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in inner areas. Causes, effects, and narratives (Italy, Albania, Romania)



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## Ricostruire identità. Un approccio territory-based per contrastare l'abbandono nella Valle del Drino (Albania)

Gjergji Islami (Polytechnic University of Tirana), Denada Veizaj (Polytechnic University of Tirana)

*Dalla caduta del regime comunista, l'Albania ha affrontato processi di trasformazione che hanno profondamente segnato sia i centri urbani che i territori rurali. Le aree rurali hanno subito un progressivo abbandono, in gran parte a causa dei radicali cambiamenti nel sistema economico e nello status della proprietà terriera agricola, con conseguente prolungata crisi nel settore. Basato sui concetti di paesaggio culturale e governance di rete, questo articolo conduce un'analisi dei potenziali storici, culturali, economici e territoriali delle aree rurali. La comprensione del territorio, della sua morfologia, della struttura degli insediamenti rurali e della loro evoluzione nel tempo, ha costituito la base per la ricerca finalizzata alla costruzione di un modello di sviluppo sostenibile. Le identità locali, le catene economiche storiche e la morfologia del territorio sono state identificate come i pilastri di una potenziale strategia di sviluppo mirata a ripristinare le vocazioni naturali del territorio. Lo studio si concentra sulla valle del fiume Drino nel sud dell'Albania, una regione complessa che ben esemplifica i processi demografici e le dinamiche di trasformazione degli ultimi decenni. Questo lavoro è iniziato con il progetto "100 Villaggi", supportato dal governo albanese e dall'Agenzia Nazionale per la Pianificazione Territoriale e ulteriormente ampliato grazie a una collaborazione con il Politecnico di Torino e l'ETH di Zurigo. Più recentemente, con un focus sullo spopolamento e l'abbandono, la ricerca è stata supportata dal progetto RIBA Lost and Found, promosso dal Politecnico di Milano.*

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# Rebuilding Identities. A Territory-based Approach to Face Abandonment in Drino Valley (Albania)

Gjergji Islami, Denada Veizaj

This article presents the efforts of introducing in the Albanian context a model of rural regeneration that integrates concepts of cultural landscape theory with those of network governance. As a need to cope with the dilemmas of the post-communist transformations (more specifically depopulation), the Albanian government initiated a rural regeneration program named “100 Villages”, which methodologically was founded on a point-based model of development, known as territorial acupuncture<sup>1</sup>. As an alternative to this model, our proposal constructs economic-rural regeneration models based on territorial-regional notions, which are a result of references to cultural landscape and network governance notions<sup>2</sup>. The application of these concepts has facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the territory, providing us with tools to develop more sustainable rural regeneration scenarios.

## *1. Overview of demographics in Albania*

In order to comprehend the intricacies of landscape and territorial transformation within the Albanian countryside, it is imperative to pause for a moment and elucidate the robust dynamics that

1. KRYEMINISTRIA 2018.

2. Notions discussed by FARINA 2000; KLIJN, KOPPENJAN 2014; MOORE, WHELAN 2016.

have engrossed the country in recent decades. Starting in 1944, Albania experienced two distinct periods closely linked to changes in the social, economic, and political environment.

The first period corresponds to the postwar developments that followed the establishment of the communist regime, which endured until the early 1990s. During this era, owing to population policies, advancements in healthcare, and the stringent isolation measures that limited emigration, the country witnessed a substantial population surge, nearly tripling in the span of 45 years. The population, which stood at 1.12 million in 1945, rose to 3.29 million in 1990<sup>3</sup>, marking a historical peak for Albania.

The second period commenced in 1991 with the collapse of communism, the introduction of a free-market economy, and the newfound freedom of movement. The significant wave of emigration that began in the early '90s persisted and continues to the present day. According to the National Institute of Statistics (INSTAT), Albania's population has decreased to 2.40 million as of September 2023<sup>4</sup>, representing a 27% reduction compared to 1990. The primary drivers of this emigration trend are economic conditions, unemployment, and issues related to corruption and the malfunction of the justice system. Albanians predominantly emigrate to EU countries such as Italy, Greece, Germany, as well as the UK and the US. The phenomenon remains active, and recent studies confirm the perception that Albanian youth are notably more willing to leave their country when compared to the region<sup>5</sup>. Since the 1990s, Albania stands out as one of the most migration-affected countries in Europe<sup>6</sup>.

While the depopulation of the country is evident, rural areas are experiencing a notably more severe phenomenon. As illustrated in figure 1, the urban population has demonstrated consistent growth over the past 75 years, whereas the rural population has undergone a rapid decline after 1990. Although emigration has impacted both urban and rural areas, internal migration has balanced the depopulation effect in urban centres. One of the obvious outcomes of such processes is the continuous abandoning of rural settlements.

Today, the rural population of Albania is lower than it was 70 years ago, constituting only 35% of the country's total population. In terms of population distribution, in 2009 Albania shifted from being predominantly and historically rural to having a majority of the population in urban areas<sup>7</sup>.

3. WORLD BANK 2022.

4. INSTAT 2024.

5. JUSIĆ, NUMANOVIĆ 2017, p. 52.

6. KING 2005, p. 133; BANJA 2019, p. 94.

7. WORLD BANK 2022.

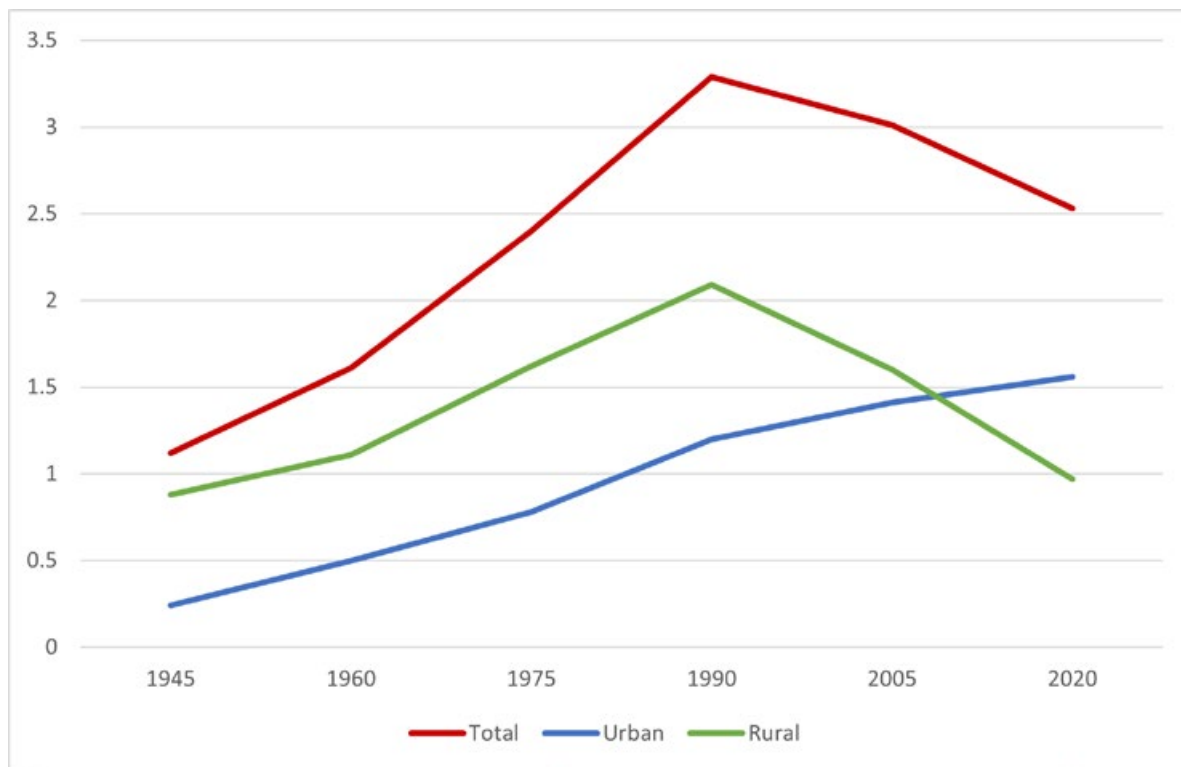


Figure 1. Population (in million) in Albania 1945-2020 (Elaboration by G. Islami based on the interpretation of data obtained from INSTAT and World Bank).

### 1.1 Principal causes of rural depopulation

In the past three decades, the rural population in Albania has witnessed a significant decline, with more than 50% decrease compared to 1990<sup>8</sup>. Living in the countryside poses challenges for various reasons. In rural areas, income levels are notably lower than in urban centres. The primary drivers of internal migration to cities or emigration are the poor quality of life, inadequate infrastructure, limited access to public services, and challenging economic conditions. The rural economy has failed to compete effectively and gain access to markets. On the other hand, seasonal emigration of agricultural workers, (such as to Greece), remains a more profitable option.

The immediate aftershock of the fall of communism was the collapse of the agricultural system, which consisted of 652 state-run farms and agricultural cooperatives, each with an average area of over 1000 hectares. In 1991, Law 7501, "On agricultural land," was enacted with the aim of relaunching the rural economy by ending the era of cooperatives and redistributing state-owned agricultural land. Despite the positive intentions behind this law, it led to the fragmentation of land into 467,000 micro-farms, averaging just 1.3 hectares each. These micro-farms were often divided into non-adjacent parcels, rendering them insufficient to sustain a profitable agricultural industry<sup>9</sup>.

The implementation of the law was slow and gave rise to persistent issues concerning ownership rights and the distribution method. Furthermore, the deterioration of agricultural infrastructure and the absence of investments in subsequent years compounded the problems, resulting in an underperforming industry. As noted by Civici, Albania undertook the most radical agricultural land reform in Eastern Europe<sup>10</sup>. In these circumstances, the opportunities to reestablish a flourishing agricultural sector with mechanization, proper irrigation infrastructure, and clear land parcel management are significantly constrained. Nevertheless, agriculture and the rural economy remain important sectors in Albania's economy, accounting for 38% of total employment (2019) and a substantial portion of the national GDP, both of which exceed the EU average significantly<sup>11</sup>.

Besides agriculture, which has faced a prolonged crisis in recent decades, rural areas had limited alternatives for development. Albania did not have a tradition of rural tourism, which has emerged as a new opportunity in recent years.

8. WORLD BANK 2022.

9. CIVICI 2019.

10. *Ibidem*.

11. AZIJAJ 2019.

## 2. Evolution of the territory-settlement relationship in Albania

The theoretical examination of the rural environment is relatively complex, primarily due to the ambiguity surrounding its definition and interpretation. Various scholars have distinct perspectives on rurality, with some primarily connecting it to the production process, while others view it simply as a variation of the urban and transformative process of the natural territory.

Doxiadis observes that there is still a lack of a systematic approach to comprehending cities<sup>12</sup>, and as a consequence, what is not considered city. On the other hand, Schmid asserts that urbanization is a polymorphic process that involves various levels and encompasses a wide range of situations, from the production of the built environment and the formation of urban centres and suburbs to the dynamics and daily changes in territorial regulation. According to him, urbanization should be understood as the entirety of transformative processes of the natural system, processes that generate the built environment<sup>13</sup>. In this context, rural settlement does not enjoy a separate classification but is presented as a distinct form of territorial transformation.

In this study, we perform an analysis of rural territory through the lens of cultural landscape concepts. Human society and nature are the two main forces that shape landscape structure and drive landscape-level processes. Cultural landscapes are geographic areas where the relationships between human activity and the environment have created ecological, socioeconomic, and cultural patterns<sup>14</sup>.

On the other hand, the importance of such analysis relies in opening new doors in terms of rural regeneration strategies. As Naveh admits, paradigms developed by the field of landscape ecology can be used to explain the ecological relevance of cultural landscapes and their capacity to inform and guide other human activities, especially in the economic sphere<sup>15</sup>.

The following listing of historical facts is not a historical analysis per se; rather, it is an examination of the relationships between settlement systems, production systems, and natural systems. Through a chronological sequence of transformative processes of Albanian rural territories, the paper attempts to build the concept of territorial identity, expressed through the notion of architecture of territories, seen as the entirety of tangible and intangible dynamics established over time.

12. DOXIADIS 1968, p. 2.

13. SCHMID 2015.

14. FARINA 2020.

15. NAVEH 2008.

There are documented traces of the nature of Albanian villages in the pre-Ottoman period, around the 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Muka asserts that in the Early Middle Ages, the Western Lowland appeared as the most prosperous region. The chronicles of the time depict natural territories with dense populations, such as the plains, as well as the inner valleys of rivers in mountainous areas. Most settlements during this period are found in hilly areas, at the foot of the mountains, on their slopes, or along the rivers<sup>16</sup>. Manzour further affirms that data from pre-Turkish medieval times indicate territorial groupings of villages based on localities and ethnographic regions<sup>17</sup>. Biçoku also notes that from the records of the time, the economy of medieval Albanian villages appears well-developed, with primary activities centred around grain cultivation, orchards, gardening, and vineyards<sup>18</sup>.

Another important factor concerning economic characteristics, linked to spatial morphology, is the creation of levels of mountain villages. According to Muka, from a single plain where the old village was initially founded, often around a religious or burial site (frequently referred to as the old village), the village's structure gradually stratifies based on the primary modes of agricultural production. In parallel with the growth of the village, the introduction of new agricultural cultures (such as maize) influenced the emergence of a stratified structure of the settlement. Many old villages were relocated in terms of altitudes or established secondary settlements, a phenomenon that became more evident during the 17th century<sup>19</sup>.

It is important to emphasize that the economy operated at a regional level, with sub regions and localities functioning as complementary entities. A similar pattern is observed even during the Ottoman era.

Unquestionably, it can be affirmed that the socialist era exerted the most profound impact on the natural (and rural) landscape. The centralized economic system manifested itself across the territory through the iconographic imagery of an agricultural sector transitioning towards industrialization, comprising both the flatlands and hilly areas. In addition to the gradual metamorphosis of these depictions (shifting from autonomous and localized territorial systems toward a national-scale planning paradigm), there have also been distinct transformations in the relationship between settlement and the natural environment mainly diminishing the role of the cultural regions and of their historical links.

16. MUKA 2007, p. 29.

17. MANZOUR 1827, p. 195.

18. BIÇOKU, FRASER 2005, pp. 12-16.

19. MUKA 2007, pp. 31,36.

As stated in “Bujqësia në Republikën Popullore Socialiste të Shqipërisë” [Agriculture in the Popular Socialist Republic of Albania], until 1944 « [...] land was managed based on the concept of feudal ownership and the Chiflik<sup>20</sup> system. The major landowners, constituting only 3% of families, controlled 40% of the land. »<sup>21</sup>. Starting in 1944, a series of reforms were initiated, gradually collectivizing agricultural land, and reorganizing it into state-farms and agricultural cooperatives.

Many new rural residential centres were designed ex-novo, to serve the new economic structures. Particularly after the 1970s, the tendency to preserve mountainous and remote areas from depopulation was expressed in planning strategies for rural settlements<sup>22</sup>. These strategies aimed at intensifying areas inhabited near natural resources, forests, energy sources, etc., facts reflected in the urban consolidation of existing villages in these areas, as well as in the planning of new ones.

According to a study by the Institute of Studies and Design<sup>23</sup> in 1987, villages were classified as small (up to 500 residents), medium (500-1000 residents), large (1000-2000 residents), and very large (over 2000 residents). From a strategic perspective, the goal was to increase the percentage of villages with more than 500 residents, implying the densification of existing villages. Meanwhile, in the flatland areas with intensified agriculture, there was guidance to construct medium and large villages<sup>24</sup>. According to King, two-thirds of the population were kept in villages to provide labour force for the farms, thus contributing to the densification of rural settlements and impeding the rural-urban migration<sup>25</sup>. In terms of spatial morphology and composition of rural settlements, there have been several evolutions. The planning anticipates the functional diversification of centres, whether they are existing villages or new ones. Referring to the social and urban centre as the principal space in the village, the same study states, «The formation of an ensemble with artistic value is a strong reflection of the role that mass activities have played during the years of People's Power»<sup>26</sup>. This assertion is reflected in the equipping of village centres with cultural facilities, where beyond entertainment, communist propaganda was conveyed. The socialist village was conceived as a compact settlement organized around a cultural and administrative centre that was meant also

20. Çiftlik (chiflik): Turkish term for a system of land management in the Ottoman Empire.

21. SHTËPIA, PROPAGANDËS, BUJQËSORE 1982, p. 8.

22. I.S.P. Nr.1 1987.

23. *Studim për projektnormativat 1987*.

24. *Ivi*, pp. 4-6.

25. KING 2015, p. 136.

26. *Studim për projektnormativat 1987*, p. 11.



to provide social control<sup>27</sup>. Another significant difference in morphological and spatial aspects is the approach to newly designed residential areas. In old villages, there is an organic relationship between the built form and the territory. In contrast, the new residential units exhibit a rigid geometrization of building blocks, indicating a lack of sensitivity to the contextual environment. Furthermore, pre-socialist villages maintain a compact, family-oriented structure, with neighbourhoods defined by surnames and inhabited by relatives. Contrarily, socialist villages lack clan-based structure and instead feature heterogeneous neighbourhoods that often exude an urban rather than a rural atmosphere in terms of composition.

The strongest development feature of post-communism in Albania was the demographic shift, and as highlighted by Streule et al. and Topalovic, it remains the principal catalysts of natural territorial transformations<sup>28</sup>.

One of the most evident traces of such phenomena over the territory was the blurring boundaries between urban and rural environments. Instead of clearly defined and planned boundaries, intermediate zones that facilitate a gradual transition from rural to urban environments have emerged. These zones materialized in various typologies of settlements, mostly including informal constructions and/or poorly built areas along road axis and margins of urban centres.

After the fall of communism, the Albanian countryside is confronted with the following major challenges:

- Depopulation and the abandonment of rural settlements;
- Lack or degradation of public services;
- Deterioration of agricultural infrastructure;
- Reduction of arable land due to informal urbanization;
- Low performance and lack of competitiveness of the rural economy.

The present-day countryside is a complex amalgamation of different realities in terms of imagery, ranging from wild landscapes to the iconic elements of a Mediterranean cultural scenery, to the post-industrial landscapes of socialism, as well as the images of a territory overtaken by spontaneous urbanization.

27. ISLAMI, BURDA 2019, p. 114.

28. STREULE *et al.* 2020; TOPALOVIC 2020 pp. 301-304.

### 3. Case study - Drino valley

In 2018, the Albanian government launched the national program "100 Villages", aimed at directing attention toward rural development, in what is referred to as "Rural Renaissance"<sup>29</sup>. The most obvious symptoms of the collapse affecting rural settlements were the lack of infrastructure and public services, depopulation, and the crisis in the agricultural sector. The program, led by the National Territorial Planning Agency, sought to formulate development visions for 100 selected pilot villages.

The preliminary study and the development models for the villages of Zhulat, Dhoksat, Saraqinisht, Labovë e Kryqit, Lazarat, Nepravishtë, and Sotirë (fig. 2), chosen as settlements with high development potential in the Drino River valley (fig. 3), were entrusted to the Polytechnic University of Tirana. Although being a specific region, the sample of the valley represents an optimal and comprehensive illustration of the transformation processes that the rural territory has undergone in recent decades.

The "100 Villages" program follows a series of similar initiatives from European countries with a focus on rural territory and its challenges. The program is methodologically articulated around the concept of territorial regeneration through acupuncture<sup>30</sup>, thus, has provided a uniform reading of the territory at the national level, neglecting regions and local characteristics. As an alternative to this approach, we have proposed an analytical method and, subsequently, a development model built on the concept of the region and localities.

Methodologically, the analysis of the context and, further, the scenarios for rural regeneration are based on the integration of cultural landscape and network governance concepts<sup>31</sup>. The approach to the valley as a cultural and territorial identity has framed the regional scale of the regeneration strategy. On the other hand, the proposal of a bottom-up and collaborative development model transforms local communities into significant development actors. The work was led by the authors of this article, who supervised the academic workgroups and created a model based on the reconstruction of local identities. As mentioned, the approach was founded on the concept of viewing villages not as isolated entities but as integral components of a broader territorial system. The development model

29. The Albanian government had previously undertaken the initiative "Urban Renaissance", which resulted in intensive investments in the transformation of urban centers in cities.

30. KRYEMINISTRIA 2018.

31. Notions discussed by FARINA 2000; KLIJN, KOPPENJAN 2014; MOORE, WHELAN 2016.

focuses on the synchronization of the villages' potentials and their specialization within the various systems established in the Drino Valley, highlighting its distinctive character and historical identity.

### 3.1 Territorial overview

The Drino River Valley constitutes a territory encompassing a natural, cultural, and economic system that has evolved over time along the river's course. The scenery is defined by mountainous landscapes on either side that descend to the riverbed, where human settlements have existed since ancient times. The valley has long served as a vital communication corridor between territories that today are shared by Albania and Greece.

In antiquity, the area was part of the region of Chaonia<sup>32</sup>. Today, it is dominated by the city of Gjirokastër<sup>33</sup>, a historic and touristic centre in southern Albania, along with a series of rural settlements that have developed along the banks of the Drino River. The region's geographical and climatic characteristics appear to have played a crucial role in shaping its natural physiognomy and subsequent development. The valley, situated at an elevation of 200 - 270 m above sea level, stretches for more than 42 km across Albania between two mountain ranges<sup>34</sup>, with a southeast-northwest orientation. The primary hydrographic artery is the Drino River, which is also a major branch of the Vjosa River<sup>35</sup>, both in terms of length (84.6 km) and the surface area of its catchment basin (1324 km<sup>2</sup>).

The Drino River traverses the space between the mountain ranges, creating a breathtaking and dramatic landscape. The villages are scattered across diverse territorial settings including typical flatland villages, those situated at the foothills on gentle terrains, as well as hidden villages in the deep mountainous areas. It seems that the altitude above sea level is a significant factor, among others, in defining the characteristics of the rural economy in these villages.

The history of settlement development witnesses a long-standing relationship between humans and the territory. Early traces of settlements can be found in archaeological evidences in places like Sotirë, Selo, Vodhinë, Terihat, Sofratikë (Adrianopoli), Paleokastër, Goranxi, Derviçan, Çepun, Kardhiq, Lazarat, Shtepëz, Lekël, Erind, Saraqinisht (Antigone), Suhë, Libohovë, Melan, Labovë e

32. BUDINA 1974, p. 343.

33. The historical center of the city is part of the UNESCO World Heritage List.

34. The eastern border is defined by the Lunxhëri - Bureto mountain range, while the western border is marked by the Mali i Gjerë [Wide Mountain] and partly the Kurvelesh mountains.

35. River in southern Albania, considered the last wild river in Europe.



Figure 2. Illustration of the settlements. From left to right: Top – Zhulat, Lazarat, Dhoksat; Bottom – Sotirë, Labovë e kryqit, Nepravishtë (photos 100 Villages Academy - Team Lot 18 & Lot 19).

kryqit, Peshkëpi, and others<sup>36</sup>. Their distribution across the territory also reveals the strategy of their residents: during times of peace, inhabited centres expand into open fields, while in challenging times, settlements occupy high points with panoramic views, allowing visual control over the valley. This strategic placement is particularly noticeable in locations like Antigone, Melan, the Castles of Labova, Kardhiq, Libohovë, and Shëntriadhë, all of which serve as vantage points for observing the entire valley. The combination of fertile land alongside the Drino River, with the physical protection and climate offered by the gentle hills and mountains, created ideal conditions for the development of settlements.

The presence of numerous religious buildings in the valley, especially Orthodox Christian churches, attests to the intensification of human activity during the Medieval period. In this era, settlements expanded in size and engaged in increased interaction with one another, driven by factors such as geographical proximity, cultural affinity, and economic cooperation. The network of historical pathways that connected villages and territories is still visible today and, in some cases, still in use.

The valley represents a clear and evident case of how the physical and intangible dimensions of a territory act together. This dynamic interplay is manifested through various facts and events, continuously shaping the region's uniqueness. Over centuries, this ongoing interaction has defined the characteristics and boundaries of the valley's cultural landscapes. These landscapes, distinguished by their strong identities, illustrate the relationship between human activity and the environment, creating distinct ecosystems and socioeconomic patterns. Five cultural and territorial entities stand out: Lunxhëria, Zagoria, Pogoni, Dropulli, and Labëria (fig. 4). Historically, these entities have developed economic interdependencies. This observation, derived from territorial analysis, will methodologically guide the development of the rural regeneration model.

### *3.2 The historical economic chain*

The Drino Valley remains an ideal illustration of the translation of territorial features into specialized settlements. Evidently, the villages near the valley or at the foothills have historically preserved and developed an economy based on agriculture and fruit growing. Meanwhile, villages situated above 700 meters above sea level, such as Stegopul, Saraqinisht, Sheper, etc., predominantly engage in livestock farming. Beyond individual characteristics, the villages are grouped into historical-cultural and economic entities, such as Lunxhëria, Zagoria, Pogoni, Dropulli, and Labëria (fig. 4). It is remarkable how within a relatively small spatial extent, diverse cultural

36. BUDINA 1974, pp. 346-367.



Figure 3. Aerial view of the valley of Drino (photo 100 Villages Academy - Team Lot 18 & Lot 19).

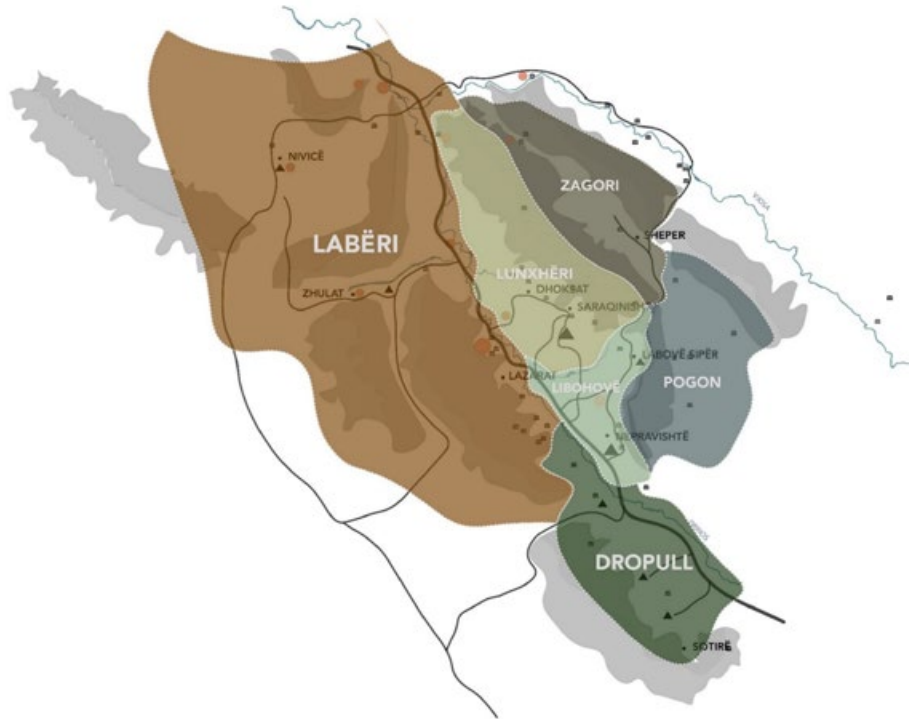


Figure 4. The historic and cultural territorial entities (image from 100 Villages Academy - Team Lot 18 & Lot 19).

and social identities coexist. How close the villages of Lunxhëria are to those of Labëria, and how distinctly they express differences between them, from architectural traditions, land use practices, cultures, customs, songs, and dances, to attire and cuisine. The ongoing interaction of villages and areas, based on their various profiles, has ensured coexistence within the valley system.

With the rise of the communists to power, the rural economy and consequently the countryside began to undergo a transformation (fig. 5). The establishment of agricultural farms and cooperatives not only created a new economic model but was also followed by a renewed social and eventually urban model. The regime tried to shape “the new socialist man” not only through propaganda, but also by transforming the built environment. Under the slogan “Ta bëjmë fshatin si qyteti” [Let's make

the village like a city], the communist regime gradually materialized its ideology by transforming the rural landscape<sup>37</sup>. Initially, the new economic model was applied at the village level, and step by step, cooperatives were grouped, thus creating broader-scale systems where groups of villages cooperated to increase production. One of the villages was designated as the centre of the cooperative and assumed a higher hierarchical role.

During the socialist era, the flat part of the valley underwent policies to intensify agriculture. The cooperatives and farms developed in sectors where each village was specialized according to the characteristics of the territory but without considering the local identities or the historical interactions among them. An illustrative example is the agricultural cooperative "Asim Zeneli", which in 1970 extended from Labëri (villages of Rexhin, Lekdush, Progonat, Golëm, and Lazarat) to Lunxhëri (villages of Saraqinisht, Tranoshisht, and Krinë) and even to Libohovë (villages of Stegopull and Suhë)<sup>38</sup>. Furthermore, villages like Rexhin, Lekdush, Progonat, and Golëm do not geographically belong to the Drino Valley's borders but are part of the Kurvelesh region. The same approach was applied during the settlement of new villages. For instance, the village of Arshi Lengo was established with residents brought from Tepelenë, Skrapar, Përmet, and Kurvelesh<sup>39</sup>, regions geographically detached from the Drino Valley, each with distinct identities from one another.

The very model imposed for the development of agriculture and land management was prone to disintegration immediately after the fall of communism when the free movement of the population was guaranteed<sup>40</sup>, and the land was returned to the villagers.

### 3.3 Depopulation of the valley

Considering that demographic processes until 1991 were planned and controlled, it is worth studying the trends of the last three decades, during which the phenomenon of massive abandonment of rural areas has emerged.

The Gjirokastër Prefecture, which geographically encompasses the Drino Valley, has experienced the most intensive depopulation at the national level, losing approximately 48% of its population

37. POMPEJANO 2023, pp. 103-104.

38. LONDO 2022.

39. *Ibidem*.

40. During communism, the movement of the population within the country's territory was restricted and planned, thereby exerting control over demographic phenomena.





Figure 5. Edi Hila, Planting of trees, 1972 (National Gallery of Arts, Tirana).

or around 54,000 residents in two decades (2001-2020)<sup>41</sup>. Furthermore, the prefecture also has the highest national percentage of the population over 65 years old (23.8%)<sup>42</sup>, a figure that clearly illustrates the intensive phenomenon of labour emigration.

In 2011, the number of unoccupied buildings in the prefecture was around 30%, and their presence was on average 2.3 times higher in rural settlements compared to urban ones<sup>43</sup>. Since 2011, there are not detailed figures on the number of unoccupied buildings, but given the depopulation trend, it is expected that this number is now above 40%.

If the existing data from the 2011 census for rural areas are analysed, it is evident that the most intensive depopulation and abandonment of territory has occurred in the villages of the Greek minority, who have found it easier to emigrate and integrate into Greece. According to the data, in the case of Upper Dropull, the number of unused buildings exceeds 82%<sup>45</sup>.

It should be noted that the territory exhibited emigration tendencies even in the pre-socialist period. Male emigration for certain periods (*kurbet*) was a routine practice to ensure a basic foundation for building the family economy. However, in most cases, this emigration was not followed by abandonment but by return, leading to the construction of houses or the purchase of properties.

The intensive depopulation rates of the post-socialist period have led to a significant reduction in agricultural activity and production, the closure of schools in villages, as well as the abandonment and degradation of buildings.

Nevertheless, by delving into the local context and community, it becomes evident that abandonment is not always permanent, particularly in historic villages. Numerous families utilize these villages as summer retreats, while some, even after years of absence or despite the decay of their homes, choose not to sell their properties—underscoring a profound connection to the land or a latent desire to return in the future.

### 3.4 Analysis of territorial typologies

The transformation of the landscapes in the Drino Valley has been quite intensive over the past three decades. As mentioned earlier, the direct impact of political, social, and economic changes on

41. *Durrësi bëhet qyteti 2020*.

42. INSTAT 2014, p. 31.

43. The detailed data of 2023 census have not been made public until the publication of this article.

44. INSTAT 2013, p. 78.

45. *Ivi*, p. 84.

human activities, the territory, and consequently the built environment is evident.

In addition to the historic settlements and those developed during socialism, the extensive economic and political transformations of recent decades have given rise to various typologies of rural settlements such as:

- Relocated settlements (new or lower neighbourhoods);
- Settlements along road axes;
- Abandoned settlements.

All the mentioned categories of settlements can be observed in Drino Valley (fig. 6). In the pre-medieval structures that continued to develop during the Ottoman presence, we find settlements that have continuity up to the present day, from all historical entities (fig. 4). Here, we can mention the village of Saraqinisht in Lunxhëri, near the ruins of the ancient city of Antigonea, the village of Melan in Libohovë, near the ruins of the ancient city with the same name, the village of Sofratikë in Dropull, near the ruins of the ancient city of Adrianopolis, and the village of Kardhiq in Labëri, the castle of which dates to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Meanwhile, villages established during the socialist era include Bulo, Asim Zeneli, Arshi Lengo, Valare, and Andon Poçi. The disintegration of urban-rural entities after the 1990s is exemplified by the expansion of lower neighbourhoods closer to lowlands or road infrastructure, particularly in Nepravishtë and Lazarat (Kordhocë) (fig. 7). Additionally, industrial zones have emerged, primarily along the main road of the valley.

#### *4. Rebuilding identities in Drino Valley*

Being aware that repopulation of settlements in the Drino Valley is not a realistic scenario and on the other hand considering that the contribution of the agricultural sector to the Albanian economy is still significantly higher than the EU average, the proposal for the Drino Valley aims to establish a model that promotes the improvement of the performance of existing assets by relying on efficient instruments for rural territory planning and management.

Regarding the landscape, including the built environment, by improving performance, we mean its conservation and rehabilitation as an integrative and gradual approach, as opposed to transformative interventions *à grande échelle*. Trusting in the regenerative capacity of the Drino Valley, as demonstrated in its history, we believe that implementing policies rooted in the principle

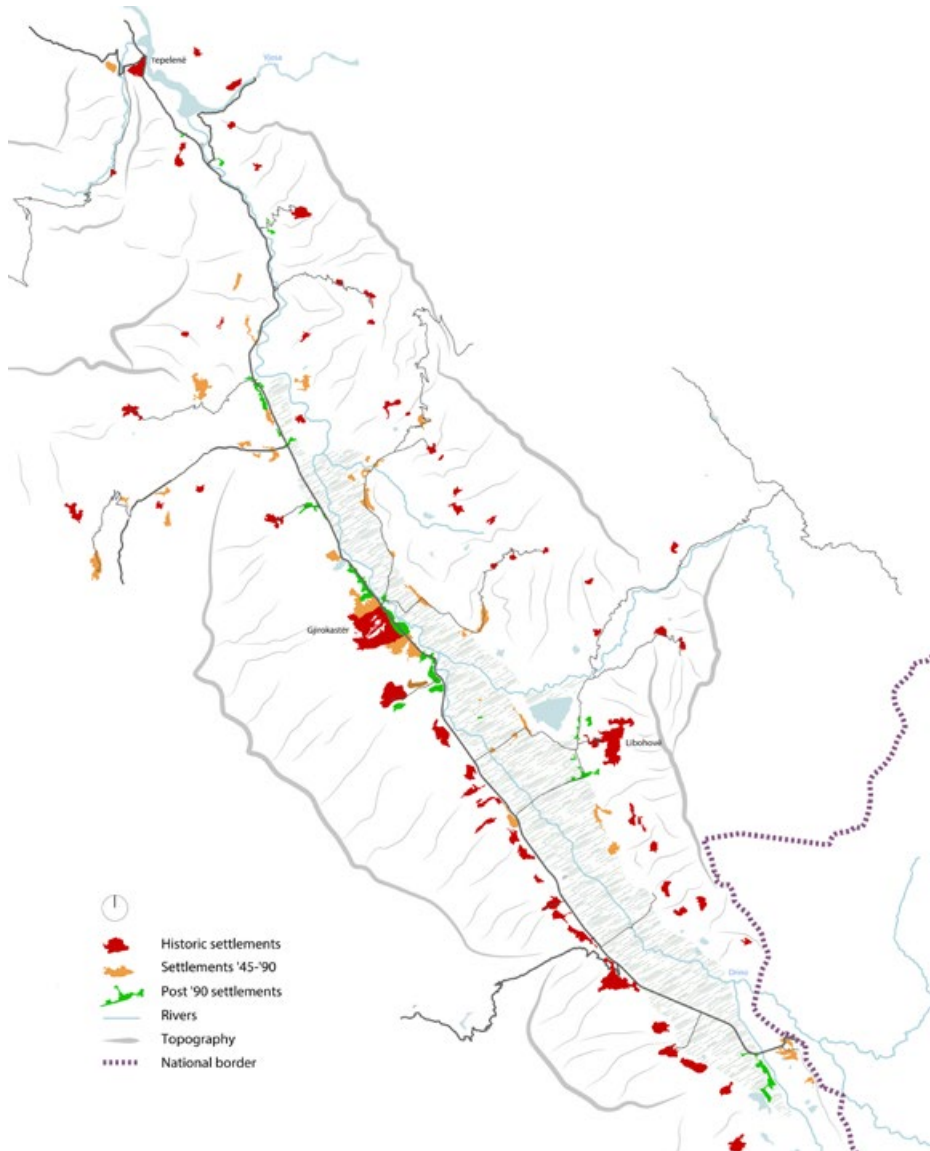


Figure 6. Settlement typologies in Drino Valley (image from 100 Villages Academy - Team Lot 18 & Lot 19).



Figure 7. Aerial view of the post-socialist expansion of Lazarat into the lowlands (photo100 Villages Academy - Team Lot 18 & Lot 19).

of coexistence of settlements, territories, and identities would create optimal conditions for the regeneration of both life and the economy.

In terms of the architecture of territory, the small scale has historically dominated the functioning of the valley. The disruption of regional equilibrium due to centralization during the socialist era, combined with the lack of integrated management in the post-socialist period, should be addressed by reestablishing a system based on a regional logic for managing and developing the territory. Rural regeneration adheres to the concept of localities, which in this case involves the reconstruction of regional economic interdependencies within the Drino Valley.

In contrast to the top-down approaches previously applied in Albania, we propose a governance model that is people-centred, emphasizing the role of local communities over central or local authorities.

As is widely recognized, moving towards a flexible and collaborative model of planning that addresses various contextual challenges requires a pluralistic and inclusive mode of governance<sup>46</sup>. The network governance model goes far from considering central government authorities as the predominant stakeholder in policy making or administration issues<sup>47</sup>. Instead, it provides local communities with the opportunity to become significant actors in development processes and policies. Klijn and Koppenjan define governance networks as «[...] sets of autonomous yet interdependent actors (individuals, groups, organizations) that have developed enduring relationships in governing specific public problems or policy programs»<sup>48</sup>.

The strategy initially outlined by the authors during the “100 Villages” project, and elaborated further in a research-based process, proposes an alternative development model that is both specific and generic when addressing the recovery from the post-communist shock in the countryside. Furthermore, the model remains generic precisely because it depends on individual identities, coexistence, and interactions which we consider preconditions for prosperity and development.

The key development policies of this model are as follows:

- Rehabilitation of public and engineering infrastructure.

From our perspective, ensuring the basic elements of a settlement's functionality is an initial prerequisite for implementing a development model. This includes educational and healthcare

46. HEALEY 1997; HAJER, WAGENAAR 2003.

47. KLIJN, KOPPENJAN 2014, pp. 61-70.

48. *Ivi*, p. 61.

services, ensuring the safety of the territory and buildings, connecting to basic energy and water supply networks, as well as connecting to road infrastructure for accessing further services.

- Strengthening historical identities.

Reclaiming historical identities is crucial for promoting the genuine behaviour of the territory and its communities. The dissolution of these identities during socialism through collectivization, the creation of the "new man", or the trend to promote city-lifestyle in villages, eventually led to the failure of this socio-economic model. Reinforcing historical identities and consolidating historical settlements can be accomplished through:

A. Preserving historical landscapes, architecture, and the natural environment, with a focus on coexistence and the protection of historical layers, as well as accentuating their inherent values.

B. Reviving connections and economic interactions among regional units, fostering specialization and complementarity between these entities.

C. Involving the community in decision-making and governance.

- Developing tourism as a supportive sector for the rural economy.

The tourism industry remains a relatively unexplored concept in rural areas in Albania. We do not suggest a revival model based on tourism but rather seeking to leverage urban tourism flows from Gjirokastra, archaeological sites, and local cultural identities as assets to sustain the struggling rural economy. In this context, the consolidation of historical settlements plays a dual role, both in strengthening local identities and in the parallel development of tourism.

- Consolidation of industrial clusters.

The model we propose doesn't solely draw from the past but also incorporates recent developments. Spontaneous initiatives for the development of light industries in the last three decades can be transformed into planned industrial clusters to function as part of an integrated system.

- Consolidation of socialist-era settlements.

In the case of the newly built villages during socialism, the approach leans towards reinforcing these new identity layers and integrating them in the overall system, relying on their potential to transform into productive hubs.

- Establishing economic chains.

Partly based on the existing cultural identities, and partly on an economic management model linked to territorial assets, promoting profiling and specialization in interactive economic chains is seen as a promising opportunity for regenerating the valley system.

The current planning system in Albania gives little consideration to rural areas. Additionally, planning documents follow a top-down logic of decision-making, prioritizing urban environments. In contrast, the approach proposed in this study strengthens the concept of the regions and promotes a continuous alternation of spatial scales, where the larger system is built through the connections created by the characteristics and profiles of smaller units (fig. 8). The suggested strategy aims to revitalize the regional economy by reinforcing the "natural inclinations" of the settlements, resulting in a balanced development of the landscape.

This alternative planning approach suggests integrating bottom-up actions with top-down ones and recommends reading the territory by applying historical, economic, and geo-morphological data. Similarly, to the Drino Valley, other regions, landscapes and rural contexts can be interpreted, such as valleys, lowland production territories (e.g., Myzeqeja), coastal villages, mountainous areas, etc.

This planning approach ensures a deeper understanding of the territory, but, more importantly, it aims to decentralize development models by offering dedicated and tailored tools for each region. The methodology remains a flexible instrument to face the issue of abandonment and depopulation, that can be followed by local policymakers, territorial management authorities, or developers of instruments for territorial regeneration.

## *5. Conclusions and recommendations*

The "100 Villages" program, due to the 2019 earthquake in Albania and to the COVID-19 pandemic, has been slowed down at the implementation stage. Nevertheless, the proposed regeneration strategy has resonated with various stakeholders; local authorities and businesses have embraced the concept of the "region". The program's impact and the involvement of communities in the planning stages have increased residents' awareness, as evidenced by the growing number of private business initiatives oriented towards tourism.

On the other hand, the process has also drawn attention to the identified villages, and there are several examples of the alignment of planned strategies with government investments and initiatives. Despite this progress, a follow-up programme or an action plan for Drino Valley has yet to be developed.

On a broader level, the proposed approach represents a milestone in the advancement of planning and territorial management culture in Albania, which has largely operated through



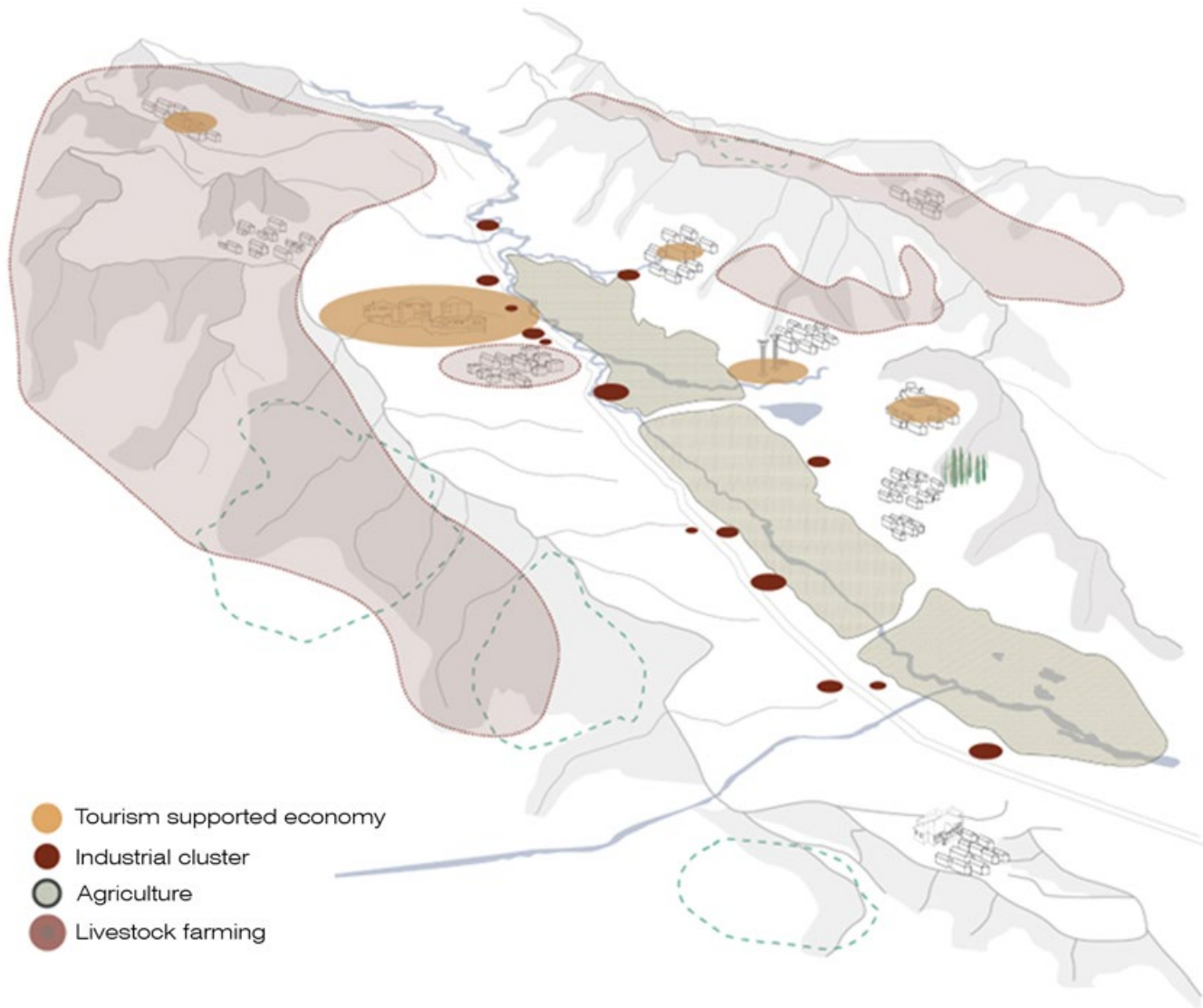


Figure 8. The territorial planning approach for the valley (image from 100 Villages Academy - Team Lot 18 & Lot 19).

statutory documents and top-down methods. The development model of Drino Valley introduces alternative planning concepts, emphasizing the idea that there should be no hierarchical weighting of actors in rural regeneration processes. Based on the complex understanding of the particular context, we believe that exploring territorial identities and involving local communities are essential steps for the rural regeneration processes of the post-communist Albanian countryside.

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