

*Culture, agriculture and medieval villages for an open Calabria.
The plain of Sibari, the Ionian sea, the foothills of the Pollino:
an alliance between development and the rule of law.*

Outline of the project and its strategy

July 2014

1. Introduction and summary

The project outlined below is part of a broader programme – named *Luoghi idea(li)* – which aims at stimulating change in eleven places in Italy, and, in parallel, at favouring the maturation of Italy's *Partito Democratico*, from its roots. The name of the project stems from the conviction, on one hand, that change comes from, and begins with, decentralized action, and that, on the other hand, the places we chose are ideal ones. A distinctive feature of the project is its method, which is designedly participative.

Each of the eleven projects is owned and conducted by the local institutions of the party. A central team assists them in organizing themselves, applying the chosen method, and evaluating the results achieved.

This project concerns a relatively small area of Italy's least developed region, Calabria. At its centre is the archaeological site of Sibari, which lies where in antiquity the river Crati flew into the Ionian sea. This site hosts the remains of a famously wealthy Greek (Peloponnesian) colony, *Sybaris* (VIII–VI centuries B.C.), from which the adjective 'sybarite' is drawn, of a subsequent panhellenic colony founded by decision of Pericles, *Thurii*, whose limpid urban plan was drawn by Hippodamus of Miletus and at whose foundation Protagoras and Herodotus were present, and of a later and less prominent Roman city, *Copia*.

The area comprised by the project – Sibari-Pollino, or the 'Sibaritide' – includes the Ionian coast before the archaeological site, the fertile plain that surrounds it and reaches up the Pollino massif, to the north, and the foothills of such mountains, dotted by several rather well-preserved hilltop settlements where the population retreated after the VII century, under the pressure of Saracen piracy. Several host Albanian-speaking (*arbëresh*) communities that settled there in the XV century, as the Ottomans advanced across the Balkans, and still treasure linguistic, cultural and religious traditions which largely crystallized at the time of their emigration.

Illegality and organized crime – which in Calabria takes the name of *'ndrangheta* – are serious problems in this area, no less than administrative paralysis, exemplified lately by the inactions and inefficiencies that first caused the flooding of the river Crati, which in January 2013 deposited a thick layer of mud over much of the archaeological site, and then delayed essential clean-up and maintenance interventions.

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The conditions for the Sibaritide to make a leap forward, in terms both of development and legality, have existed for long. They rest on three main assets: the historical and ideal attraction of its ancient cities; a specialized agrifood sector, capable of generating exports and susceptible of further expansion; and the touristic potential of the medieval villages at the foothills of the Pollino.

To restore the rule of law, overcome administrative paralysis, and build a narrative about Sibari as an 'ideal city', which may serve as the engine of a broad development programme, it is necessary to

establish a horizontal alliance among those three assets. A parallel alliance must accompany it, however, between local and national instances, so as to break inherited constraints, stimulate innovation, and achieve change. This project – which enjoys the firm commitment of Calabria’s branch of the *Partito Democratico* – aims at realizing such two alliances and leveraging on them to achieve change and accelerate the development of this area.

2. Calabria: a region of extremes

In collective imagery Calabria recalls the idea of an Italy of extremes. A rough, closed, intrinsically deviant, sick society. A territory impermeable to development and market relations, devastated by widespread illegality and organized crime. A very different society compared to Northern Italy and the rest of Western Europe. Such perceptions are strongest and have their deepest roots in those who observe Calabria from afar, from media reports, and never visited it.

Statistical data inexorably confirm this image, depicting an outlier region. We observe per capita income levels very far from national and European averages; extremely high unemployment; a pathological dependency on external public transfers; micro firms incapable of growing; negligible exports; a huge informal sector; the emigration of the well-educated youth; vast clusters of poverty, absolute and relative; and inadequate public services, including basic ones. Academic analyses describe a broken-up territory and a pulverized society, lacking significant urban settlements, civic communities and civil society organizations.

In such a socioeconomic context, politics took the centre of the stage. It became the only player governing collective and individual destinies, the formal and informal economy, wealth and poverty, human relations, social mobility. Without strong civic, economic and institutional actors, politicians and public administrators seem to have acquired a monopoly over the resources for starting and developing businesses, for securing jobs and income, or for enjoying even basic civil rights, such as the right to health and to a dignified life. This explains the widespread and all-pervasive attraction exercised by the profession of politics, and a closely correlated paradox: Calabria displays the highest levels of political participation nationally, and yet among its citizens distrust for politicians and political institutions alike is both radical and widespread.

A self-sustaining vicious circle seems to have set in, fuelled by a constrained market and hypertrophic public regulation, which progressively deteriorates society, the few vital economic forces, and their autonomy from politics. Worse, this vicious circle confirms and propagates a ‘failure syndrome’: the conviction that efforts to change this state of affairs are futile, leading to resignation to an ineluctable status quo.

If viewed more closely, however, Calabria takes on a different light. It appears more variegated, and less distant from the contemporary world and the rest of the country. Although the image of an underdeveloped region does not altogether disappear, it takes on a lighter shade, especially as regards the quality of social and civic life and its openness to economic exchange with the rest of Italy and the wider world. One may observe specialized productions of some relevance, examples of effective government, excellent schools and cultural and scientific institutions, civic networks of some quality, and places where development is underway. Calabria is not an ‘other’ world, thus, coherent within itself and irreconcilably dissonant from the rest of the nation: it is an aggregation of diverse places, communities and activities. But where positive signs exist they are intrinsically fragile, weak, disconnected and isolated from each other.

Indeed, the mark of this region is its pointillist character: the mutual isolation of practices and experiences. Calabria lacks tight networks and close connections, and functional links within and among its places. Family ties, closed circles and particularistic networks prevail instead, under whose constraints interpersonal ties and economic and entrepreneurial networks do not grow. These many microcosms remain closed, therefore, just as they were during Italy’s industrial revolution and at the

height of the waves of emigration towards the rest of the country and the Americas, when Calabria's openness was highest; and they remained closed after the archaic social order disappeared, in the post-war period.

A literary and sociological stereotype ascribes Calabria's predisposition towards isolation to the 'culture' of its citizens: to their individualism and 'amoral familism'. Far more important are its geography instead, dominated by impervious mountains and reliefs; the pulverization and fragility of urban life; and, above all, the chronic absence of national, regional and local public policies aiming to pool resources, link up experiences, stimulate institutional and social cooperation, and favour the spatial and functional agglomeration of economic resources and essential services.

The strengths and vital forces of this region thus remain confined within narrow boundaries, producing hardly any impact beyond them. This is doubly harmful. On one hand, the vital forces that do exist cannot exploit the advantages of their location, and, on the other hand, the broader territory in which they are situated is deprived of the beneficial spill-overs that they could generate. The weakness of the networks and connections that could link such forces thus contributes to a static equilibrium between innovation and persistence, change and status quo. Change and innovation are not impossible, but they entail higher costs than elsewhere and suffer the dampening effects of the slower pace at which the social and political order of the region evolves.

A closer look at Calabria reveals also an extraordinary wealth of natural and cultural resources, some of them unique, disseminated across all its territory. Again, however, they are insufficiently exploited, if not culpably ill-used, neglected or even abandoned. A capital resource, the sea, is systematically polluted by an inefficient water treatment system, and its coasts are devastated by illegal construction. The impressive forests and woods of Calabria's many reliefs are inadequately maintained, and every year are devoured by numerous wildfires. Its rivers often flood, by reason of lack of maintenance and unregulated or illegal extraction of sand and stone. Likewise, the region's numerous and important archaeological treasures are exposed to damage and deterioration, because they are ill protected. The potential of such assets – for economic development, job creation, and the very formation of a regional identity – is considerable, but only few of them flourish, often in isolation. The divergence between the scale and quality of such natural and cultural resources and the paucity of their exploitation is truly remarkable.

3. The 'idea(l) place': the Sibaritide

One of the foremost examples of the strident asymmetry between Calabria's potential and its realization is the 'idea(l) place' of this project, the Sibaritide.

This territory lies in the north-western part of Cosenza's province, and encompasses the plain of Sibari, traversed by the river Crati, its coast on the Ionian sea, and the foothills of the Pollino massif, to the north. The geography, environment and development potential of this territory are quite variegated. What joins its parts together is the presence of valuable and diverse natural and cultural resources, largely underutilized or ill-exploited. The organizing hypothesis of the project is that only the integrated exploitation of such resources can allow this territory to make a development leap: individual resources cannot alone provide the critical mass that is necessary to realize the potential of this territory.

The main resources, or clusters of assets, are three: archaeological site of Sibari; the agrifood sector in the plain; and the medieval settlements at the foothills of the Pollino.

The archaeological site is one of the most important ones in the Mediterranean. For more than one thousand years, a period broadly coinciding with the duration of the Greco-Roman civilization, trade and a very fertile plain sustained important cities: *Sybaris*, above all, *Thurii* and Roman *Copia*. The opulence and refinement of the oldest one were a common literary reference in classical antiquity, and in several modern languages the adjective 'sybarite' still denotes the lover of luxury and leisure. The site

is immense: the protected area extends over 2,500 hectares, about 2,000 of which encompass the urban perimeter of *Sybaris* and *Thurii* (within whose bounds *Copia* also rose). Despite archaeology's enormous potential of as a marker of identity and stimulator of economic activity, the excavations essentially are an enclave: a small, isolated oasis, and a promise of prosperity that was not kept. Sibari's grand ruins lack both a context and influence over it. A dramatic manifestation of such isolation was the carelessness with which the public institutions and local community alike failed to protect the site from the flooding: the embankments of the river Crati was not maintained and its bed was illegally occupation by citrus groves and other plantations, leading to a flood that recently left the site covered by a thick layer of mud and debris. One may quote also the degradation of several tourism establishments near the archaeological site; the persisting inattention for strategic infrastructure, such as the (nearby) port of Corigliano; and, more broadly, the grave inadequacy of essential public services in the area.

Since about half a century the Sibari plain hosts the densest agglomeration of modern capitalist enterprises in Calabria, centred on small number of leading agricultural and agrifood firms, which organized broader cooperative structures – for the collection, transformation and commercialization of agricultural products – to which hundreds of smaller firms associated themselves. Such cooperatives chiefly provide agronomic assistance to their members, so as to standardize their production and its quality. The agrifood sector employs thousands of workers from the plain and the villages at the foothills of the Pollino. In the past twenty years the leading firms have diversified – often with success – into the production of milk and dairy products, wine, energy, and, more recently, distribution, direct sale and gastronomy. In parallel, they innovated their production processes and internal organization through partnerships with local and national firms. The production of this cluster of businesses – peaches, oranges, tangerines, vegetables, grapes – represents a wide share of Calabria's (modest) exports. Yet important assets and resources of the Sibari plain remain underutilized. Considerable margins for improvement exist also in the quality of its production, and the whole value chain, from production to commercialization, can be strengthened.

The medieval settlements at the foothills of the Pollino are about fifteen, and are generally small. They rise on hilltops or easily defensible sites, and are often rather well preserved. Traditional cultural values and civic norms persist in these villages, favouring social cohesion, and most of them rely on small, largely self-contained economies based on traditional products and informal codes of know-how. Albeit weakened by incessant emigration, like much of the region, they all display a remarkable variety of micro-resources: natural, environmental, cultural ones. Although they are of considerable value, such assets often remain invisible, even to the residents: traditional foods and artisanal productions; pristine natural ecosystems; thermal waters; autochthonous trees and animals, some in danger of extinction; notable churches, public buildings, libraries, and small museums; interesting architectural styles, in both the villages and the rural areas; vital and persistent traditions of popular culture, and notably those of the Albanian-speaking *arbëresh* community. Such villages, moreover, enjoy qualities that are ever rarer in more densely populated centres – a clean environment, a strong sense of community, silence – and which, if adequately promoted, could attract the discriminating tourist. Once more, however, such resources are often separated from each other and survive in isolation. Even more than in the agrifood sector, therefore, their exploitation requires an integrated approach encompassing the whole endowment of these villages: productive and institutional synergies must be pursued, to combine their different sectors, resources and assets into a diversified offer. Crucially, the exploitation of this potential depends on the capacity to encapsulate the whole spectrum of such resources into one unified narrative, rendering the image of a cohesive, diversified and open territory.

4. Objectives

This project aims at laying the preconditions – public awareness, knowledge, political choices – for the formulation of an integrated development strategy for the Sibaritide. The availability of information is

the precondition for responsible citizenship. This is not just a question of transparency: the sediments of knowledge and information about this territory that exist at both local and national level must be integrated and transformed into a capital of knowledge, pertinent, widespread and public. Such capital of knowledge can broaden the horizon of all actors concerned, and allow them to see opportunities and solutions that were not previously visible to them. This shall be possible only if all players take part in the effort of joining together the existing sediments of partial information and knowledge, imagining a fresh strategy, and implementing it.

The creation of such a capital of knowledge can allow the main resources of this area to be integrated into a system, or network, with a view to breaking the status quo. The agrifood sector would derive tangible benefits – increased demand of quality products, a better image, higher sale prices – from an enhancement of Sibari's archaeological site, as well as from the improvement of tourism at the seaside and in the medieval villages of the Pollino. Likewise, the archaeological site would benefit – through an increased flow of visitors and greater attention by private donors – from the strengthening and diversification of the agrifood business, or from the growth of tourism the area. In turn, Pollino's villages would equally benefit from the development of the archaeological site and the agrifood business. Parallel progresses in each sector would strengthen each other, in a mutually reinforcing acceleration.

The necessary processes of economic, social and institutional integration are complex, however. Cooperation is beneficial but costly, as it demands time, energy and capacity to compromise. Theoretical literature and empirical research have shown that firms' propensity to cooperate is correlated to 'localized' trust, namely the degree of trust placed by entrepreneurs in the local public institutions and the credibility the latter. Where public institutions are perceived as capable and efficient, firms display greater propensity to cooperate among themselves, whereas if trust in the institutions is low also interpersonal trust among entrepreneurs remains low. The quality of public institutions, in turn, is linked to the demands made – and the pressure exercised – on them by citizens, firms and civil society organizations (political parties, trade unions, organized professions, civic associations). The establishment of a new equilibrium in the behaviour of firms and public intuitions may be sparked by 'events' that signal a rupture with past practices, and can change their attitudes. Favouring the occurrence of events capable of leading to a new, more efficient equilibrium is part of the aims of this project. In particular, obtaining that the course of the river Crati be properly maintained, its waters cleaned, and the archaeological site protected and restored, could be one such event.

The five objectives of this project stem directly from these considerations, and are linked among each other:

- 1) Creating *greater public awareness* among the citizens, firms, public institutions and social forces of this area, about the fact that the exploitation of its development potential requires the accumulation, integration and dissemination of information and knowledge – existing locally and at national level – that now lie dispersed.
- 2) Causing the public authorities to implement the actions – concerning both the infrastructure and the fight against illegality – required to *secure the river Crati and clean its waters*: this is a necessary first step, without which no other action shall be credible, as well as an instrument to facilitate the achievement of the previous objective (collecting and integrating information – often complex – from several sources is in fact a prerequisite for this action).
- 3) Based on the knowledge assembled, formulating and communicating a *unified vision of this area*, aiming at exploiting in an integrated manner its diverse resources, their synergies and complementarities.

- 4) Building an *open information system* ('Open Sibaritide') focused on the actions, initiatives and investment programmes adopted for this area by the public and the private sector: crucially, such information system – to be subsequently maintained, alimented and further developed by local actors – shall monitor the implementation of such actions and programmes, so as to allow continuous public oversight of them .
- 5) Favouring the maturation, among the local leaderships and the local organs of the Partito Democratico, of the *capacity to conduct political mobilization and political actions* – including through the use of 'Open Sibaritide' – and to conduct them in an integrated manner, acting as a network: among the several local units of the party, between them and its national instances, and between the party and other local associations or social forces.

5. Implementation and governance

Underlying such objectives is the need of forming the above-mentioned capital of knowledge about the assets, constraints, potential and opportunities of the Sibaritide. To this end an investigation shall be conducted, chiefly through interviews, whose results shall then be combined with the existing literature. On this basis, actions shall be undertaken to achieve those objectives. Progress shall be assessed in March 2015, when the project ends.

The project is monitored by an independent supervisor, the renowned archaeologist professor Salvatore Settis. Antonello Pompilio, secretary of the Castrovillari branch of the Partito Democratico, is in charge of running the operations, with the support of two members of the team that set up the broader *Luoghi idea(li)* national programme: Fabrizio Barca (director general at the Treasury; formerly minister of regional cohesion) and professor Domenico Cersosimo (economist, University of Calabria; formerly vice-president of Calabria's regional government, in charge of economic development).

A committee of experts chaired by professor Pietro Domenico Guzzo (archaeologist; formerly superintendent of Pompeii and director of excavations at Sibari) is in charge of the scientific, cultural and methodological oversight of the project. The committee comprises representatives of the archaeological, agrifood and tourism sectors, academic experts, representatives of the local branches of the Partito Democratico, and members of the *Luoghi idea(li)* national team. The committee has set the strategy of the project, chosen the investigation method (interviews), selected the persons to be interviewed; it takes part in such interviews, and shall discuss and evaluate the outcome of the investigation and of the actions undertaken on its basis.

In close cooperation the committee, a team of professionals is conducting the investigation and shall organize or stimulate the ensuing political actions. Such team comprises experts in territorial and business development, territorial planning, rural tourism, communication and the arts, and it includes the internal valuator of the project, professor Giancarlo Vecchi (engineer, Milan Polytechnic).

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