

CHAPTER 20

NEW IN-MIGRANTS – NEW CHANCES: THE REVITALIZATION OF ABANDONED VILLAGES FROM THE OUTSIDE

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Introduction

Are seeds of renaissance in the Alps being planted by newcomers or, more specifically, foreign-born migrants? Over the last 150 years large parts of the Alpine arc have experienced depopulation. Beyond transit traffic corridors and regions of mass tourism, villages in many rural areas have become significantly depleted in recent decades. Socio-economic changes have caused farm closures and emigration, showing a marked decline in the cultivation of land as a result of abandoned property and the expansion of scrubland and forest, a process which is regrettable for several reasons (e.g. a reduced resilience to natural hazards). Whereas the infrastructure of towns and villages can be partly revitalized or preserved by exogenous forces such as second homeowners and politically motivated investments, cultivated landscapes can only be sustained and developed by their appropriate use. Therefore initiatives of new in-migrants who start with agricultural activities and try to revitalize once permanently inhabited areas gain our interest.

Using the example of Dordolla/Val Aupa in Northern Friuli, we will show how the cultural landscapes in peripheral Alpine areas could be revitalized through external contributions, asking whether or not these approaches might help advance regional development in other rural areas. The study reveals the significant impact of individual migrants with non-native cultural backgrounds on rapid, evident revitalization.

Scientific background, methodology, and questions

Our recent research on newcomers to peripheral Italian Alpine villages (Löffler et al. 2016) describes diverse population groups: in addition to local residents who were born and grew up in their village and live there throughout the year, there are typically second homeowners who are sporadically in residence, migrant workers, and amenity migrants in the broadest sense (including re-migrants and relationship migrants). “True” new highlanders are those who have previously lived outside of the Alps and have consciously decided to transfer their lives to the mountains. Most newcomers originate from other geographical areas, be it from cities of the Italian Po plain or from other countries. They all bring new knowledge and socioeconomic stimuli to isolated villages.

In this context, but also in relation to food security and traceability, agriculture is key to making resettlement and repopulation of certain Alpine areas a long-term, sustainable proposition. It might prevent the further deterioration of cultivated land and cultural landscape and could help to reduce further out-migration, perhaps even attracting new in-migrants and tourists. It is therefore noteworthy that the number of new farmers is increasing in some peripheral areas of the Alps (Warmuth et al. 2016). Indeed, those who have started farming in these areas are often “new” in more than one regard – they are an emerging, socio-agrarian “species” of migrant that does not necessarily have a background or education in agriculture and/or animal husbandry. These findings are supported by other studies (Cason et al. 2015; Fassio et al. 2014; Garde et al. 2014; Varotto and Lodatti 2014).

Our own research (Löffler et al. 2016) shows different stages of recent demographic turnaround in various areas of the European Alps. In the remote, western Italian Alps, data currently shows more immigration than emigration over the last decade. In the case of certain French Alpine valleys, this quantitative data can be verified through qualitative research. However, throughout the entire Alps it can be demographically proven only in various small, formally abandoned villages (ibid.).

The example of Dordolla

With the example of Dordolla we aim to elaborate on two key questions using specific, extrapolated information from our Dordolla survey: (1) What are the cultural differences between locals and newcomers in Dordolla?; and (2) To what extent do new cultural backgrounds create local impact?

The data acquisition for this research utilized the following techniques: the analysis of literature to gauge the state of relevant research; the evaluation of official statistics; and the analysis of specific demographic data from the municipality of Moggio Udinese. Within the framework of a university master's module (*Modul Raumentwicklung und Regionalforschung* 2017–2018, Department of Geography, University of Innsbruck), 22 students mapped land use and the function of buildings in Dordolla and nearby Val Aupa hamlets. Furthermore, they completed a comprehensive survey through participatory observation as well as through expert and semi-structured interview with all locals and newcomers present at the time.

Dordolla's situation and its newcomers: a qualitative approach

Dordolla (612 m.a.s.l.) is located about 100 m above the Aupa Valley floor in the rugged Friulian region of the eastern Alps. The village forms part of the municipality Moggio Udinese which as of 2017 had an overall population of 1,416. Since World War II, Moggio's population (4,000 in 1951) along with the rest of the Aupa Valley has followed the Montagna Friulana demographic trend of rapid depopulation; indeed, certain Aupa villages lost all of their inhabitants and consequently formed a cluster of 12 ghost villages in the 1980s (Čede and Steinicke 2007; Steinicke 1991;). A decade later the phenomenon of amenity migration reached the region and caused Moggio Udinese's overall population to rise again for the first time between 1995 and 2001. Although one might think that this new in-migration would only delay the overall declining demographic trend, at the time the number Val Aupa villages permanently abandoned reduced to two (Steinicke et al. 2012). Dordolla's development reflects a similar trend: although the village, which still counted 300 inhabitants in 1951, had lost 90% of its population by 1991 – and was suffering from the abandonment of land and housing, indicating that it could have become a ghost town in just one generation – vits population started to grow in 2011 and by 2017 officially had 49 residents. In addition, a number of regular visitors, including some newcomers, who stay in the village for at least some months of the year, form an integral part of the village's structure and bring its current, unofficial population figure to 60–70 people.

The following section provides insights into the lives and interactions of selected foreign in-migrants to Dordolla who have spearheaded many of the village's revitalization tendencies. In order to explain the intricate system of village interactions, essential background information is presented alongside new data representative of changes in local land use (2017).

The People

Ten years ago Kaspar Nickles moved to Drentus, a small hamlet near Dordolla, with his wife, Marina Tolazzi. Together they manage the village's sole agricultural tourism business, *Tiere Viere* (the Old Terrain), which Marina established when initially reutilizing existing plots of family land in the valley. The business, which is also now known as AgriKulturAlpina, has since grown. Kaspar's agricultural background gave the couple an educated position from which to revitalize the area's cultivated landscape. Originally from southern Germany, Kaspar grew up in the 1980s with parents who first cultivated two hectares of land in their free time before deciding to move to Carinthia, Austria, where they revitalized a long-abandoned hillside farm at the foot of the Central Alps. Their eldest son Kaspar then chose to study agriculture in Vienna, specializing in regional development. When he moved to Val Aupa, his knowledge and experience were put into practice managing the demanding mountainous environment.

It might be easy to imagine the difficulties of implementing a new farm with steep topography, unfavorable climatic conditions, and small, disparate plots of land, as well as soil erosion (a characteristic of the entire region). However, perhaps the bigger challenge was establishing oneself in a declining, foreign village as a mountain farmer with innovative approaches but little awareness of specific local situation. For newcomers, even those who are agricultural experts, acquiring land without the goodwill of neighbors with whom all intersecting paths are shared might lead to a problematic impasse. Importantly, individual locals need to perceive the added value that any planned actions could have for the village. In Dordolla's case, certain key locals served as interpreters, explaining ideas behind the farmer's projects to other inhabitants – importantly, the ideas behind the plans included traditional agricultural production adapted to local circumstances using modern methods and techniques.

The farming family participates in the WWOOF movement (Willing Workers on Organic Farms). Some of their volunteers who did not want to leave Dordolla after finishing their work were encouraged and supported by the farmers and other residents to stay. All were provided with free housing until they were able to renovate their own property and work was available in and around the village for those who wanted manual experience (which, at times, was even paid). A history graduate from Veneto, who previously had more experience living in concrete environments, moved to Dordolla and became a qualified dry stone waller; although no longer resident in the village, his renovated terraces and pathways remain. Another Dordolla immigrant is an arts graduate and trained special needs teacher originally from Padova. Two other newcomers – creative practitioners known for their

various book and film projects who previously lived in London – visit Dordolla often and have become a regular part of the community. All have contributed to the organisation of festivals for Dordolla's well-established cultural association, La Cort Dai Gjats, which engages in a breadth of activities from the maintenance of local pathways to music, theater, art, and environmental events supported by locals, newcomers, and visitors alike. Other volunteers, who regularly arrive in Dordolla from almost anywhere in the world other than small mountain areas, add an international flavor to the village and often stay for several months.

Other Dordolla in-migrants of particular note include: the local municipality's current tourism councilor and his family from Udine; those who have returned to live permanently in previously disused family property; a retiree from the region; a local climber; an artist from Gorizia; three families with roots in the valley – one from Venice, another from Brescia, and the third from Paris – who stay in Dordolla for many months of the year; and other families from France, Belgium, and Italy who regularly spend their annual vacations and other free time maintaining second homes in the village.

Tourists have been able to stay in the village since the farmers renovated certain family houses and disused buildings. Many artists and others affiliated with creative disciplines attend the various, and often ambitious, cultural events. Researchers stay for work and leisure at the farmers' accommodation in either Dordolla or Drentus. Visitors are usually pleasantly surprised by the opportunities to meet interesting people who converse in at least one of the five everyday languages spoken in the village – Friulian, Italian, French, German and English. Tourists are attracted by the opportunity to participate in artistic and scientific activities whilst philosophizing on life beyond the mainstream in the abandoned surroundings. Tourism now constitutes the farming family's primary source of income and is framed within a new agricultural context.

The Land

For socioeconomic renaissances to be sustainable, care also has to be given to the cultivated land surrounding villages. The original settlement and creation of arable land from former wilderness in Val Aupa was commonly achieved through sheep farming. During a period of overpopulation in the early 1900s it became progressively clear that small animals require more feed to deliver the same gain produced by larger, individual animals. Sheep grazed on meadows were exchanged for cows often kept in stables converted from the cellars of village houses. As cows are generally far too

heavy to graze on steep valley slopes and quickly destroy ground that then requires decades to recover, grass and hay were delivered to them. At the time of its maximum population, Dordolla's well-maintained meadows forced inhabitants looking for firewood up towards the rock face. All available agricultural land was used; a few fruit trees offered shade but no firewood. As elsewhere in cultivated areas of Northern Friuli, vegetables, potatoes, beans, corn, and even some grain have long been grown there in spite of adverse topographical and socio-agrarian factors and the rough, extremely humid climate with low duration of sunlight (Steinicke 1991: 56).

While in the 1950s Dordolla was rather overpopulated and most families owned at least one cow, not even 10% of the population (nor even a single cow) was left by the early 2000s. The population was ageing and only one family had children. Only the forest grew; so much so that it threatened to engulf the stables on the outskirts of the village.

Although exact data is still missing, we know that the forest has now grown over up to 90% of the former agricultural land. The following thematic map (Figure 20-1) shows the land's latest development. Data was collected during the aforementioned master's module in autumn 2017 and analyzed for this report by students Lisa Helminger and Stefanie Mössler. As the map illustrates, those areas nearest the village are still forest-free. Where former meadows have been abandoned for around 20 years, they have now been enclosed by hazelnut forest (very overgrown areas in the northeast). Slightly overgrown areas are likely to be totally overgrown within two to five years if they are not mowed soon. Should they be left untended they would no longer be suitable for agriculture. Any of the remaining areas that were still fit for agricultural use in recent decades have been kept open by locals who cleared the land in order to preserve parts of their heritage. The new farmer and one local key figure in particular have since continued cutting the high grass from the last islands of open fields, felling trees, and re-cultivating important areas close to the village. Other people are maintaining what was already theirs and some have even begun tending land that belongs to absent owners.

The farming family cultivates nearly 5 hectares of a total 8.4 hectares that are still usable (well-cultivated and only slightly overgrown). A large percentage of their land is leased and they have the informal right to use certain small parcels of land. Less than 2% of the farm's usable area is overgrown, while 57% is in full use. The remaining 41% is so well maintained that it could be used for farming at any time.

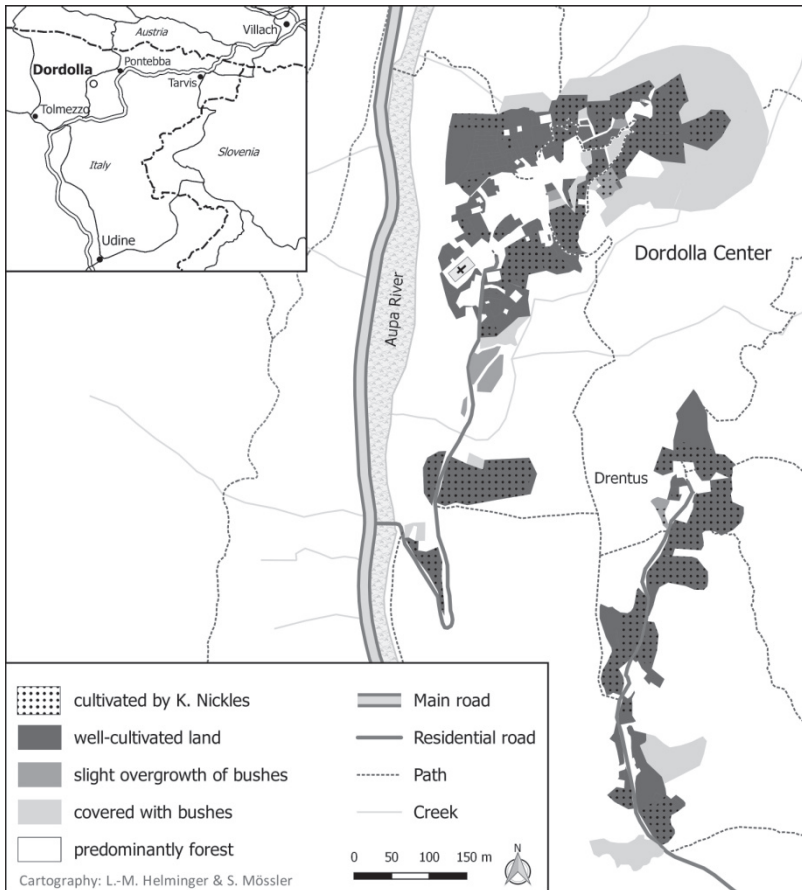


Figure 20-1: Current Land Use in the Dordolla Area (Mapping by Innsbruck University geography students (September 2017); cartography: Stefanie Mössler and Lisa Helminger).

Even though they do not directly benefit from this remaining percentage, the farmers and the rest of the village's inhabitants and visitors enjoy as much open landscape as possible. In recent years other locally active people have also begun maintaining their more peripheral land beyond the village to the point that now less than 5% shows slight overgrowth encroachment. Even some steep slopes have been cleared of new forest, which is not as yet of great use but crucial for an attractive village image. After 5 to 10 years of careful maintenance, this land could once again be used for grazing sheep.

Dordolla: A model case study for new in-migration?

Dordolla's lively combination of newcomers and established residents has become well known throughout Friuli and beyond through media reports, scientific articles, and the internationally recognized documentary shot in Val Aupa, *The New Wild: Life in the Abandoned Lands*. The proof that a positive turnaround can happen somewhere leaves little excuse for not trying everything possible elsewhere.

As a case study of foreign in-migration, Dordolla seems to serve as a promising example of the sustainable revitalization of a near-depopulated village. As one of the village's immigrants articulates, however: "A village is a direct response to its location and circumstance, forming all manner of characteristics that make it unique" (Thomson 2017); therefore, even as a model case study, Dordolla can only provide evidence that foreign in-migration can happen and could lead to other innovative and pioneering revitalization. The single phenomena and actions seen in Dordolla are nevertheless also evident in a large number of other Alpine villages, implying the potential for similar development elsewhere. In other places, we find enough newcomer activity to anticipate a similar turnaround concerning demography, village social life, revitalization of the surrounding cultural landscape, and house renovation; however, improved infrastructure and increased economic activity should be implemented in the near future for villages such as Dordolla to witness a long-term, sustainable revival.

Almost all of the contributions and innovations in Val Aupa have been triggered by new migrants (Löffler et al. 2016). Many striking and evident changes are based on the implementation of ideas by those who come from other backgrounds and whose former ways of life would not be practical in this new place of residence. The activities of single stakeholders have provided the impetus to control overgrowth, expand cultivated land, restore old paths, and introduce sheep farming in a new form. The cultural landscape's revitalization has also stimulated tourism and other economic activities. Innovation is evident in the sociocultural field and conspicuous in the revival of the area's cultural landscape. As said above the Dordolla example is not a model which is feasible and replicable for all areas. But the Dordolla case study shows that peripheral mountain areas can benefit from new immigrants with other cultural backgrounds. It depends on the social relations of people and their willingness to cooperate as well as on the support of legislation and the involved institutions to allow and to confirm these forms of social innovation.

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