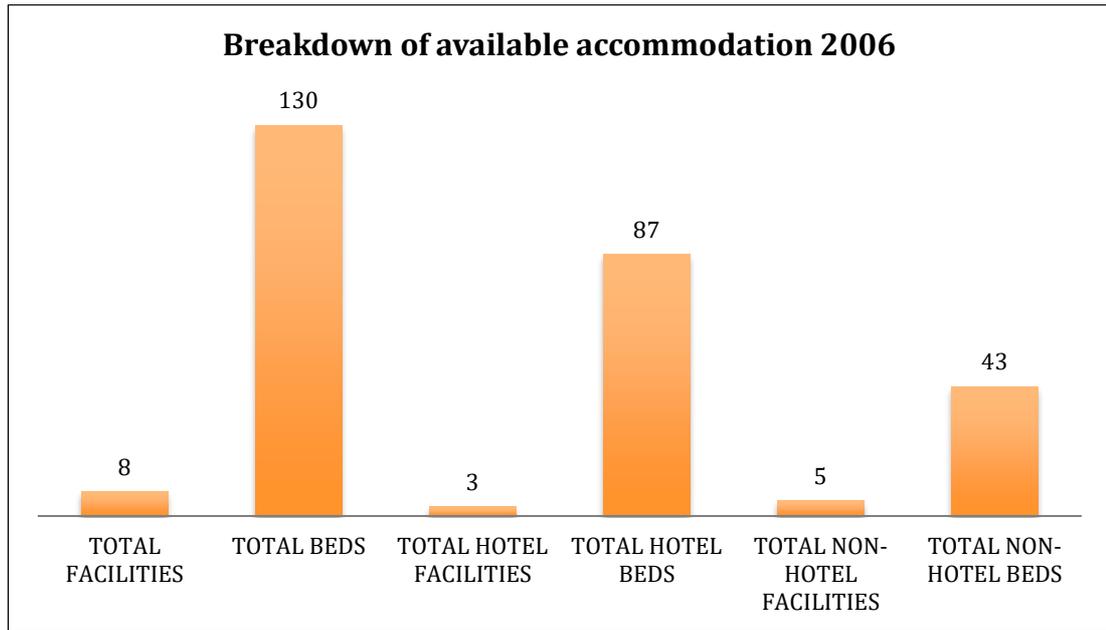


Figure 2: Breakdown of available accommodation, 2006.

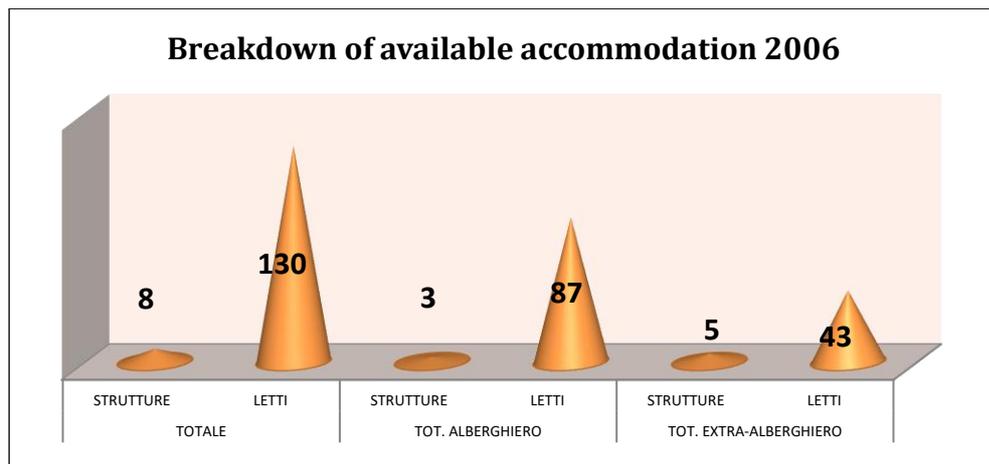


Figure 3: Breakdown of available accommodation, 2006.

Source: FEEM chart based on Basilicata APT data.

The tourist demand amounted to 1715 arrivals, 83% of which were Italian customers, and 2418 stays, a little over one tourist per inhabitant (2123 total inhabitants in 2006). Neither of the municipalities featured on popular travel itineraries and were the destination of a small number of independent tourists, coming mostly from neighbouring catchment areas.

A restaurateur from Pietrapertosa stated, “before the Flight opened, the villages’ prospects looked gloomy and we wondered if we could carry on. The major attraction brought hope to the area”.

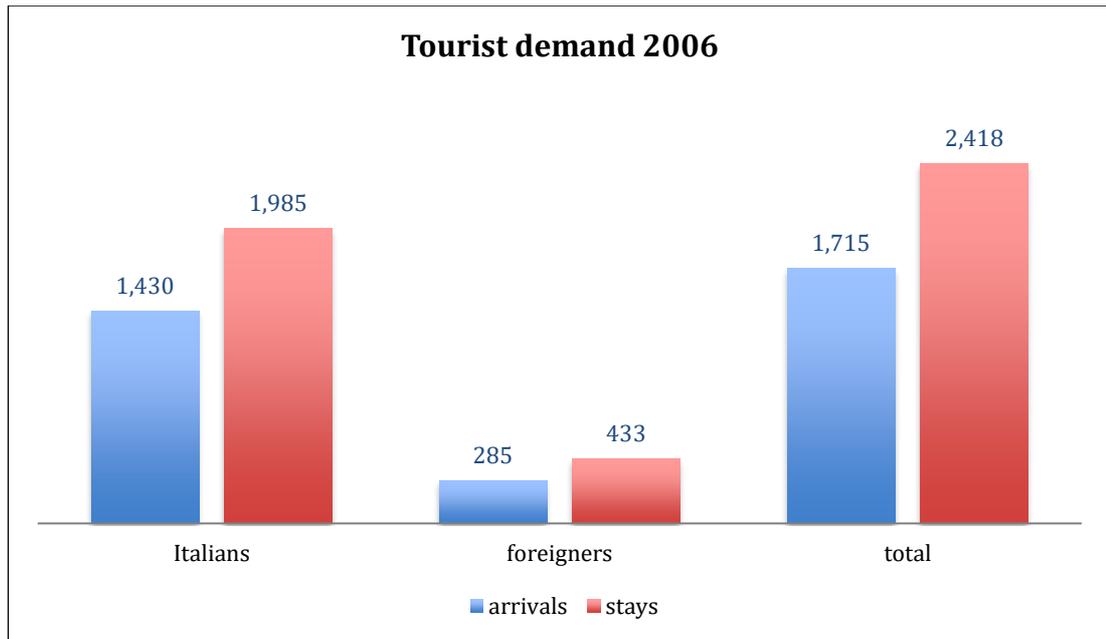


Figure 4: Tourist Flows, 2006.

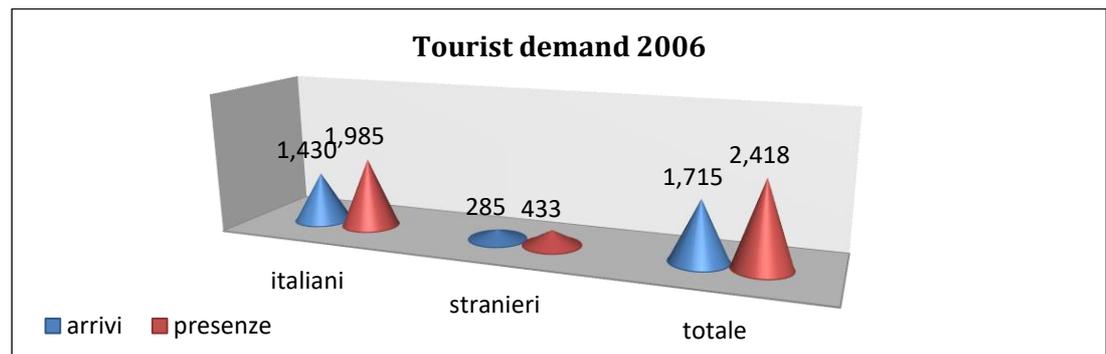
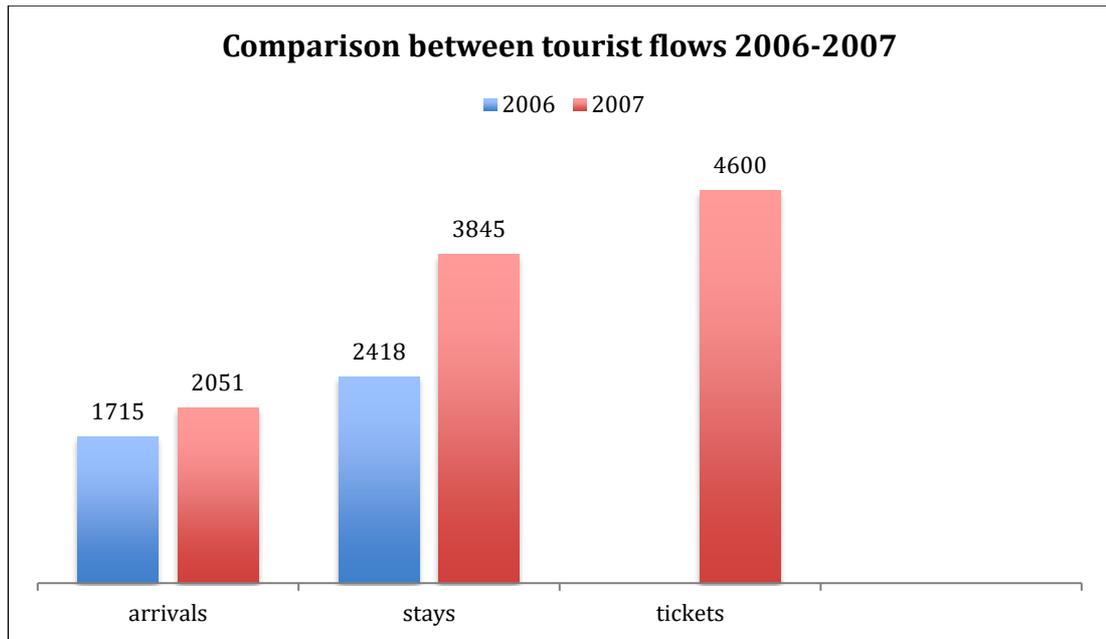


Figure 5: Tourist Flows, 2006.

Source: FEEM chart based on Basilicata APT data.

In 2007, one and a half months after opening, the communities realised that local movement trends had reversed: “The Flight went viral on the internet” (Mayor of Castelmezzano).

In its first year of activity, the figures showed a 20% increase in arrivals, a 59% increase in stays and 4600 tickets sold.



*Figure 6: Tourist flows 2006-2007.*  
Source: FEEM chart based on Basilicata APT data.

### 3. Impact of the Flight of the Angel in 10 years of activity: tourism

The Flight's opening boosted the local profile, "the community reacted by seizing the opportunity for growth and new enterprises were opened, bucking the regional trend" (Mayor of Castelmezzano). The tourism infrastructure began to reorganise, and the local fabric gradually became more structured. New attractions were added: "the Via Ferrata (protected climbing route), Percorso delle Sette Pietre (Seven Stones Path), Literary Park, the Nepalese Bridge, properly marked footpaths and several observation points" (Volo dell'Angelo Management Company).

The local administration reported, "10 years later, the Flight has exceeded our expectations, with the number of flights increasing from 4000 in 2007 to nearly 20,000 in 2017" (Volo dell'Angelo Management Company). This boom has created new businesses and jobs, consolidated community partnerships and partly offset the effects of depopulation.

Since 2006, the accommodation capacity has doubled, with a marked difference between the type of accommodation facilities present. The number of hotel beds has remained unchanged, but the number of B&Bs has increased from two to 15 and the number of accommodation facilities managed on a business footing has increased from 0 to 17. This type of accommodation supplements family incomes and allows the resident population to improve its levels of well-being.

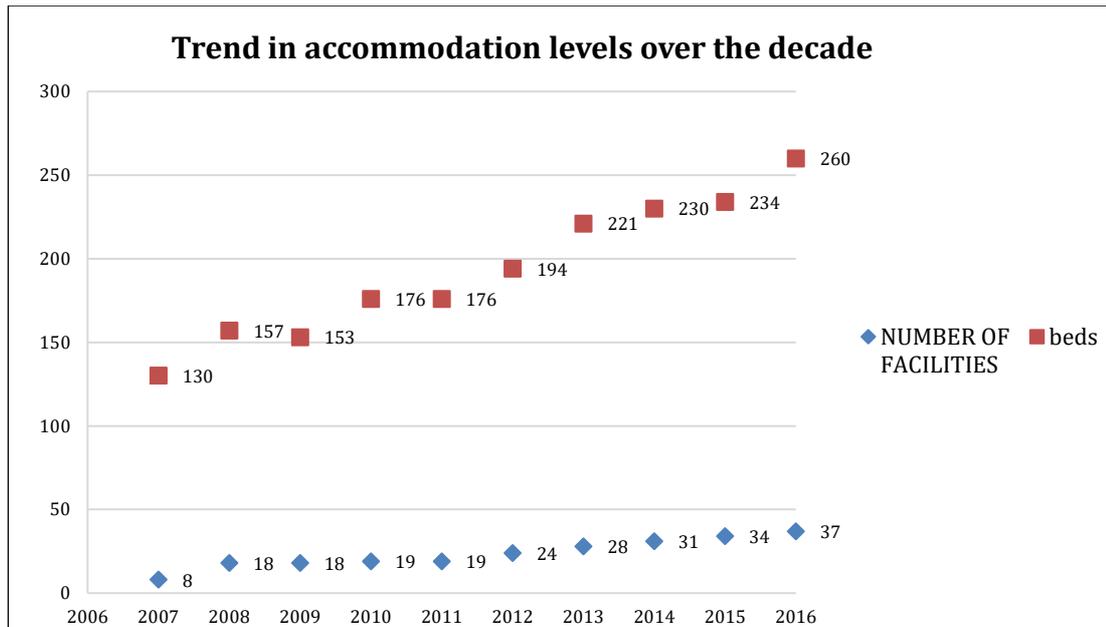


Figure 7: Trend in Accommodation Levels, 2007-2016.  
Source: FEEM chart based on Basilicata APT data.

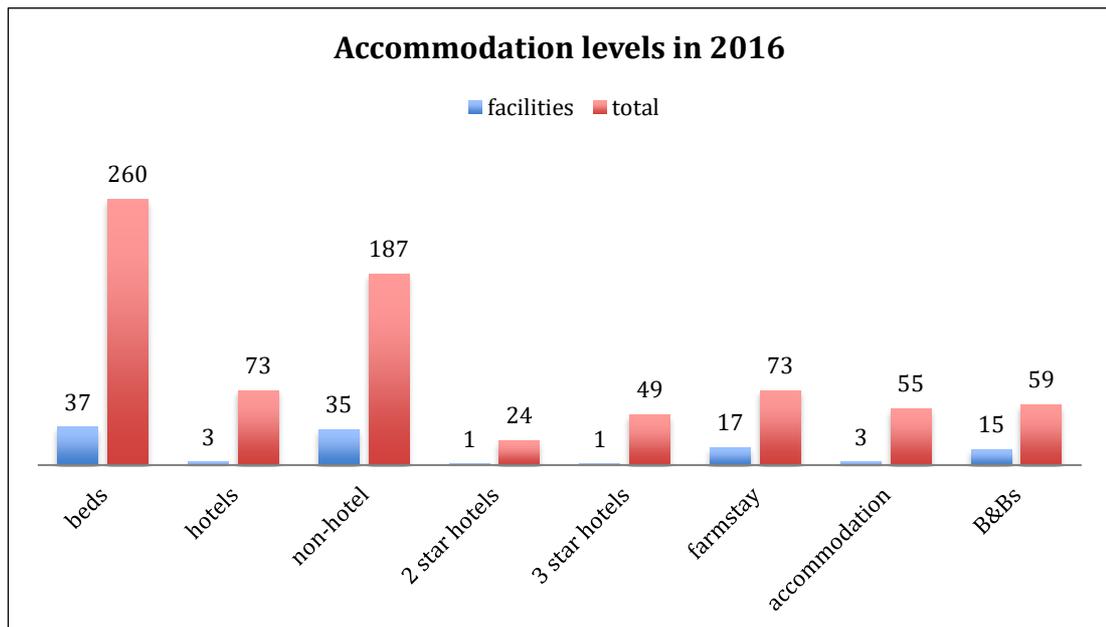


Figure 8: Accommodation Levels 2016.  
Source: FEEM chart based on Basilicata APT data.

Since 2009, several B&Bs have been set up in addition to six restaurants and one self-service restaurant, two pizzerias, one tasting centre for local products and about 10 bars. Two shops selling local produce and two selling souvenirs are also present. The Mayor of Castelmezzano stated that “the real challenge and triumph lies in the fact that no single investor has been manipulating this situation. Instead the local families have turned their hands to becoming tourism entrepreneurs”. Castelmezzano

and Pietrapertosa are living evidence of the theoretical concept of “transition tourism,” whereby a significant reorganisation of the tourism supply in rural areas is effective if shifted toward common tourist products, which are the result of a new planning model focusing on “community-based tourism” (Salvatore et al, 2018). For the potential offered by the developing tourist demand to be fully exploited, the supply must undergo a process of reorganisation and this in turn requires vital, committed local communities (ibid.).

The demand has also responded positively to the bid for social recovery launched locally through the major attraction. In its decade of activity, arrivals have increased by 162%, stays are up by 111% and the number of tickets sold for the Flight have increased by 65%.

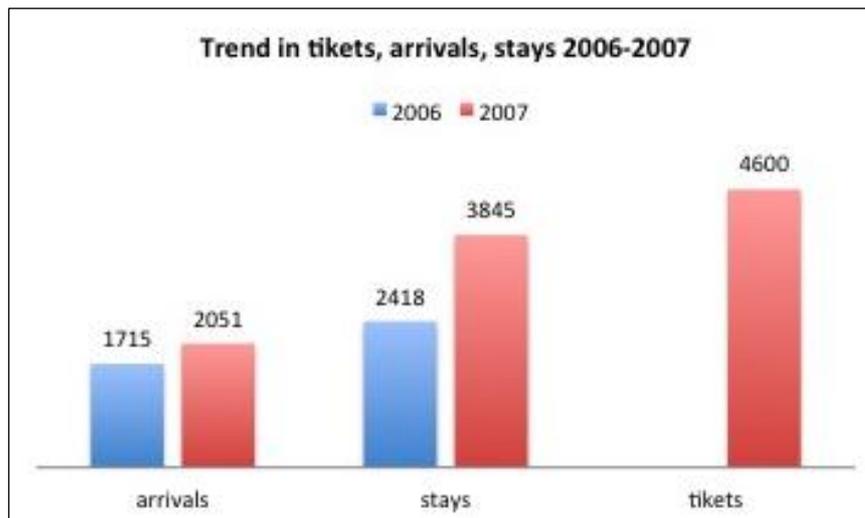


Figure 9: Trend in tickets and tourist flows.  
Source: FEEM chart based on Basilicata APT data.

The number of visitors is also greatly underestimated since “every user who takes the Flight is accompanied by one or two others on average” (Volo dell’Angelo Management Company). This means that the estimated annual number of visitors is approximately 42,500, of whom 73% are hikers. According to this finding, the numbers have risen from just over one tourist per inhabitant to 10.5 fliers per inhabitant and 23 visitors per resident. This pool is also expanded by tourist who stay the night in other areas of Basilicata: one in four operators in Basilicata state that the Lucan Dolomites are the second most popular excursion destination for guests in their facilities, immediately after Matera.

High levels of hikers and greater tourist pressure threaten the sustainability of flows and represent a disadvantage for the tourist economy of places that still see little use being made of the available beds despite having benefited from a substantial increase in overnight stays. For example, only 27% of beds were occupied in the Flight’s peak months.

The Mayor of Castelmezzano stated that the goal for coming years is to extend the time tourists stay in the area. New attractions will be added to what is already on offer, beginning with a themed trail on the village’s history and traditions through eight installations in the *Supportici*, as the village’s ancient gateways are known. The trail will involve the entire village of Castelmezzano, and the residents will participate. An

electric train travelling on a monorail will be built to connect the two villages currently connected by the Flight of the Angel.

#### 4. Direct and indirect financial impacts

When the effects of the major attraction are analysed, it has clearly changed the economic structure of both communities. One of the most obvious outcomes is transition from an economy based on farming and building toward one based on services and recreational activities

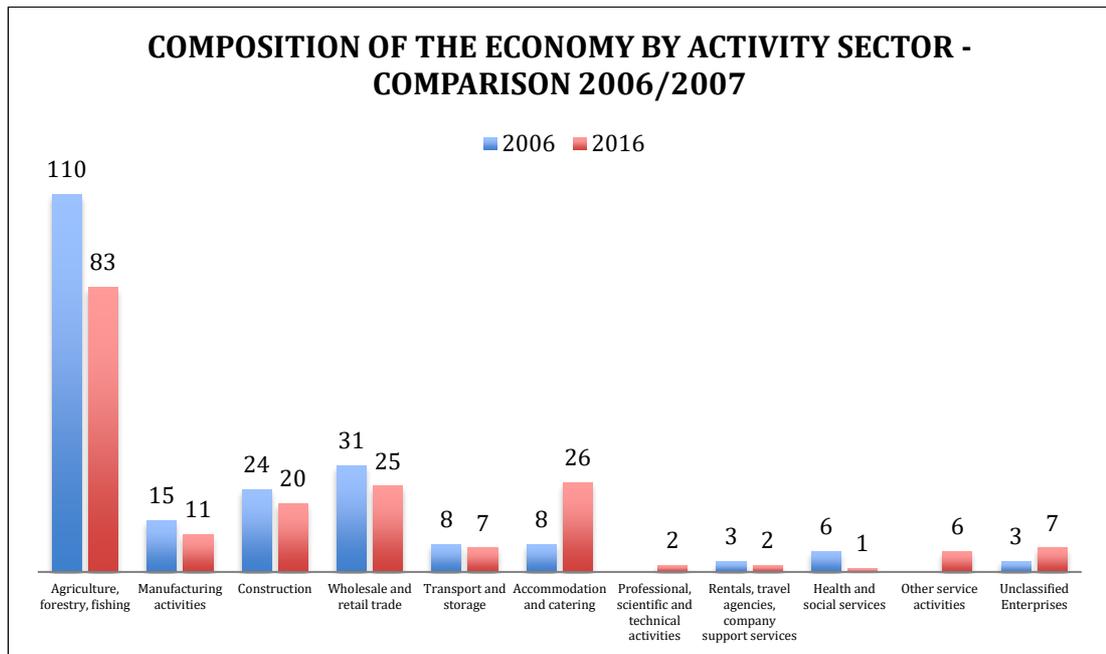


Figure 10: Economic composition by sector - 2006/2017.  
Source: FEEM chart based on Basilicata Unioncamere data.

This transformation has also affected employment. Approximately half the active population of Castelmezzano and 38% of that in Pietrapertosa works in the “sport and leisure” sector. Overall, sectors connected with use of the territory for tourist purposes account for 57.5% jobs in Castelmezzano and 53.5% jobs in Pietrapertosa, without counting workers in shops, a sector that is also directly correlated with tourist activity.

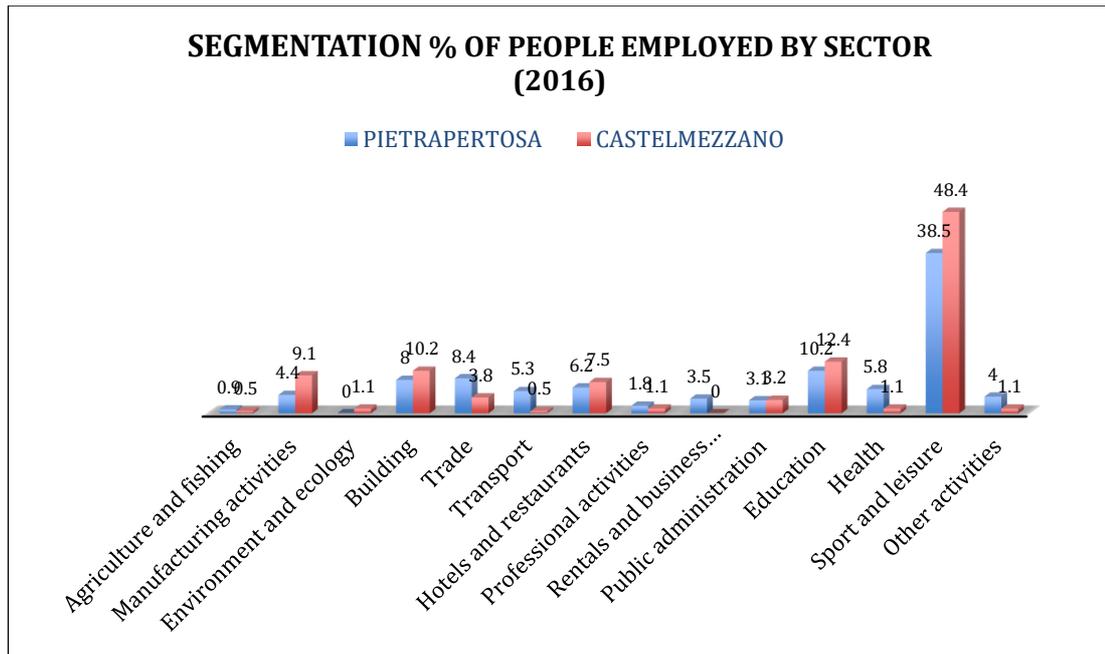


Figure 11: People employed by activity sector, 2016.

Source: FEEM chart based on Basilicata Unioncamere data.

“A minor economy of scale has therefore resulted” (Volo dell’Angelo Management Company), nowadays the villages have a good economy and a guaranteed future, the Flight has graduated from a bid for success to a firm reality (Mayor of Pietrapertosa). The activation of these flows has also placed both communities on the external investment market by raising their profile. In the words of the Mayor of Castelmezzano: “One case worth mentioning is that of Stefano Ricci, a Tuscan businessman who produces ties. After spending a holiday in the Lucan Dolomites, he opened a local company, providing work for 15 local people”. The Flight also “raised the media profile of the Dolomites and sparked the curiosity of film-makers” (Volo dell’Angelo Management Company), who have chosen it as a location for several productions. One of the best-known of these, which had direct financial effects on the territory, was a production entitled “Un Paese Quasi Perfetto” by Massimo Gaudioso, which employed 36 professionals and 202 local extras. According to a FEEM analysis of the film’s impact, the overall amount spent locally was approximately 511.000 euro compared to 140.000 euro received as a regional contribution through a Lucana Film Commission “crisis grant”. Approximately 150,000 euro of the overall sum was spent on food and accommodation for the actors and workers, providing a further financial boost for the hospitality sector. This was supplemented by a knock-on impact estimated at approximately 920,000 euro: for each euro received through the “crisis grant”, the film company spent 3.65 euro locally (Colangelo, 2015).

## 5. Environmental impacts and shared management of ecological load

As mentioned above, since the Flight goes through areas of particular environmental value with EU protection, it was essential to keep a close eye on the anthropic impact that tourist pressure could have on land and biodiversity when planning tourism development.

In the decade that the major attraction has been active, both communities have succeeded in establishing a form of “proactive landscape conservation” (Salvatore, 2015), demonstrating that sustainable tourism is a tangible way of creating income and revenue through the enhancement of natural resources.

The conflict between nature protection and tourist pressure that affects the local ecological load capacity has been resolved by managing problems jointly. This eased latent environmental and social tensions, ensuring a satisfactory state of conservation was maintained without threatening economic growth. Over the years, a low-impact tourist infrastructure plan and a Joint Committee have been set up to monitor disturbance to bird nesting caused by the major attraction and collateral attractions. “Shared management of the natural heritage and partnership between local actors is now on such a sound basis that a common training and professional development programme has been established for Park and Flight operators” (Volo dell’Angelo Management Company).

The Mayor of Pietrapertosa stated with regard to natural heritage protection that: “With the entry into force of the SAC, because the Flight of the Angel and the Via Ferrata both have an impact on the Special Area of Conservation, we have addressed and resolved the problem through an agreement between municipalities, the Region, the Parco del Gallipoli Cognato and Ispra over monitoring the impact on biodiversity. We have set up a legally established Committee of ornithologists tasked with monitoring wildlife. It is also empowered to stop tourist flows immediately in the event of an obvious disturbance to wildlife.”

Local biodiversity and natural resources have therefore been protected and enhanced by the Flight, mainly because “the value of the attraction lies in its wonderful setting. The same attraction would not have worked in other places because the location would not offer the same features. The Flight has also been a means of maintaining footpaths and roads. The birds have benefited so much that black stork records show that the number of eggs has tripled since the beginning of monitoring activities”. (Mayor of Castelmezzano)

Although there is no scientific evidence that birds have been disturbed, the Joint Committee has decided that they will only allow the Flight to run on public holidays during the black stork’s nesting period. The Committee provides tourists with information about what is happening in nature and asks them to behave in an impact-free way, thus encouraging sustainable use of the territory.

## **6. Conclusions**

New tourist phenomena in peripheral areas are destined to become important drivers of change. However, there is a need for social structures to evolve through governance geared to sustainable development and “multilevel management of transition” (Kemp et al, 2007) that tends to emphasise the fundamental role of communities.

Nowadays tourism is a territorial product because it is closely connected to gaining an experience of places and those who live there. From this perspective, smart integration with the local area and community through shared policies that allow inhabitants to become involved in establishing the tourism supply and entertaining tourists represents a break with old tourist provision processes and provides a valuable support for designing tourist experiences. A focus on the welfare of the community and integration with the territory helps the destination’s social sustainability.

Organising and managing tourism development through partnership means that the host community is bound to enter into a kind of “collective pact” (Magnaghi, 2012). Within this, each actor involved must be able to find its own comfort zone and help create territorial, environmental and landscape added value” (Salvatore et al, 2017). Our analysis shows that the tourist region of Castelmezzano and Pietrapertosa represents a small-scale model of economic development. For these municipalities, the major attraction “Flight of the Angel” has offered an opportunity to enhance the unique local environmental and landscape features, offering tourists an opportunity to live an equally rare experience: travelling to the opposite mountain top suspended over a void. The Flight has created widespread awareness among local government and the public that there may be opportunities for development and growth in less-favoured areas. Each new attraction is an added value for its host community but only works if local protection and community involvement are guaranteed. These factors are essential for a form of development that keeps sight of the goal of sustainability.

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