

Facilitating assets-based development in rural communities through service-learning

Antonella Guarino*, Irene Barbieri,
Christian Compare and Cinzia Albanesi

Abstract By integrating a learning experience with community organizations, service-learning (SL) can be considered a tool to facilitate rural communities' development, acting as a resource mobilizer. This study presents a participatory process based on the assets-based approach for community development approach. Six local organizations and 16 university students in three Italian rural communities were engaged to assess local resources and co-construct rural SL (RSL) projects. A two-phase rural participative process was developed and evaluated using qualitative instruments, such as focus groups and students' reflexive journals. Results indicated that rural communities uncovered a set of material and intangible inner assets to develop. Indeed, they identified internal (and potentially external) resources that could effectively bring some insights to rural challenges. Moreover, community members experienced new paths through SL to count on their internal assets through effective collaboration with university students. The collaboration between students (and university) and community organizations delivered new local and rural development opportunities while supporting the partnership for RSL. Students experienced themselves as potential agents of change, enhancing their psychosocial resources and competencies, and strengthening rural development. The result's implications involve the development of

*Address for correspondence: Antonella Guarino, PhD, Department of Psychology, AlmaMater Studiorum University of Bologna, Viale Berti Pichat, 5, 40127 Bologna, Italy; email: antonella.guarino2@unibo.it.

rural policies, including effective participation of rural communities (and organizations) and regarding different dimensions of development, like economic or psychosocial development.

Introduction

A general representation of rural communities is that rural people work together, are less diverse, and that the countryside is just a healthier place to live (Van Dam *et al.*, 2002). However, rural areas have undertaken complex transformation processes, mainly due to global dynamics of change (da Silva *et al.*, 2016). In Europe, at least 44 percent of areas are rural areas, affected by progressive depopulation toward urban and metropolitan areas. Common challenges affected the rural realities, such as demography, land use, social services, education, and changes in the labour market (Zolin *et al.*, 2017; European Commission, 2019). Moreover, the agricultural economy changes favoured some rural areas' modernization and the decline and abandonment of others.

Demographic dynamics involving heterogeneous populations (Mohatt, 2020), ageing (da Silva *et al.*, 2016), innovation and sustainability in economics and politics (Dell'Olio *et al.*, 2017; Colibaba and Skinner, 2019), and civic and social participation (McHenry, 2011) determine the meaningful challenges of rural areas. The European Development Opportunities in Rural Areas (EDORA) project provided evidence of different opportunities for increasing regional strengths through territorial cooperation in EU rural areas. It analysed the potential impact of climate change on the development opportunities of rural areas. Notably, the project explored how it is possible to form a cohesion policy in rural areas considering the so-called intangible assets. Auditing with local communities represents a crucial aspect of local and trans-local development (Copus *et al.*, 2011).

The LEADER program

The European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) worked to face challenges and enlarge opportunities for the rural areas. To engage local actors in designing and delivering strategies, decision-making processes, and allocating resources to rural areas' development, ENRD developed the LEADER program (ENRD, 2016). Since their 61 percent coverage of the rural population in the EU, Local Action Groups (LAGs) were designated leaders of this program. LAGs bring together public and private stakeholders in processes to reach social, economic, and environmental objectives. They focus on community members' involvement in the process of innovation and cooperation through designing and implementing Local Action Plans

(LAPs) to support rural development. LAGs' activities initially focused on environmental protection, landscape conservation, infrastructures, and competitive markets, rather than social issues and socio-cultural initiatives. An evaluation of the LEADER program in Austria (Dax and Oedl-Wieser, 2016) showed that the active engagement of economic and socio-cultural actors fostered the local potential of rural regions.

Moreover, they found that exclusive technical focus (e.g. infrastructures, competitive markets) regarded only restricted development potential. Investment in socio-cultural initiatives and social innovation offers greater improvement prospects at the local level (Dax and Oedl-Wieser, 2016). In this sense, enhancing social innovation, participating in rural development, responding to rural needs, enabling the process of empowerment, and focusing on programme impact could be considered vital processes to support rural development of regional and local areas.

Although active participation and collaboration are beneficial to rural communities and organizations (e.g. gaining direct knowledge of problems and needs, reporting interests and desires, and reflecting on their resources), it has been underused in developing LAPs (Landini, 2015; Menconi *et al.*, 2017). Participatory processes and direct involvement of community members are practices adopted in Community Psychology to understand local people's needs, assets, and motivations to set shared objectives and agenda for community-based interventions (Levac *et al.*, 2019).

Based on the literature about European initiatives and their approach to rural development and the successful implementation of participatory process in rural communities, it becomes crucial to adopt a bottom-up approach. Amplifying community members' voices on rural needs and assets and considering the process of rural development as beginning from within the communities is the first step (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993).

Assets based community development for rural communities

The Assets-Based approach for Community Development (ABCD) builds on the idea that people can act as proactive citizens in communities. They can identify and leverage existing (but often underestimated) resources to respond and create local opportunities (Mathie and Cunningham, 2003). The ABCD model shifted the focus on community development from just scrutinizing the needs and deficiencies of areas to nurturing community assets as the required building blocks for achieving sustainable urban and rural community revitalization. According to the ABCD, acknowledging strengths and assets is more likely to inspire positive community actions for change than an exclusive focus on needs and problems. ABCD incor-

porates a broad set of actions as part of a collective process of community empowerment (Laverack, 2001; Scott *et al.*, 2020). Community members can make mutual efforts and manage local resources independently, improving local organizational participation and capacities (Ahmad *et al.*, 2015). Both formal and informal community organizations are considered central actors and assets of community development (Greene, 2000).

Within the ABCD model, the authors identified three core aspects (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993):

- 1) Asset-based: a constructive approach to sustainable development wherein the community building begins with a collective process of identifying the assets within the community;
- 2) Internally focused: acknowledging a possible change thanks to an internal focus and, where needed, outside support. The priority for asset mapping is to identify and purchase the resources from within the community;
- 3) Relationship-driven: a continuous process of building reciprocal relationships among community members. Furthermore, conducting a mapping of the skills can assist in maintaining and strengthening these relationships.

Research on assets found that rural communities can a) focus on the role of schools and educational institutions to promote community development by providing community-based learning experiences (Miller, 1995); b) improve the community care system for youth by strengthening the partnership between community members and service agencies (Boyd *et al.*, 2008); c) foster resilience when dealing with social and community's assets and risks considering the support from informal and formal community organizations (Maybery *et al.*, 2009); and d) promote community empowerment through fostering human capital, skills and capacities of local communities to take collective action (Ahmad *et al.*, 2015). University can be a key educational institution in the ABCD process, facilitating acquiring knowledge, focusing on local communities' resources, and supporting broader community building and development.

Service-learning: a path to community engagement and development?

Service-learning (SL) is a form of experiential education that integrates community service with class-based learning. It allows students to participate in structured service activities that benefit both students' sense of responsibility and communities' needs (Bringle and Hatcher, 2009). It heavily relies on the reciprocal partnership with the community organizations and stakeholders to foster students' civic learning and active citizenship

(Guarino *et al.*, 2019; Aramburuzabala *et al.*, 2019; Compare *et al.*, 2022). While deficit-based approaches have been identified as potential risks of accentuating communities' problems (Mtawa and Wilson-Strydom, 2018), resource-based approaches promote ethical and respectful community engagement (Shah *et al.*, 2018).

Indeed, with the co-creation of new experience-based knowledge, students, faculty, and community organizations can strengthen community resources, involving community members in possible solutions to face relevant community issues (Bringle and Hatcher, 2009; Guarino *et al.*, 2019; Compare and Albanesi, 2022). SL facilitates the acknowledgement of community organizations as valuable and active contributors to students' education and community development while benefitting from partnering with the university (Jones *et al.*, 2018). They can access academic resources and knowledge (Eyler *et al.*, 1999), sustain the partnership (d'Arlach *et al.*, 2009), and have a voice in co-defining social issues and co-creating solutions (Harris, 2004). Therefore, SL values community assets and university students' resources to identify and analyse social issues and develop community-based projects.

In rural contexts, the implementation of SL encounters some challenges (Tyndall *et al.*, 2020). For example, the distance from the university may limit the opportunities for the effective engagement of community organizations (Lapping, 1999; Geller *et al.*, 2016). To overcome these challenges, scholars offered different solutions (Holton, 2007). For example, creating guidelines for implementing SL in rural areas (Boethel, 1999), analysing community reactions to SL implementation in rural areas (Vernon and Ward, 1999), and promoting social entrepreneurship and sustainability for small rural municipalities (Martínez-Campillo *et al.*, 2019), and providing frequent interactions and feedbacks between community partners and academic staff on rural programs adaptation (Jones *et al.*, 2018). Nevertheless, there is still much to be done to clearly understand rural SL (RSL), its implementation, and its capacity to facilitate community asset identifications and act as a 'booster' for rural community development.

This study wants to contribute to this understanding, offering some insights based on the analysis of our experience with RSL. This study aims to understand and explore the process and the outcomes of the participatory process adopted for designing and implementing SL projects for the development of rural communities. Acting as a community catalyst, SL could enhance the mutual benefits of partnering with the university in a collaborative process (Geller *et al.*, 2016). Our research questions (RQs) aim at exploring:

RQ1. What are rural community needs and resources?

RQ2. How can SL lead to the development of rural communities' assets?

RQ3. How does SL contribute to rural communities' development?

Study context

Rural 3.0 project

The current study is part of the European Erasmus Plus Project Rural 3.0—Service Learning for Rural development (RURALS). The project aims to set up a common strategy between higher education institutions and rural community organizations contributing to rural areas' development. It includes meeting their needs, boosting innovation in these areas through an innovative methodology, and establishing community–university partnerships.

The University of Bologna promoted an intensive and residential Summer School of RSL in the rural context in July 2020. SL Projects were designed based on the needs and assets of community organizations, with students playing an active role in working on concrete issues raised by rural organizations within the university–community partnership.

Method

Procedure

A participatory process, including assessment, implementation, and final evaluation, was developed in two main phases involving different actors (Table 1). Our study started by embracing the voices of organizations' representatives on the needs and problems they encounter. Listening to and welcoming their worries was critical to establish trust, and to create some 'space' for adopting a different perspective. As such, our attention to needs and problems create the path to move to an ABCD approach. Even if not always included in the ABCD approach (see for an exception, Scott *et al.*, 2020) this step was necessary for the organizations' representatives and for us to create a shared ground to work on for starting an empowering process. In doing so, organizations' representatives recognized and became aware of the risks of a depreciative approach to the community and the institutions. After that, the ABCD approach was proposed and agreed upon with the whole group.

Participants

Phase 1. Community organizations located in the three rural areas participated in the project.

Eighteen representatives from different community organizations (Table 2) participated in the three focus groups on community assets mapping—five in Sarsina, seven in Santa Sofia, and six in Riolo Terme.

Table 1 Phases of participatory process

Phase 1 <i>Involving rural communities in understanding their resources</i>	<p>1.1 A partnership was established with the LAG of the rural area near the Bologna's campus branches.</p> <p>1.2 Three affiliates of the Department of Psychology and three affiliates of the local LAG (L'Altra Romagna) were chosen as members of the Rural Research Group (RRG)</p> <p>1.3 Three rural communities of the Emilia-Romagna region (north of Italy) were selected and contacted by the LAG, facilitating the connection between the university and the rural community organizations. Next, the LAG invited local community organizations (from three different communities) to participate in the project.</p> <p>1.4 The RRG carried out a resources assessment.</p>
Phase 2 <i>Cooperating with local organizations to design and implement SL for rural development</i>	<p>2.1 A collaborative process of designing SL projects based on assets identified by community organizations was held by RRG and community organizations;</p> <p>2.2 The implementation of SL projects in rural areas involving members of community organizations and students.</p> <p>2.3 A final evaluation included students in community organizations members.</p>

Table 2 Participants involved in phase 1

Rural community	Organization	Area/Activity
Sarsina	Casa Insieme	Social and health services
	Il Pagliaio	Agriculture – Education
	Il Cammino di San Vicinio	Tourism
	Municipality of Sarsina	Public services
Santa Sofia	Municipality of Mercato Saraceno	Public services
	Coldiretti	Agriculture
	Auser	Social services (older adults)
	Municipality of Santa Sofia	Public services
	Public Library	Cultural/Educational services
	Association Via Romea Germanica	Tourism
	Association Sophia in Libris	Cultural services
Riolo Terme	Caritas	Health/Social services
	Borgo dei Laghi	Agriculture
	Consulenza Agronoma dei Parchi	Agriculture, Tourism
	Pro Loco Brighella	Environmental, Entrepreneurship
	Ente Gestione Parchi e Biodiversità Romagna	Tourism, Territorial development
	Agriturismo Pietra Luna	Tourism, Agriculture
	GMT	Tourism

Participants had a great age variation (range 25–75), and men and women were equally represented. The inclusion criteria were: 1) being a well-known representative in the rural communities; 2) being recognized by the LAG as a reference for rural development; 3) being committed to different aspects of the community life (e.g. educational, health, and cultural services); 4) being open to implementing SL.

Phase 2. Six site supervisors (i.e. representatives of local rural organizations that supervised SL students' activities onsite) (83.3 percent men) remained to start the co-designing process of SL projects. Sixteen graduate and undergraduate students were recruited with a selection protocol based on their previous experience in international projects, personal motivations, and interest in rural development (Table 3). Students were 87.5 percent women, their ages ranged 20–28, and were enrolled in the following courses: International Cooperation on Human Rights and Intercultural Heritage, International Relations and Diplomatic Affairs, Environmental Science, Local and Global Development, Management of Social Economy.

Instruments and analysis

Phase 1. Three focus groups were conducted with organizations' representatives for rural communities' assets assessment. The assets mapping focus group's guide included: information about perceived needs, problems, and difficulties of their rural communities; information about potential resources and strengths; ideas and expectations for the RSL.

Phase 2. A focus group with site supervisors was conducted for the final evaluation.

The evaluation focus group's guide included: perceived strengths and weaknesses, the relationship between site supervisors and students, and possible development for rural communities. Each focus group was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, with previous informed consent by participants, and lasted around 1 hour and 30 minutes. Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Table 4), described as 'a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The research team included two young researchers who listened to audio recordings, cleaned transcriptions, and independently coded the data in different stages. To ensure trustworthiness in the data analysis process (Guba, 1981), the research team discussed codes and themes with a senior researcher to identify how they connected with the data.

Moreover, field journals written by students as daily reports and reflections of the activities were included as part of the evaluative material and analysed using thematic analysis.

Table 3 Participants involved in phase 2

	Rural community organizations	Community representatives	Students
Sarsina	Il Pagliaio- Multifunctional and educational farm Consulta Giovani- Il Cammino di San Vitorio	Owner, M Member of the organization, M	1 M, 1 F 4F
Santa Sofia	Municipal Library Elderly volunteer organization Via Romeo Germanica	Employee, F Coordinator, M President of the organization, M	2F 2F 2F
Riolo Terme	Rifugio Carnè- Vena del Gesso park	President of the organization, M	3F, 1 M

Table 4 Themes and codes

Themes		Codes
Phase 1	Community mapping	Agro-environmental resources and needs Socio-economic resources and needs Antropo-psychological resources and needs
Phase 2	Co-operating with local organizations for rural development	Co- designing SL projects Creating a sustainable development strategy Sharing stories, connecting genders and generations Supporting Organizational development
	Collaboration boosting change: challenges and strengths	Community organizations: new directions for rural development Students' perspective: building relational and intergenerational bridges Connecting local and global (people and policies) Supporting change

Results

The themes and codes that emerged from the analysis are presented in Table 4.

Phase 1. Community mapping: a perspective from rural organizations

The process of assets mapping in rural communities amplified the voices of community organizations' members to express their needs and mainly focus on their assets. We analysed them according to three codes that reflect the main reported challenges: agro-environmental, socio-economic, and anthropo-psychological (Table 5).

Agro-environmental Organizations' representatives identified some issues connected to the rural landscape, such as the lack of dwellings caused by the territory's characteristics (hills far from urban services), but also the presence of several unexploited lands for agriculture and natural parks, essential resources for community development of local tourism (e.g. naturalistic, religious, and sportive) and agriculture.

The Apennine territory is significant for its liveability, traditional products, and agriculture. Students would help identify latent questions and needs with a new outlook to see, propose, and identify solutions and opportunities. (Focus group 1, participant 8).

Socio-economic Organizations' representatives shared the need to implement the agriculture labour market, considering agricultural activities to improve and extend the local labour market to the national and international levels. Second sector services are increasing and could represent a new path to develop strategic partnerships to offer new services to the population.

This [the land] has favoured the condition for unique products to grow and be known worldwide as DOP products. Biodiversity is one of our resources (Focus group 1, Participant 5).

Some key services, such as libraries, school services, and women's health services, are lacking and need to be implemented since they influence young people's and families' decisions to stay in rural communities or move to the city.

There are no services for individuals and families here. The demographic decline has been going on for some time. We need to provide services to convince people to stay, especially women and mothers who feel the lack of assistance the most. (Focus group 2, Participant 3).

Third sector services like voluntary associations, recreational centres for children and adolescents, cultural services and activities (e.g. the theatre), and the tourist office could represent a resource.

Table 5 Rural communities' needs and assets mapping

Code	Needs	Assets
Agro-environmental	Multiple buildings (houses, dwellings) Greater community development	Parks Unexploited land Rural territory
Socio-economic	Hotels Creating jobs: agriculture, need for innovation and communication, tourism as work Cultural (library) School Personal services (mostly women and young people)	Businesses DOP and typical agricultural products Religious tourism, sports, etc. Tourist office Voluntary associations Services for children and adolescents (summer centres) Educational farm Theatre and culture Migrants Young people Elders Values of welcome and hospitality, link with history, cultural memory Genuine and spontaneous relationships Networking Good/high quality of life
Antropo-Psychological	Low birth rate Depopulation (few young people) Women and families want to leave Elderly Cultural values and tradition Participation Identity recovery Network Community	

From the cultural and rural point of view, we have some potential. Linking diverse projects on the territory might answer the community's needs while supporting the students' learning (Focus group 2, Participant 3).

Anthropo-psychological From the participants' account, the depopulation phenomena of rural contexts can be contrasted with the presence of young people. They could represent a resource for innovation in many productive activities. Older adults could represent a resource as they preserve the rural communities' history, traditions, and values (together with young people they could create a connection between traditions and innovation). Finally, migrants are recognized as a resource, being the new labour force.

Hospitality, acceptance, and the vivid connection to the tradition have been reported as relevant values that can create a shared memory and a sense of connection among rural community members.

As soon as you step into the principal square, you can feel a sense of hospitality. We should work on that. Indeed, people remain here for the relationships they made and because they can rely on others living well (Focus group 1, Participant 2).

Young people's participation is relevant to attract more young people and improve their engagement in the community, thus reinforcing youth's sense of belonging to rural territories and sense of shared identity.

A crucial need is to involve young people constructively. Young people are not only resources per se, but they also generate a cascade effect connecting with other youth (Focus group 2, Participant 4).

Participants defined social relationships among residents as good, genuine, and spontaneous and reported a good quality of life given by living in nature and harmony, thus feeling like a 'big home' for all community members.

We must be a house for the community and integration, where people can be united. We want to start up a place where activities can integrate. Thus, we must think about territorial and economic integration and balance (Focus group 3, Participant 1).

Phase 2. Cooperating with local organizations for rural development

Co-designing SL projects SL Projects have been designed based on the community organizations' needs and assets (Table 6). Students were asked to work on issues identified with the organizations, implement activities, and offer their analysis and insights.

We present results from three SL assets-based projects (out of six projects developed) involving students in the rural context as they have different focuses and offer different strategies to support community development (Table 7).

Table 6 SL projects developed during RSS

Organizations	SL project objectives
Il Pagliaio- Multifunctional farm Consulta Giovani- Il Cammino di San Vitorio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To support the activities of the farm, co-designing new activities To promote a collective discussion about the scope and tools of rural development and agricultural policies To give voice to community workers To connect generations—strengthen social ties and sense of belonging; To promote the role of women through a historical perspective To promote organization members' active participation in Santa Sofia context; To strengthen the connection between the organization and the context of Santa Sofia; To promote a generational change into the organization. To promote the activities of the association and of the pilgrimage route itself; To support the communication strategy; To mediate with local partners. To analyse and map the structures/tourist activities; To analyse tourists' experiences.
Municipal Library	
Elderly volunteer organization	
Via Romeo Germanica	
Rifugio Carnè- Vena del Gesso park	

Table 7 SL and students' proposals for local rural development

Organizations/s	RSL project objectives	Students' proposals to local development
Il Pagliaio- Multifunctional and educational farm	To support the activities of the farm, co-designing new activities	Opening the activities to new languages (English or Spanish) with university students' support
Municipal Library	To connect generations—strengthen social ties and sense of belonging;	Involvement of formal and informal leaders, and stakeholders;
	To promote the role of women through a historical perspective	Development and strengthen of local social networks
Via Romeo Germanica	To promote the activities of the association and of the pilgrimage route itself;	Proposal of different organization internal structure and improved use of social networks.
	To support the communication strategy;	
	To mediate with local partners.	

Creating a sustainable development strategy The rural organization Il Pagliaio in Sarsina hosted two students who supported the multifunctional farm educational activities targeting children. They developed proposals to enlarge the organization's activities, build on its local network, and connect tradition with innovation. Students suggested that the farm could work more on sustainability (recycling and permaculture) and become a rural hub that creates environmental awareness among inhabitants (elders and children). They claimed that:

[It is needed] To strengthen the opportunities of the territory by enhancing the local identity as part of the Romagna tradition. The goal is to remember and promote local customs, which constitute a rich cultural potential, without eluding the need to open to new horizons. (Student 2_Sarsina).

Finally, they suggested offering educational activities targeting children in different languages (English or Spanish) and integrating environmental and educational goals for children attending their laboratories with the university students' support.

Sharing stories, connecting genders, and generations The municipal library in Santa Sofia hosted two university students in a research-based SL project to investigate women's work in the last 70 years and create a shared history by involving citizens. Students collected citizens' stories of formal and informal community leaders through qualitative interviews. They reported:

Non-structured interviews have been a winning strategy: people shared their stories more authentically, feeling at ease. Moreover, it made the time more enjoyable and allowed us to better catch their feelings and emotions. (Student7_SantaSofia).

Students helped the municipal library create an exhibition open to citizens based on the collected and analysed material.

Supporting organizational development The community organization Via Romeo Germanica in Santa Sofia hosted two university students to strengthen the local and national network by providing recommendations on improving the communication and marketing strategy of the organization. Students first analysed the organization's structure (organization chart, social relations, roles, tasks) and found that:

The organization presents a high potential for development, but its structure, based on volunteers, hinders many actions and makes the administration more complex. (Student3_SantaSofia).

Students proposed three strategies to the organization: adopting a work simplification by sharing tasks and delegating responsibilities; improving

the network with local stakeholders, such as public institutions, civil society, and enterprises; promoting internal and external communication with organizational units, community partners, and global networks.

Collaboration boosting change: strengths and challenges The evaluation of the SL projects allowed the identification of different themes. While community organizations focused more on strengths, students identified different challenges.

Community organizations: new directions for rural development.

Site supervisors considered the whole experience as improving their strengths and opening new perspectives on their role in the community.

It was the first time we hosted students. I am pleased with the experience. We have spent time well, and the students did a good job. They have been very competent, analysing the organization and suggesting ways to communicate with younger people. I hope that this work does not end here. (SiteSupervisor_1).

Moreover, they focused on the importance of welcoming university students to re-address their main goals and co-design RSL objectives.

When they arrived, students had a different idea of the service. We had a more practical perspective. We presented the context and the library exhibition, sharing thoughts on the women's work across the decades. They also had the opportunity to interview key community representatives. We had an interesting discussion about the evolution of women's work. (SiteSupervisor_5).

Finally, the whole process and the projects proved that RSL had been a valuable tool for promoting social change and approaching things differently based on the proposals.

This experience has made me grow. By giving continuity to this experience, we can promote a tremendous cultural change, bringing together university and rural communities. (SiteSupervisor_3).

Implementing systematically activities in the rural area could become an excellent solution to bridge the gap between rural communities and the surrounding territories and plan and implement the best strategy together, relying on the considerable skills of students, both at a cognitive and conceptual level. (SiteSupervisor_4).

Students' perspective: Building relational and intergenerational bridges

Students reflected on and were aware of some processes and challenges that rural communities must face and the formal and informal opportunities given by social relationships. By focusing on specific issues, students gained a perspective on the challenge of rural development, such as the need to build relational bridges in the rural community and revitalize its social life.

I know that generation gap and emotional disconnection detachment dynamics, associationism, openness, and youth contributions are common challenges in rural

areas. I believed that relationships are essential in society, especially in small cities. I leave with a stronger conviction. We need to create and maintain interpersonal bonds, which are fundamental to building an effective network and keeping the territory alive. (Student2_SantaSofia).

We have tried to act as a bridge to structure dialogue, and we have succeeded. With time and dedication, we have structured a trusty relationship with citizens, rewarding them and us. (Student2_Sarsina).

Connecting local and global (people and policies) Following the importance of maintaining relationships and partnerships, one student expressed her awareness of the relevant link between policy and daily activities and the connection between the European and local levels.

Only through the experience, we can understand the concrete application of soft skills and the active role we can have within the community. Indeed, when studying European agricultural policy, I will no longer think about the buildings in which decisions are made. I will remember this experience and all the people and farmers I met here. (Student1_Sarsina).

Supporting change by sharing different perspectives Students felt involved while supporting the organization to open their views on the local stakeholders' role. Students' awareness underpinned reciprocal reflections that led to a change of attitude and unveiled the treasures of rural communities.

I think I have brought something and helped volunteers to reflect on themselves. In turn, we [students] have become more aware of the situation. They have received some fresh air. Hopefully, this 'oxygenation' will enable them to take steps in new directions. (Student3_SantaSofia).

The community questioned itself *The presence of external observers made the organizations curious about our work. It allowed the participants to examine their situation and actions. It was a consciousness exercise for all the involved parties. (Student1_Santa Sofia).*

Finally, they recognized the values, assets, and capabilities that rural communities have and can be improved if actors at different levels take an integrated action.

I am more aware of the richness of rural contexts: people, history, art, and nature. There is great potential. St. Sofia values it well. (Student3_SantaSofia).

Discussion

This paper's primary purposes were to explore and understand the participatory process in Italian rural communities and engage rural community

organizations in community development using SL. We involved different community organizations in three rural areas developing a Rural Participatory Process based on the theoretical framework of ABCD (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993).

Our first RQ was about identifying the assets and needs of rural communities. Our findings showed that the primary assets reported by community organizations were not just about the environment and surrounding context but also psychosocial factors. These were recognized as fundamental to revitalizing community relations, sense of belonging, and cultural identity, as reported in the ABCD approach (Mathie and Cunningham, 2003). The ABCD approach helped the rural community organizations switch perspectives on their needs and resources, find new assets in building relationships with university students (and instructors), and embrace potential changes while respecting their organizational nature (structure, function, and activities). Our results confirm that adopting a participatory process that allows rural communities to reflect on their resources in the development is an innovation that can offer new prospects for the development of LAPs, (Dax and Oedl-Wieser, 2016) contrasting a tradition where bottom-up participation in rural settings has been underused.

Our second RQ was about the potential role of SL in the enhancement of community assets. Site supervisors perceived SL to improve and foster community relationships and networks, cultural identity, and a sense of belonging while receiving new ideas from the students. They recognized that it is possible to promote community development by working with educational institutions providing learning experiences based in the rural community, a solution that was proposed also by Miller (1995). The university-community partnership created a favourable climate and positive relationships among all actors involved, highlighting how partnerships are vital to the community development process and how to engage in a reciprocal exchange (Jones *et al.*, 2018). SL projects underpinned a reflection on implementing more sustainable practices, offering new perspectives on activities, using different languages, and adopting gender-balanced visions. In general, SL supported rural communities to face challenges using (in)tangible assets and valuing the community knowledge and experience as resources to mobilize, in line with previous research (d'Arlach *et al.*, 2009). The collaboration between students and community organizations led community members to share their stories, value historical and cultural memory, and recognize informal community leaders, supporting a co-educational process, where community organizations are active contributors (Compare *et al.*, 2022). SL project supported the organizational development, adapting the structure to the contemporary context and agendas.

Our third RQ aimed to investigate SL's paths for rural development. Site supervisors reported that SL was an opportunity to receive creative inputs from students to improve new development strategies, emphasizing young people's role in bringing new ideas and concrete actions to be developed in the specific rural context (Bodorkós and Pataki, 2009). SL represented a way to amplify their resources within concrete projects by involving university students.

The intensive format raised opportunities for community organizations to have a reciprocal and constant exchange for recognizing their potential for development and possible change, something needed in rural contexts according to Jones *et al.* (2018). Indeed, community members were encouraged to value their local resources and frame their problems and possible solutions within a broader social, political, and cultural perspective. They also recognized students' role in critically analysing strengths and challenges. Developing SL projects in rural communities offered the opportunity to reduce the distance between universities and communities.

The university-community partnership was constructed and maintained during the whole process and was considered an opportunity to facilitate the development of projects with new methods (i.e. SL) and involving young people, as in previous research (Scott *et al.*, 2020). On one side, community organizations had the chance to reconsider youth's contribution to their organizations, recognizing the importance of leveraging intangible assets as supportive factors of rural development and the variety of deployed competencies when collaborating with people with different perspectives. On the other side, community organizations experienced the costs of being committed to a participatory process that require time and energy to start, grow, and continue. The Covid-19 restrictions represented a challenge that negatively influenced interactions with community members while building the partnership.

Moreover, the level of participation of rural community organizations was challenged by introducing a new approach (i.e. SL), encountering some initial resistance. The partnership's development process was slow, making the transformation of ideas (from community resources) into practice (SL projects) difficult for some local organizations and site supervisors due to different levels of commitment. Beyond benefits and disadvantages, university students (and academic staff) involvement was a fundamental step to supporting rural community development by cooperating with community organizations and facilitating rural development from the inside out.

Conclusion

Our study suggests that adopting the ABCD framework in rural areas opens new perspectives for rural community development. Thus, the university

is recognized as a catalyst for amplifying local communities' voices and empowering them (Bergdall, 2003). Indeed, implementing a SL assets-based approach in rural communities provided opportunities for dialogue, collaboration, and participation through reflection and reciprocal trust (Shah et al., 2018). Rural community organizations could discover their resources and competencies and recognize the power of using these resources for future changes. A successful partnership between the university and rural communities promoted a proactive process for students, enabling them to acknowledge their competencies by contributing to the community (Geller et al., 2016).

Limits and strengths

Our study had essential strengths but also some limitations. The Rural Participatory Process revealed some challenges in maintaining the participation of rural community organizations throughout the whole process. The involvement of rural organizations was relevant to the assets-based community approach and the development and implementation of SL projects. The lack of participation was sometimes a problem, and the role of LAG was fundamental to stimulating organizations to participate. Moreover, the short onsite time did not allow us to create deep contact with the contexts and strong ties with community members and local stakeholders. The Covid-19 pandemic constrained the SL experience and the level of involvement of the rural community organizations. The contact with local communities was reduced because of the national quarantine during the months that preceded the Summer School, while maintaining physical distance partially limited the onsite experience.

Finally, the evaluation considered a short-term period, and self-estimation bias could have played a role. Follow-up studies of this kind of experience could bring new insight into the impact of the SL projects implemented in those communities.

Nevertheless, we think the whole process can represent a powerful model to be applied and further implemented in other rural communities.

Recommendations

Our study can offer suggestions for SL and community psychology scholars, rural communities, and policymakers. RSL is an effective strategy that supports rural communities and students to discover new learning processes through mutual reflection and collaboration. RSL strengthens the importance of 'getting out of the ivory tower' of the university to deeply being involved in the local contexts and adopting participative processes. It

means that local communities should have a voice in the different phases of project implementation by recognizing their power. Finally, policymakers could rely on the importance of including different psychosocial, rural, political, and educational actors in improving policy frameworks for rural development and considering bottom-up approaches as a fundamental step to addressing main rural challenges.

Acknowledgements

We thank LAG L'Altra Romagna, the rural communities (Sarsina, Santa Sofia, Riolo Terme) and community organizations that participated in this study for their intense motivation and engagement. We also thank students for their commitment and their contribution to rural development.

Funding

This research was developed under the Rural 3.0 Service Learning for Rural Development project funded by Knowledge Alliance Erasmus Plus Programme of the European Union (Project number 599382-EPP-1-2018-1-PT-EPPKA2-KA). The grant covered the research fellowships for Antonella Guarino and Irene Barbieri. The views and opinions expressed in this publication are the authors' sole responsibility.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Antonella Guarino is a research fellow in community psychology. Her interest is in promoting the active citizenship of young people in communities and social justice.

Irene Barbieri is a community psychologist and adjunct professor. Her interest is in promoting a sense of community in rural and urban areas.

Christian Compare is a PhD candidate in community psychology. His research is focused on civic engagement and empowerment processes promoted within university-community partnerships.

Cinzia Albanesi is a full professor in Community Psychology and Coordinator of the Master's degree in School and Community Psychology. Her research is focused on community development, health promotion and education for social justice.

References

-
- Ahmad, M. S., Talib, A., Bt, N. (2015) Empowering local communities: decentralisation, empowerment and community-driven development, *Quality & Quantity*, **49** (2), 827–838. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-014-0025-8>.

- Aramburuzabala, P., McIlrath, L., Opazo, H. eds (2019) *Embedding Service-Learning in European Higher Education. Developing a Culture of Civic Engagement*, 1st edn, Taylor and Francis, London.
- Bergdall, T. (2003) *Reflections on the Catalytic Role of an Outsider in 'Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)*, Unpublished manuscript. Asset-Based Community Development Institute, School of Education and Social Policy, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, Retrieved from <http://www.abcdinstitute.org/docs/ABCD-outsider-catalyst.pdf>.
- Bodorkós, B. and Pataki, G. (2009) Linking academic and local knowledge: community-based research and service-learning for sustainable rural development in Hungary, *Journal of Cleaner Production*, **17** (12), 1123–1131. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2009.02.023>.
- Boethel, M. (1999) *Service Learning: A Strategy for Rural School Improvement and Community Revitalization (Benefits) [Squared]: The Exponential Results of Linking School Improvement and Community Development*, Issue Number Two. Southwest Educational Development Lab., Austin, TX. Retrieved from: <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED445876>.
- Boyd, C. P., Hayes, L., Wilson, R. L., Bearsley-Smith, C. (2008) Harnessing the social capital of rural communities for youth mental health: an asset-based community development framework, *Australian Journal of Rural Health*, **16** (4), 189–193. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1440-1584.2008.00996.x>.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, **3** (2), 77–101. <http://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.
- Bringle, R. G. and Hatcher, J. A. (2009) Innovative practices in service-learning and curricular engagement, *New Directions for Higher Education*, **147** (147), 37–46. <https://doi.org/10.1002/he.356>.
- Colibaba, A. and Skinner, M. W. (2019) Rural public libraries as contested spaces of older voluntarism in ageing communities, *Journal of Rural Studies*, **70**, 117–124. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2019.08.007>.
- Compare, C. and Albanesi, C. (2022) Stand together by staying apart: extreme online service-learning during the pandemic, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, **19** (5), 2749. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19052749>.
- Compare, C., Pieri, C., Albanesi, C. (2022) Community-University Partnership in Service-Learning: voicing the community side, *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, **26** (2), 79–102. <https://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/jheoe/article/view/2596/2749>.
- Copus, A. K., Shucksmith, M., Dax, T., Meredith, D. (2011) Cohesion Policy for rural areas after 2013. A rationale derived from the EDORA project (European Development Opportunities in Rural Areas)–ESPON 2013 Project 2013/1/2, *Studies in Agricultural Economics*, **113** (2), 121–132. Retrieved from. <http://repo.aki.gov.hu/id/eprint/2218>.
- d'Arlach, L., Sánchez, B., Feuer, R. (2009) Voices from the community: a case for reciprocity in service-learning, *Michigan Journal of Community Service-Learning*, **16** (1), 5–16 Retrieved from: <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ888070>.
- Dax, T. and Oedl-Wieser, T. (2016) Rural innovation activities as a means for changing development perspectives—an assessment of more than two decades of promoting

- LEADER initiatives across the European Union, *Studies in Agricultural Economics*, **118**, 30–37. <https://doi.org/10.22004/ag.econ.234971>.
- Dell'Olio, M., Hassink, J., Vaandrager, L. (2017) The development of social farming in Italy: a qualitative inquiry across four regions, *Journal of Rural Studies*, **56**, 65–75. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2017.09.006>.
- ENRD. (2016). LEADER local development strategies: design and implementation. Retrieved from: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/enrd-guidance_ids_0.pdf.
- European Commission, (2019), The future is rural: the social objectives of the next CAP. Retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/info/news/future-rural-social-objectives-next-cap-2019-feb-15_en.
- Eyler, J., Giles, D. E. Jr., Gray, C. J. (1999) *At a Glance: What we Know about the Effects of Service-Learning on Students, Faculty, Institutions and Communities*, 1993–1999. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University. <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slece bibliography/5>.
- Geller, J. D., Zuckerman, N., Seidel, A. (2016) Service-learning as a catalyst for community development: how do community partners benefit from service-learning? *Education and Urban Society*, **48** (2), 151–175. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124513514773>.
- Greene, M. (2000) *The Power of Associations: Not Mapping But Organising*. Unpublished paper, Available from ABCD Neighborhood Circle Initiative, ABCD Institute, Evanston, IL.
- Guarino, A., Albanesi, C., Zani, B., Compare, C. (2019) Quality of participation in service-learning projects, *Psicologia Di Comunita*, **1**, 90–110. <https://doi.org/10.3280/PSC2019-001007>.
- Guba, E. G. (1981) Criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiries, *ECTJ*, **29** (2), 75–91. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02766777>.
- Harris, G. (2004) Lessons for service learning in rural areas, *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, **24** (1), 41–50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X04267711>.
- Holton, N. (2007). Rural service learning: turning special challenges into great opportunities. *The Journal for Civic Commitment*, **3**. Retrieved from: <http://ccnce.org/articles/rural-service-learning-turning-special-challenges-into-great-opportunities/>.
- Jones, D., Mcallister, L., Dyson, R., Lyle, D. (2018) Service-learning partnerships: features that promote transformational and sustainable rural and remote health partnerships and services. *Australian journal of rural health*, *Australian Journal of Rural Health*. **26** (2), 80–85. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajr.12381>.
- Kretzmann, J. P. and McKnight, J. L. (1993) *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilising a Community's Assets*, Institute for Policy Research, Evanston, IL, Retrieved from: [https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/publications/publications-by-topic/Documents/GreenBookIntro%202018%20\(2\).pdf](https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/publications/publications-by-topic/Documents/GreenBookIntro%202018%20(2).pdf).
- Landini, F. (2015) Contributions of community psychology to rural advisory services: an analysis of Latin American rural extensionists' point of view, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, **55** (3), 359–368. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-015-9712-4>.
- Lapping, M. B. (1999) Universities, service learning and the rural context: seeing rural people and places for what they are, *Small Town*, **29** (5), 28–30.

- Laverack, G. (2001) An identification and interpretation of the organisational aspects of community empowerment, *Community Development Journal*, **36** (2), 134–145. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/36.2.134>.
- Levac, L., Ronis, S., Cowper-Smith, Y., Vaccarino, O. (2019) A scoping review: the utility of participatory research approaches in psychology, *Journal of Community Psychology*, **47** (8), 1865–1892. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22231>.
- Martínez-Campillo, A., Sierra-Fernández, M. D. P., Fernández-Santos, Y. (2019) Service-learning for sustainability entrepreneurship in rural areas: what is its global impact on business university students? *Sustainability*, **11** (19), 5296. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su11195296>.
- Mathie, A. and Cunningham, G. (2003) From clients to citizens: asset-based community development as a strategy for community-driven development, *Development in Practice*, **13** (5), 474–486. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0961452032000125857>.
- Maybery, D., Pope, R., Hodgins, G. et al. (2009) Resilience and well-being of small inland communities: community assets as key determinants, *Rural Society*, **19** (4), 326–339. <https://doi.org/10.5172/rsj.351.19.4.326>.
- McHenry, J. A. (2011) Rural empowerment through the arts: the role of the arts in civic and social participation in the mid west region of Western Australia, *Journal of Rural Studies*, **27** (3), 245–253. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2011.03.001>.
- Menconi, M. E., Grohmann, D., Mancinelli, C. (2017) European farmers and participatory rural appraisal: a systematic literature review on experiences to optimise rural development, *Land Use Policy*, **60**, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2016.10.007>.
- Miller, B. (1995) The role of rural schools in community development: policy issues and implications, *Program Report*. 1–16. Retrieved from: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED393617.pdf>.
- Mohatt, D. F. (2020) There is a road, no simple highway: musings on rural community practice, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, **65** (1–2), 13–15. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12393>.
- Mtawwa, N. and Wilson-Strydom, M. (2018) Community service-learning: pedagogy at the interface of poverty, inequality and privilege, *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, **19** (2), 249–265. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2018.1448370>.
- Scott, D. L., Sharma, R., Godwyll, F. et al. (2020) Building on strengths to address challenges: an asset-based approach to planning and implementing a community partnership school, *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, **24** (2), 69–84.
- Shah, R. W., Troester, J. M. S., Brooke, R. et al. (2018) Fostering eABCD: asset-based community development in digital service-learning, *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, **22** (2), 189–222.
- da Silva, D. S., Figueiredo, E., Eusébio, C., Carneiro, M. J. (2016) The countryside is worth a thousand words—Portuguese representations on rural areas, *Journal of Rural Studies*, **44**, 77–88. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2016.01.012>.
- Tyndall, D. E., Kosko, D. A., Forbis, K. M., Sullivan, W. B. (2020) Mutual benefits of a service-learning community-academic partnership, *Journal of Nursing Education*, **59** (2), 93–96. <https://doi.org/10.3928/01484834-20200122-07>.

- Van Dam, F., Heins, S., Elbersen, B. S. (2002) Lay discourses of the rural and stated and revealed preferences for rural living. Some evidence of the existence of a rural idyll in the Netherlands, *Journal of Rural Studies*, **18** (4), 461–476. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0743-0167\(02\)00035-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0743-0167(02)00035-9).
- Vernon, A. and Ward, K. (1999) Campus and community partnerships: assessing impacts and strengthening connections, *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, **6**, 30–37 Retrieved from: <https://engagement.uiowa.edu/sites/engagement.uiowa.edu/files/2020-11/Vernon%2C%20Ward%20-%201999%20-%20Campus%20and%20Community%20Partnerships%20Assessing%20Impacts%20and%20Strengthening%20Connections.pdf>.
- Zolin, M. B., Ferretti, P., Némedi, K. (2017) Multi-criteria decision approach and sustainable territorial subsystems: an Italian rural and mountain area case study, *Land Use Policy*, **69**, 598–607. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2017.09.052>.