

Planning today for the growth of tomorrow.  
Anticipating repopulation in Sostila and Val Fabiòlo.

March 2018



Source: Massimo Dei Cas, 2011

## Abstract

This article will discuss the issues surrounding the management of Sostila, a medieval hamlet in Lombardy, Northern Italy. Sostila presents unique challenges in its management due to its geography, demography and cultural heritage. It has only two permanent residents and is only accessible by foot along a mountain trail. Cultural, physical and economic isolation has preserved the architecture of Sostila, making it prime examples of rural medieval architecture. Analysed in the context of the current growth of cultural tourism, Sostila presents an interesting case study of a town that has not yet been 'discovered' by the broader tourism market. Considering the natural beauty of its setting, in combination with its architectural and cultural heritage, I believe it is inevitable that visitor numbers to Sostila will continue to grow. The local community therefore has a unique opportunity to take control of decision-making processes, giving them the power to shape the eventual tourism development in ways that will benefit the local community and ensure sustainability, both economically and environmentally. However, considering that the hamlet has only two permanent residents, this proposal raises questions about who has the right and the responsibility to decide on management practices, who will profit from them and in what ways.

**Keywords:** Cultural asset; local development; participatory democracy; experiential cultural tourism;

## **Introduction**

Sostila is a medieval hamlet in the Bergamasque Alps in Lombardy, Northern Italy, 15km from the Swiss border and 25km east of Lake Como. The town presents unique challenges due to its location, demography and cultural heritage. Sostila sits on the western edge of Val Fabiòlo at 821m a.s.l. and is only accessible by foot along a steep 3km trail. Sostila only has two inhabitants, a retired couple who live year-round in the hamlet. However, visitors are common as the town is signposted along hiking trails that cross Val Fabiòlo and some buildings have been turned into a mountain refuge that can host up to twenty people. The town attracts a small number of tourists who are drawn by the combination of outdoor activities and cultural heritage of the area. Properties in Sostila that have been passed down from previous generations are maintained by those who are willing to make the journey to the hamlet, but these visitors rarely stay for longer than a few days<sup>1</sup>. The town consists uniquely of medieval buildings, which have been only minimally modified by their inhabitants throughout the years.<sup>2</sup> Cultural, physical and economic isolation has preserved the architecture of Sostila, making it the best example of rural medieval architecture in the Sondrio region.<sup>3</sup>

## **Historical context**

At the time of its construction, Sostila was a key stopover on a trade route connecting the north of the river Adda with the towns south of Val Fabiòlo. The inhabitants depended on both animal and arable agriculture. The diverse native trees - cherry, pear, apple, hazelnut and chestnut - provided a varied diet and complemented small crops of barley, rye and potato. The chestnut tree remains a prominent feature of the landscape and of the local diet. Although sheep and goats are best adapted to the mountainous terrain, farmers also kept cows and produced cheeses with milk from all three animals.<sup>4</sup> Available pasture was used for the production of hay to feed animals in winter, while in summer the men left the village to graze their cattle in alpine meadows. During 19th century, iron mining in the region provided employment for those willing to travel, with mines located in Valle d'Ambria ( $\approx$ 40km) and Valle di Fraele ( $\approx$ 100km)<sup>5</sup>. In 1928 the population of Sostila was 120, with the population steadily declining over the following three decades. Two events triggered the complete depopulation of the town, leaving Sostila without any permanent residents for several decades.

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<sup>1</sup> Franco Mottalini. (Forcola Web). Email correspondence. 07/03/2018.

<sup>2</sup> Michele Corti. "Sostila : oltre la retorica dei 'paesi fantasma' *Ruralpini*. Last accessed 7th March 2018. Available: [http://www.ruralpini.it/Fotoracconto\\_Sostila2.htm](http://www.ruralpini.it/Fotoracconto_Sostila2.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Renato Bertolini. *Ecomuseo dell'architettura tradizionale e della pastorizia nelle Orobie*. (Sondrio: Comunità Montana Valtellina di Morbegno/Comune di Forcola, 2010)

<sup>4</sup> Natale Perego, *Sostila e la Val Fabiolo*, (Missaglia: Bellavite, 2002)

<sup>5</sup> D.A.M.M, *Descrizione della Valtellina e delle grandiose strade di Stelvio e di Spluga*, (Dalla Società tip. de' Classici italiani, 1823)

## **Depopulation**

The first event was the closing of the primary school in 1961. At the time of its closing the school had only one class of mixed ages and employed a teacher from outside Sostila who lived in the town only during term time. In the early 1960s, the opening of the *Strada Provinciale 11* put a definitive end to commercial traffic through the valley. This new road provided a quick route round the valley and linked towns to the south directly with major national roads. At the time the rest of Italy, and particularly the North, was living through *il miracolo economico* (The Economic Miracle), a period of strong economic growth which lasted into the late 1960s. The booming economy offered well-paid jobs, cheap consumer goods and social security, transforming Italian society. Sostila, on the other hand, remained relatively untouched by these developments. By 1961 the population had fallen to 14. Considering the lure of employment and modernity offered in the nearby towns and cities, it is unsurprising that Sostila emptied during this period.

Today, the fact that Sostila has remained more or less untouched for decades forms part of its attractiveness to locals and visitors alike. Viewed in the context of the current boom in the heritage tourism industry, Sostila represents a unique property that can be an asset to the local communities. The town falls under the jurisdiction of Forcola, a small municipality (15.7km<sup>2</sup>) of only 870 inhabitants spread over seven principle communities.<sup>6</sup> Most inhabitants are employed in administration or are self-employed, with the traditional agricultural economy threatened by a decline in youth participation.<sup>7</sup>

## **Tourism in the region**

Although it is off the usual tourist path, tourism nonetheless plays a role in the local economy.<sup>8</sup> The natural beauty of this mountainous region attracts outdoor enthusiasts who come predominantly to hike and climb. Just outside of Sirta (the nearest town and municipal centre) is a rock face called *La Caurga* which offers a variety of climbing routes. Val Fabiòlo is criss-crossed with a handful of hiking trails which follow the former mule tracks and link the mountain communities. However, Val Fabiòlo is somewhat overshadowed by the offerings of other tourist hubs in the area, which include the Italian Lakes, Mantua and Milan. In 2012, Lombardy was the 20th most visited region in the European Union<sup>9</sup>, so while Val Fabiòlo may not currently be overrun with tourists, the crowds are not far away.

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<sup>6</sup> The National Institute for Statistics. "Popolazione residente, Forcola" Last accessed 12th March 2018. Available: <http://dati.istat.it>

<sup>7</sup> Youth and agriculture: Key challenges and concrete solutions. (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2014) Last accessed 12th March 2018. Available <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i3947e.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> "Ambiente e territorio" Parco delle Orobie Valtellinesi. Last accessed 12th March 2018. Available: <http://www.parcorobievalt.com/>

<sup>9</sup> "Tourism" In *Eurostat regional yearbook 2014* (Eurostat)

### **Tourism provision in Sostila**

Current trends in tourism show a growing interest in experiential cultural tourism, where tourists expect to be ‘immersed’ in a local culture and its history.<sup>10</sup> A Forcola resident has tapped into this market and currently runs guided day trips from Sirta up to Sostila. The guide dresses in medieval costume, recounts the myths and legends for which the valley is famous and guides visitors around the restored buildings in Sostila. In part thanks to the interest drummed up by these excursions, the municipality has funded the restoration of certain buildings in the hamlet, a project supported by local volunteers. The buildings now shown to visitors are *La Casa dei Portali*, which features a reconstruction of a room as it would have been in the 17th century, with a central fireplace and cinder-stained walls. Within the former school a classroom has been reconstructed with the help of testimonies from former pupils, and is made to look as it did when the last pupil left in 1961. Also recently restored is the *Casa Parrocchiale* in which the kitchen and dining room have been left as they were. A loom recently recovered in one of the houses in Sostila is currently being restored and will be on display in the *Stanza del telaio*. This reconstruction of buildings fits comfortably into the experiential tourism paradigm, ‘transporting’ the visitor into the past, complete with costumes and reconstructions. This raises questions about the crystallisation and museumification of the town. Due to the low resident numbers, physical isolation and lack of modern infrastructure, Sostila has effectively been ‘frozen in time’ without any concerted effort to do so by individuals within the tourism industry. I believe the current tourism project run by Franco Mottalini is commendable - he has succeeded in ensuring the restoration of heritage buildings, while the tours he conducts educate visitors on the local history and culture in an interactive and enjoyable way that is at the same time socially and ecologically respectful. However, looking to the future, it is important to take action now in anticipation for an increasing number of visitors in order to avoid a complete ‘museumification’ of the town.

### **Sostila in the broader tourism market**

Due in part to a reaction against globalisation and the cultural homogenisation it brings, tourists are increasingly searching for so-called ‘authentic’ travel experiences. This translates as, among other things, accommodation in vernacular buildings, dining on traditional and local foods and interaction with local residents (for example through performances, tours or purchasing locally produced goods). In response to this market trend, urban management bodies seek to shape their city’s image in order to give the impression of a unique tourist destination, whether that be in terms of architecture, geography, history or culture.<sup>11</sup> In the case of Sostila, the *creation* of an image is not necessary - it is already unique in many ways. It is, therefore, a significant cultural asset that can be used as a vector for economic development through tourism. Undoubtedly, the current residents living out their retirement

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<sup>10</sup> Bob Mckercher, Hilary du Cros. *Cultural Tourism: The Partnership Between Tourism and Cultural Heritage Management*. (Routledge, 2012)

<sup>11</sup> Otília Arantes. *Urbanismo em m de linha*. São Paulo: Edusp, 1999

in the peacefully isolated hills of Val Fabiòlo do not want mass tourism arriving on their doorstep tomorrow. However, given the unrelenting growth in tourism and the growing interest in both outdoor and cultural tourism<sup>12</sup>, it is certain that Sostila will eventually attract significant numbers of tourists, whether that be within a decade or a century. It is therefore important that local residents take control of the decision- and policy-making processes now, before the economic potential of Sostila is taken into the hands of larger tourism entities that could exploit this cultural asset without considering the sustainability of its management.

### **Participatory democracy in low density areas**

But with only two residents, who gets to decide the future of the town? A local magazine published an interview in 2012 with Fausto Mottalini, at the time the only resident, which was entitled ‘The last king of Sostila’ (*L'ultimo re di Sostila*).<sup>13</sup> Although evidently not intended to be read for such deeper meaning, this title alludes to the idea that Mottalini has right over the governance of the town, that by default the whole of Sostila has become his property. But if participatory democracy is instigated in this area it needs to include all willing actors that will be affected by changes in regulations, infrastructure and development. This includes not only private owners of properties in Sostila, but also in the surrounding towns. There have already been initiatives to link the separate communities in the valley in a cultural tourism network, for example through the maintenance of hiking trails linking the communities<sup>14</sup> and the proposition of an ecomuseum that valorizes local heritage.<sup>15</sup> If residents are to have control over the future of development in their valley, systems must be put in place that allow residents to have genuine power over the decision-making processes. Processes that will affect residents include, but are not limited to: development of infrastructure and public utilities, regulations on construction, on purchase and sale of houses and on the rental market.<sup>16</sup>

The spatial dilution of residents in the valley, combined with an underdeveloped transport infrastructure, poses a logistical challenge to a potential community participation scheme. However, with proper planning and use of communication methods it is possible to organise even disparate communities into cohesive action groups.<sup>17</sup> A broad range of communication methods should be used, considering that some residents may prefer to be contacted through print media, telephone or through previously established social groups (for example religious congregations). The establishment of an elected representative in each community is an

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<sup>12</sup> “Tourism” In *Eurostat regional yearbook 2014* (Eurostat)

<sup>13</sup> Nello Colombo. “L'ultimo re di Sostila” in *Alpes* (July 2012)

<sup>14</sup> “Nuova segnaletica sentieri” *Forcolaweb* Last accessed 12th March 2018. Available: <https://www.forcolaweb.org/frazioni/alfaedo/121-nuova-segnaletica-sentieri>

<sup>15</sup> Renato Bertolini. *Ecomuseo dell'architettura tradizionale e della pastorizia nelle Orobie*. (Sondrio: Comunità Montana Valtellina di Morbegno/Comune di Forcola, 2010)

<sup>16</sup> Rob Krueger, David Gibbs. *The Sustainable Development Paradox: Urban Political Economy in the United States and Europe*. (Guilford Press, 2007)

<sup>17</sup> Mark Tran. *How best to engage communities in development projects?* The Guardian (Nov 2012)

effective way to disseminate information and keep the community informed of meetings, discussions and developments.

Owners of buildings in Sostila that have been inherited from relatives pose a challenge to this democratic process. As stakeholders in the town they should be consulted and, if they so desire, contribute to policy-making. However, some may live far from the valley and may no longer be emotionally invested in the area. Some of these property owners may eventually want to sell these properties, and this is where the local community could play an important role in defining the cultural identity and economy of Sostila. This can be done by regulating the local property market and in doing so deciding who will be the next generation of property owners, and potentially inhabitants, of Sostila. Similar rural communities throughout Europe have seen a rise in city-dwellers purchasing a second home in rural towns which they then inhabit sporadically throughout the year. These inhabitants are typically of the older generation and come to consume rather than produce.<sup>18</sup> This phenomenon of repopulation of low-density areas through the purchase of second homes brings with it a plethora of social, economic and cultural questions which will not be discussed in detail here. However, it is fair to say that such a development would impact significantly on the town in many ways, affecting its management, economics and cultural identity. It is the prerogative of the current residents to decide if they pressure local government to place regulations on the sale and purchase of property in Sostila.

### **Community control of future development**

Similarly, when tourism does develop, the local population have the opportunity to control the provision of tourist accommodation. Many larger cities' governments have begun placing restrictions on accommodation platforms such as AirBnB and VRBO.<sup>19</sup> Sostila and Val Fabiòlo have the opportunity to discuss these future developments before they take place, rather than place impose regulations retrospectively, a process which is far more complicated, both politically and logically. Steps can be taken to ensure that money generated from tourism will be reinvested locally. Furthermore, due to its isolation, core infrastructure is not particularly developed in Sostila, most notably in transport but also public utilities. These will be key areas that will need to be developed in order to support growing numbers of visitors or residents and as such present another opportunity for residents to participate in development.

### **Conclusions**

Sostila and Val Fabiòlo present an interesting case study as the geography, demography and cultural heritage of the territory are quite unique, however the issues in its management and development are common to many places. It falls into a category of potential cultural tourism destinations that is neither imminently threatened by mass tourism nor particularly popular in the broader tourism market. It therefore does not attract enough attention to justify significant

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<sup>18</sup> Geyer, H. S. & Kontuly, T. M., eds. (1996) *Differential Urbanization: Integrating Spatial Models*, London: Arnold.

<sup>19</sup> Katherine Lagrave. *Cities Cracking Down on Airbnb*. Conde Nast Traveler (June 2017)

financial investment or political intervention to protect or develop the region. For now, that means that the local community has a unique opportunity to take control of decision- and policy-making processes before they are taken over by larger entities. In this way, through community participation and bottom-up participatory democracy, residents can shape and control future development in their territory. The recognition of Sostila merely as an economic asset may seem cynical, but it is my belief that if control is not taken by local people then outside entities will eventually seek to exploit the economic potential of a town like Sostila. Whether this be through increased tourism or through the purchase of second homes, both would change the social and cultural dynamic of the town and its valley. It is therefore imperative that local residents act now in order to develop the area in a way that is sustainable and respectful to the community, to nature and to the heritage of this unique town.