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# Beyond Top-Down and Bottom-Up

*A Comparative Analysis of Community Engagement in Rural Revitalization in Italy: The Cases of Peccioli and Gibellina Nuova*

## ABSTRACT

This essay critiques the binary framing of rural revitalization as either top-down or bottom-up by comparing two Italian case studies: Gibellina Nuova and Peccioli. Gibellina, rebuilt after an earthquake, began with local support but evolved into a top-down cultural project disconnected from residents' needs. Peccioli, often praised as a bottom-up success, used landfill revenues to fund public works and art, but maintained centralized leadership and limited dissent.

Through qualitative analysis of governance structures, public narratives, and community responses, the study reveals both cases as hybrid models shaped by ongoing negotiations between authorities and communities. Participation, it argues, is not guaranteed by origin but by the depth, openness, and continuity of engagement over time.

The thesis proposes a new framework for rural revitalization focused on flexible governance, genuine participation, power transparency, and the integration of local and expert knowledge. Success, it concludes, depends less on governance models and more on sustained, inclusive dialogue and adaptability to community needs.

## KEYWORDS

AR2A011, Rural Revitalisation, Rural community, Governance models

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## INTRODUCTION

Rural revitalization has long been a central theme within academic and policy debates, emerging as a response to persistent challenges facing rural territories globally. Scholars such as Woods (2011) and Shucksmith (2018) identify critical pressures, including demographic decline, economic marginalization, ageing populations, and the erosion of public services, all of which contribute to weakening community cohesion and increased social fragmentation. These structural dynamics often exacerbate inequalities and reduce the adaptive capacity of rural populations (Whitley et al. 1999). In parallel, varying governance strategies have been developed to address these issues, most notably categorized into top-down and bottom-up models. Top-down strategies are typically associated with centralized interventions conceived at the national or regional level, while bottom-up models prioritize local agency and grassroots participation (Friedmann 1987; Ray 1998). Both limitations have led many scholars to argue for hybrid models that integrate external support with local engagement, such as the neo-endogenous approach (Bosworth and Atterton 2012; Navarro-Valverde et al. 2022).

Scholars such as Willett (2023) emphasize that rural communities are far from homogeneous; they encompass diverse social groups with varying, often competing, interests and perceptions that evolve over time. This complexity is further influenced by the varying levels of civic traditions and social capital embedded within communities, shaping their capacity for collective engagement and long-term participation (Putnam 1993). Despite extensive academic focus on institutional frameworks and economic outcomes, a significant gap exists in understanding how these interventions are experienced at the community level. This study aims to address that gap by examining how local communities in Italy interact with and react to revitalization efforts, specifically through a comparative analysis of two contrasting cases: Peccioli and Gibellina Nuova.

Peccioli and Gibellina Nuova offer compelling contrasts that challenge conventional classifications of rural revitalization into rigid top-down or bottom-up categories. In Peccioli, what is often cited as a bottom-up success story initially emerged from a municipal-level initiative—creating a waste treatment centre—that residents first perceived as an imposition. Over time, however, sustained community dialogue, transparent governance, and the reinvestment of revenues into local services transformed public perception, turning resistance into engagement. This trajectory underscores the central role of continuous community interaction in legitimizing and reshaping development strategies. Conversely, Gibellina Nuova, conceived in the aftermath of the Belice earthquake as a utopian project blending art and architecture, began with initial community support but eventually alienated residents. Despite the participatory veneer—led by an elected mayor—the project imposed spatial and social structures disconnected from local realities, neglecting the long-term integration of displaced inhabitants. The fragmentation illustrates how early approval does not guarantee enduring resonance if community needs and lived experiences are sidelined.

Despite the extensive scholarship addressing rural revitalization, several critical gaps persist. Much of the literature predominantly focuses on institutional design and economic impacts, often privileging structural typologies over the lived experiences of the communities involved (Ray 1998; Bosworth and Atterton 2012; Navarro-Valverde et al. 2022). Studies tend to categorize governance interventions as either top-down or bottom-up, yet offer limited insight into how local populations perceive, negotiate, and reinterpret these governance modes over time (Willett, 2023). Furthermore, while neo-endogenous models advocate for integrating external support with local agency, scholars frequently overlook how power asymmetries and elite capture may persist within these frameworks, reducing community participation to a procedural formality (Navarro-Valverde et al. 2022; van der Merwe 2025). Little research also systematically incorporates emotional, perceptual, and identity-based dimensions of rural communities' engagement with revitalization processes.

These gaps raise fundamental questions about the sustainability and inclusivity of rural development strategies. Governance models alone cannot explain the divergent outcomes of revitalization efforts. Rather, it is essential to understand how communities perceive, negotiate, and shape these interventions over time. This study seeks to

shift the focus from rigid structural categorizations to the lived realities of community interaction and engagement, asking:

**How can rural revitalization efforts be designed to be genuinely embraced by the communities they aim to serve? What factors, beyond economic indicators, contribute to the long-term success or failure of rural revitalization projects? Can we move beyond the top-down/bottom-up dichotomy to define a more integrated rural development model?**

This research aims to fill the identified gaps by proposing a reconceptualization of rural revitalization that emphasizes the authenticity, depth, and continuity of community engagement as the critical measure of success. Applying this lens to two contrasting case studies—Peccioli and Gibellina Nuova—offers both a refined analytical framework and practical guidance for fostering community-centred revitalization strategies.

The methodology adopted is a comparative qualitative analysis, exploring functional and emotional dimensions of community responses to rural revitalization initiatives. Municipal archives and government documents will serve as primary sources, offering insights into decision-making processes, planning strategies, and concrete socio-economic outcomes in Peccioli and Gibellina Nuova. To complement this official narrative, informal and subjective resident perspectives will be examined through local newspapers, blogs, digital forums, and social media platforms. These sources are essential for capturing grassroots sentiment, including acceptance, resistance, fears, aspirations, and evolving attitudes. Furthermore, digital archival materials, personal recollections, and historical photographs will better understand how communities engage with memory, identity, and place. Integrating these emotional and perceptual dimensions ensures that the analysis fully acknowledges community sentiment at each stage of revitalization efforts, revealing how such initiatives are embedded within the lived experiences of the population.

Through this multi-layered methodology, the experiences of Peccioli and Gibellina Nuova will be comparatively assessed, moving beyond simplified binaries. Ultimately, this research seeks to identify critical principles and conditions for sustainable rural revitalization, advocating for hybrid, context-sensitive strategies rooted in genuine community participation.

# CHAPTER 1: MODELS OF RURAL REVITALIZATION

## 1.1 RURAL REVITALIZATION MODELS

Rural revitalization has emerged as a critical field of inquiry in response to the global socio-economic and demographic challenges confronting rural areas. Scholars such as Woods (2011) and Shucksmith (2018) identify key pressures, including population decline, economic marginalization, ageing demographics, cultural erosion, and the withdrawal of public services, all contributing to heightened social fragmentation and weakened community cohesion. As Whitley et al. (1999) emphasize, these processes often exacerbate vulnerabilities within rural communities, resulting in increased social isolation and structural inequalities.

However, scholars also recognize that rural territories possess unique cultural and social resources that can be mobilized in regeneration efforts. Ray (1998) notably conceptualizes rural areas as repositories of intangible assets—including local traditions, social practices, and symbolic landscapes—which, if strategically leveraged, play a crucial role in fostering community identity and stimulating economic renewal. This cultural perspective has become central to contemporary debates on rural development, particularly in the European context.

In response to these complex dynamics, academic discourse has identified several governance models for rural revitalization. These include centralized, expert-driven strategies, community-led bottom-up initiatives and, more recently, hybrid approaches that seek to reconcile the strengths and limitations of both frameworks. The following sections will analyze these key models—top-down, bottom-up, and neo-endogenous—examining their theoretical underpinnings, applications, and critiques within global and Italian contexts.

## 1.2 TOP-DOWN APPROACHES

The **top-down model** is conceptually rooted in the rationalist tradition of governance and planning, where societal improvement is pursued through centralized authority and expert-driven interventions. Scholars such as Friedmann (1987) describe this model as aligned with **technocratic planning frameworks**, emphasizing hierarchical decision-making and applying standardized solutions formulated by external actors. This logic is historically traceable to Enlightenment-era ideals, where order, efficiency, and progress were seen as achievable through the rational design of social systems. This perspective has shaped European development strategies. Within urban planning, Hall (1992) and Fishman (1977) identify how this rationalist approach materialized in large-scale schemes such as **Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin for Paris**, which proposed the radical restructuring of historic urban centres in favour of uniform, functionalist high-rise blocks. Similarly, rural areas were subject to externally conceived interventions, as exemplified by the **Garden City movement**, which sought to impose idealized community models designed by planners, often without substantial local input (Hall, 1992). In Italy, the centralizing tendencies of the newly unified state further entrenched this top-down approach, with increasing administrative control at the national level frequently marginalizing regional autonomy (Zan and Baraldi, 2007).

This centralized logic was most overtly realized during Italy's Fascist period. Scholars such as Atkinson (2000) illustrate how urban planning and rural settlement policies under Mussolini's regime were wielded as tools of authoritarian control, reflecting the regime's hierarchical ideology. Projects like the **reclamation of the Pontine Marshes** and the construction of new towns such as **Sabaudia** and **Pontinia** exemplify top-down interventionism, where national authorities imposed rationalist architectural aesthetics and socio-political ideals without meaningful community engagement. These projects prioritized state consolidation and ideological projection over local adaptability, reinforcing a governance model predicated on suppressing local agency.

In the contemporary Italian, **Civita di Bagnoregio** exemplifies how top-down strategies continue to shape rural development. Faced with demographic decline, Civita has been transformed through centralized, tourism-driven policies. As seen in Figure 1, the most prominent infrastructural intervention has been the footbridge connecting

the town directly to the valley below the rock it sits upon. This ramped up visitor numbers—from 40,000 to over a million annually by 2019—and led to the introduction of an entry fee system.

These measures have increased visitor numbers exponentially but have delivered few direct benefits to the town's shrinking population. Essential services remain limited, and the small number of residents face daily disruptions caused by mass tourism, with the town itself reduced to a consumable attraction. For locals,

tourism has become a tolerated necessity rather than a tool for genuine revitalization, revealing how top-down approaches often prioritise economic imperatives while sidelining social cohesion and long-term community well-being (Il Post, 2024).



Figure 1: Civita di Bagnoregio's bridge. [Source: Massimo Chiaravalli].

Despite persistent critiques, large-scale, externally conceived development visions continue to shape rural and urban landscapes globally. Koolhaas's *Countryside, The Future*, exemplifies this enduring tendency to treat rural areas as experimental canvases for grand design interventions, echoing rationalist planning traditions (Koolhaas, 2020; Greenspan, 2016). While addressing contemporary global challenges, these projects often perpetuate the same limitations observed historically: they risk oversimplifying local complexities, marginalising community voices, and imposing external solutions. Scott's (1998) concept of **authoritarian high modernism** is relevant here, showing how state-driven efforts to rationalise and control can inadvertently undermine local knowledge systems and adaptive capacity. Friedmann (1987) further critiques such technocratic models, arguing that their emphasis on bureaucratic control privileges external expertise over participatory, context-sensitive governance. In Italy, Zan and Baraldi (2007) demonstrate that even post-war decentralisation efforts have struggled to overcome these entrenched top-down tendencies, leaving municipalities fiscally and administratively tethered to centralised state structures.

While often criticised for imposing externally conceived visions, these approaches have also catalysed large-scale economic, cultural, and infrastructural innovation. The role of political elites, planners, and experts in shaping expansive and ambitious projects cannot be dismissed outright; indeed, such interventions can provide the necessary momentum to reimagine and reconfigure marginalised regions. However, their long-term effectiveness depends on balancing visionary ambition with contextual sensitivity. When top-down strategies fail to engage local populations meaningfully or accommodate evolving community needs, they risk becoming symbols of disconnection rather than revitalisation.

### 1.3 BOTTOM-UP APPROACHES

Bottom-up approaches place local actors and institutions at the forefront of revitalisation efforts. Scholars such as Ray (1998) and Li (2023) broadly characterise this model as emphasising community agency, where local populations act as primary agents of change—identifying their priorities, mobilising internal resources, and actively shaping policies and projects. Within academic literature, there is wide agreement that such approaches foster social capital, strengthen governance capacity, and cultivate resilience by rooting development initiatives



Figure 2: Coopeative Viso A Viso members in front of the multifunctional complex in the town [Source: Cooperativa Viso A Viso]

in the territory's specific cultural, economic, and social contexts (Li, 2023; Ray, 1998). Community-driven processes are frequently praised for reinforcing collective identity, preserving intangible cultural heritage, and fostering a sense of ownership, resulting in more adaptable, sustainable outcomes (Li et al., 2016; Bosworth and Atterton, 2012).

The growing focus on bottom-up models emerged as a response to the perceived shortcomings of top-down strategies. Scholars argue that centrally driven interventions often overlook embedded knowledge and the socio-cultural dynamics of rural communities, leading to projects misaligned with local priorities (Ray,

1998; Navarro-Valverde et al., 2022). In contrast, bottom-up frameworks are framed as more adaptive and context-sensitive, capable of fostering grassroots innovation and enhancing community resilience. (Li et al., 2016; Navarro-Valverde et al., 2022).

A notable example of bottom-up revitalisation in the Italian context is the regeneration of Ostana, a small Alpine village often cited as a model for community-led architectural and social renewal. Ostana's revival has been driven by strong local initiatives focusing on cultural heritage, sustainable architecture, and repopulation strategies (De Rossi, 2021). The small community inhabiting the town permanently can be seen in Figure 2: they are young adult families, mainly originally from Turin, which decided to move to the small town in the Alps and began a process of revitalisation: from the construction of a multifunctional complex providing services to the community such as a cultural centre, a library and an informal café, as well as other projects such as a general practitioner office, a bakery to even a guesthouse to accommodate seasonal visitors. They can effectively address the community's needs as all the people living in the village participate in the cooperative, raising funds from regional subsidies. However, while celebrated, the project also reveals the inherent limitations of bottom-up models. Despite increased tourism and cultural activity, Ostana remains demographically fragile, with a relatively low year-round population and heavily reliant on seasonal visitors. The village's economic model leans significantly on tourism, raising concerns about long-term viability amid potential shifts in external demand. Additionally, infrastructural challenges, such as limited digital connectivity and housing affordability, have emerged, potentially hindering the village's attractiveness to new, permanent residents (De Rossi, 2021). These factors underscore the dependency of such initiatives not only on local agencies but also on sustained external support and structural conditions that may limit their replicability elsewhere.

Nevertheless, scholars caution against an overly idealised view of bottom-up governance. Willett (2023) and others have critiqued how, even at the municipal level, governance can replicate top-down logic when dominated by local elites or characterised by opaque decision-making structures. Community-led initiatives may inadvertently entrench internal hierarchies, privileging certain social groups while marginalising others (Bosworth and Atterton, 2012). Further limitations stem from the structural constraints that often hinder bottom-up initiatives. In particular, the lack of financial and technical resources in remote or economically disadvantaged areas can fragment efforts, limiting their capacity to address broader systemic challenges (Lang et al., 2024). Additionally, van der Merwe (2025) critiques how local engagement—even when framed as participatory—may be co-opted or instrumentalised by external actors, especially when the language of community empowerment legitimises broader market-driven or institutional agendas. Participation alone, therefore, does not necessarily guarantee equitable outcomes if underlying dynamics of control and exclusion persist.

While bottom-up approaches can strengthen community agency and resilience, their transformative impact depends on the inclusivity and authenticity of engagement. Evaluating their effectiveness requires acknowledging how power operates within and beyond local contexts.

## 1.4 NEO-ENDOGENOUS APPROACHES AND THEIR CRITIQUES

Recognizing the limitations inherent in top-down and bottom-up models, scholars have increasingly advocated for a hybrid framework known as the **neo-endogenous approach**. Ray (1998) originally articulated that neo-endogenous development emphasizes fostering local agency while strategically integrating external networks, financial resources, and institutional support. Rather than privileging either centralized authority or purely grassroots mobilization, this model calls for collaborative, multi-scalar partnerships between local communities, regional authorities, private actors, and international institutions (Bosworth and Atterton, 2012; Navarro-Valverde et al., 2022).

In Italy, the LEADER program exemplifies neo-endogenous principles by supporting Local Action Groups (LAGs) to design locally tailored rural strategies. However, its implementation faces challenges. Navarro-Valverde et al. (2022) note that benefits often concentrate in areas with strong existing social capital, sidelining disadvantaged regions. Additionally, elite capture and bureaucratic rigidity limit genuine community participation and reinforce dependence on external structures. Administrative complexity and bureaucratic rigidity further hinder grassroots actors' ability to autonomously initiate projects, reinforcing local dependency on external structures (Navarro-Valverde et al., 2022).

Scholars caution that including multiple stakeholders does not automatically translate into equitable outcomes. Ray (1998) and Willett (2023) point to the risk of commodifying local identity and culture to appeal to external markets, particularly in areas leveraging tourism and heritage branding. Additionally, van der Merwe (2025) stresses that increasing stakeholder complexity may entrench existing inequalities, privileging dominant actors while marginalizing less powerful community members.

Neo-endogenous strategies present a pragmatic alternative to rigid governance binaries. Their transformative capacity depends on the **depth and authenticity of community engagement**, transparency in stakeholder relationships, and an ongoing commitment to addressing imbalances of power across all levels of intervention.

## 1.5 RETHINKING GOVERNANCE: BEYOND SIMPLISTIC DISTINCTIONS

The typologies outlined above are frequently framed in academic discourse as distinct, contrasting models. However, scholars such as Willett (2023) and Navarro-Valverde et al. (2022) argue that this rigid categorization inadequately reflects governance processes' complex, multi-scalar realities. Particularly within the Italian context, these models often intermingle in ways that blur their theoretical boundaries. Despite decades of decentralization efforts, many Italian municipalities remain fiscally dependent on centralized resources (Zan and Baraldi, 2007), while local governance itself is frequently shaped by elite interests or opaque administrative structures (Willett, 2023). Programs like LEADER, ostensibly embodying neo-endogenous principles, have shown how multi-stakeholder frameworks can perpetuate existing inequalities, limiting genuine grassroots participation (Navarro-Valverde et al., 2022).

Moreover, scholars such as Depani (2022) emphasize that institutional bodies and community actors are not inherently opposed but may benefit from coordinated, co-productive interactions. Yet, as van der Merwe (2025) cautions, such hybrid governance models often risk obscuring persistent asymmetries of power, where community involvement becomes procedural rather than transformative.

In conclusion, rather than framing top-down, bottom-up, or neo-endogenous approaches in strictly oppositional or idealized terms, adopting a nuanced understanding of their strengths and limitations is more productive. Rejecting top-down models solely based on their centralized nature overlooks political and intellectual elites' role in envisioning structural improvements and mobilizing resources in neglected areas.

Similarly, romanticizing bottom-up models can obscure internal power dynamics and capacity constraints that hinder transformative outcomes. While neo-endogenous approaches offer a promising middle ground, they, too, risk becoming formalized frameworks that mask persistent inequalities.

What is needed instead is a flexible, context-sensitive governance paradigm—one that values the creative ambitions of planners and leaders while embedding those ambitions within inclusive, adaptive, and rooted in local identity processes. Rural revitalization should not adhere to fixed models but rather aim to synthesize their most effective elements into systems capable of both innovation and deep community resonance.

## **CHAPTER 2: GIBELLINA NUOVA AND PECCIOLI**

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION TO CASE STUDIES**

As outlined in the previous chapter, understanding rural revitalisation demands moving beyond simplistic typologies and embracing governance as a dynamic process shaped by vision, negotiation, and lived experience. This chapter grounds these reflections in two emblematic case studies from the Italian context: Gibellina Nuova and Peccioli. Although often categorised as top-down and bottom-up models, both towns reveal far more complex trajectories that challenge such binary distinctions.

Peccioli, a small town in Tuscany, is often lauded as a successful instance of bottom-up development. Its revitalisation trajectory is marked by strong local leadership, participatory governance, and reinvestment of revenues generated from locally managed initiatives. The town's ability to engage residents in decision-making processes and prioritise community interests has been highlighted as a model for sustainable rural development rooted in local agency and empowerment. (Farinosi et al., 2019).

Gibellina Nuova, located in Sicily, is widely recognised as an emblematic case of top-down development. Following the devastating 1968 Belice earthquake, the town was reconstructed on a new site under the vision of external architects, artists, and planners. Its reliance on external expertise, subsidies from the central government, and lack of sustained community involvement led to feelings of estrangement among residents and fragmented social cohesion over time (Petino et al., 2023; Williams, 2018).

While these case studies are often framed as archetypes of top-down and bottom-up approaches, this reflection contends that such categorisations are overly simplistic. Upon closer examination, Peccioli and Gibellina Nuova reveal hybrid characteristics, blending elements of local initiative and external influence. This study will analyse these cases first through traditional theoretical lenses, acknowledging their conventional classifications. Subsequently, it will challenge these definitions by exploring how the interplay between stakeholders, governance structures, and temporal dynamics has shaped their revitalisation trajectories.

### **2.2 GIBELLINA NUOVA**

Gibellina Nuova has long been considered a textbook example of top-down rural revitalization. Both academic literature and architectural discourse emphasize how its reconstruction after the 1968 Belice Valley earthquake was driven by external architects, centralized governance, and a technocratic vision, largely disconnected from the local community's socio-cultural realities (Booth, 2001; Petino et al., 2023; Oddo, 2011). However, this classification—while broadly accurate—obscures key moments where local involvement, political agency, and genuine community endorsement played significant roles. This study argues that Gibellina Nuova's revitalization trajectory oscillated, beginning with strong community participation and charismatic leadership, before progressively shifting toward the alienating, top-down model recognized today.

#### **2.2.1 UTOPIA**

The reconstruction of Gibellina Nuova in the aftermath of the 1968 Belice Valley earthquake is commonly framed in scholarly literature as a paradigmatic example of top-down governance. However, such categorizations overlook the complexity and ambition underpinning its inception. At the heart of this process was Mayor Ludovico Corrao, whose leadership embodied a radical and utopian reimagining of Gibellina's future. Corrao envisioned not merely the restoration of the town but its transformation into a model of cultural, civic, and Rejecting the rationalist development plans initially proposed by the ISES (Istituto per lo Sviluppo dell'Edilizia Sociale), which conceived Gibellina as part of a functional industrial hub, Mayor Ludovico Corrao articulated a distinct alternative. Drawing inspiration from utopian thinkers such as Ebenezer Howard, Corrao imagined Gibellina Nuova as a town open to the surrounding countryside, where art, architecture, and civic life were seamlessly integrated (Williams, 2018). His plan emphasized not only physical reconstruction but also the symbolic regeneration of identity,

proposing a town built as a cultural laboratory where leading architects, artists, and intellectuals would contribute to a new civic model (Williams, 2018).

Corrao's project also emerged as a direct response to the broader socio-economic crisis following the earthquake. In the immediate aftermath, the Italian government provided displaced residents with emergency passports and one-way tickets, encouraging mass emigration from the Belice Valley. Nearly 30,000 refugees left, relocating to Northern Italy, Europe, or beyond. Faced with the prospect of complete depopulation, Corrao envisioned Gibellina Nuova not simply as a reconstruction but as a radical experiment in cultural regeneration—an attempt to stem the exodus by transforming the town into an artistic hub (Il Post, 2021). Initially, this strategy appeared promising, as the influx of renowned artists and monumental projects brought renewed attention to the devastated region.

This vision resonated strongly with the local population in its early phases. Corrao's charisma and political acumen allowed him to channel the frustrations of Gibellina's residents into collective mobilization. (Ferrara 2014). It is reported that delegations of citizens were brought to Rome, formally dressed to highlight dignity and visibility, as Corrao and community leaders lobbied national institutions for resources and political recognition (Ferrara 2014). Demonstrations, public appeals, and symbolic acts of protest—including tax strikes—illustrated the alignment between municipal leadership and popular sentiment during this phase (Petino et al., 2023; Williams, 2018).

While Corrao's narrative of rebirth, grounded in cultural innovation, initially inspired many residents, over time, the limitations of this vision became increasingly apparent. Though captivated by Corrao's charisma and the attention he garnered from renowned architects and artists, many inhabitants began to question the concrete benefits of such ambitious plans (Ferrara 2014). As delays persisted and immediate needs remained unmet, the distance between the grand cultural vision and the socio-economic realities of the local population grew sharper.

This sentiment is poignantly reflected in a comment circulating among residents at the time:

*“Once the buildings, houses, schools, churches, and civic centres are completed, in order not to starve, we will have to move to Switzerland. Here, only the desert will remain, filled with many cathedrals, all empty.”* (Ferrara, 2002).

As delays persisted and the promised civic nucleus remained incomplete, optimism gave way to disillusionment. The monumental urban model, once a source of pride, increasingly appeared detached from the socio-economic conditions facing the community. Corrao's utopia, though initially embraced, thus laid the groundwork for growing estrangement.

### **2.2.2 FAILURE**

The eventual failure of Gibellina Nuova's reconstruction stemmed not from a single decision but from a series of misalignments between governance structures, architectural ambitions, and the lived realities of its community. The utopian ideals that initially galvanized public support gradually gave way to social fragmentation, administrative opacity, and mounting disillusionment.

Petino et al. (2023) highlight the fragmentation of governance that plagued the rebuilding efforts. More than twenty overlapping legislative measures and jurisdictional disputes delayed reconstruction and obscured accountability. Though the town's mayor, Ludovico Corrao, initially succeeded in rallying residents behind his ambitious cultural vision, the bureaucratic hurdles and slow material progress steadily eroded public confidence.

Architecturally, Gibellina Nuova became emblematic of what Oddo (2011) terms **straniamento conflittuale**—a conflictual estrangement where monumental, avant-garde interventions displaced rather than integrated community life. Buildings designed by internationally renowned architects and artists transformed the town into a symbolic urban museum, yet these spaces often lacked relevance to residents' daily needs, as it's the case of figure 3: a group of elderly men gathers under the only available shade at a street corner, highlighting the absence of adequate public seating or familiar semi-private spaces. The image reflects how the new urban fabric failed to accommodate everyday social practices, reinforcing a sense of detachment between people and place. (Benini 2013). One of the town's squares in figure 4 exemplifies this disconnect: the lack of activities, green areas or shadows, seating areas estranges the primary users the square should be serving.



*Figure 3: 10 old men in front of the town's bar, sitting on a plastic chair underneath the shadow of a tree, in one of the monumental square of Gibellina Nuova [Source: Alessandro Cocorullo]*



*Figure 4: One of the five originally planned monumental squares [Source: Christian Bono]*

The town was not only rebuilt following Northern European planning models but was also filled with contemporary artworks that many residents felt disconnected from (Booth, 2001). As reported by local farmers, they often could not explain to tourists what the artworks represented, reflecting how little they were involved in the cultural vision imposed on the space (Ferrara 2014). Even the urban relationship with religious life was disrupted: in the old Gibellina, there were seven churches within walking distance of the town's neighbourhoods, while in the new one, only two were built—one of which, the monumental Chiesa Madre, was placed far from the central square and residential areas. This shift broke with the tradition of walking to mass, replacing Sunday rituals with car traffic and disorientation, and symbolically distancing sacred space from everyday life (Ferrara 2014)

Booth's (2001) ethnographic analysis vividly captures the sociological impacts of this disconnect. Booth reveals how the physical design of Gibellina Nuova, with its dispersed housing and absence of communal courtyards, fragmented long-standing social networks, especially among working-class women. Many, like Giuseppina, resorted to modifying their homes—converting garages into makeshift kitchens to recreate lost semi-public spaces. Others, like Carmela, withdrew entirely from public life, adhering to strict gender norms in an increasingly isolating suburban environment.

Further testimonies reinforce this sense of estrangement. Fondazione Manifesto (2024) records residents describing themselves as "migrants in their town," highlighting the psychological dislocation accompanying physical relocation. Visitors arriving decades later echoed similar sentiments: abandoned theatres, broken infrastructure, and a persistent absence of civic life became the most visible legacies of Gibellina Nuova's failed experiment (Anonymous, 2002).

Yet the legacy of the project remains deeply ambivalent. While national institutions continue to elevate Gibellina's artistic image—such as the *Ministero della Cultura* (2023) proclaiming it the "Modern Art Capital of 2026"—local reactions are mixed. On platforms like "Gibellina Notizie dai Cittadini," some residents express genuine pride and renewed hope, seeing the recognition as a chance to reclaim visibility and cultural relevance after decades of marginalization. At the same time, irony and fatigue are also present. One user, commenting on the prolonged

inactivity of the town's only ATM, sarcastically welcomed the arrival of a new "contemporary artistic ATM," while others chimed in, calling it "green," "innovative," and "contemporary" (Saluto, 2024).

Ultimately, Gibellina Nuova's failure was not rooted solely in top-down governance or architectural experimentation. It was the gradual erosion of continuous community participation—combined with fragmented administration and an imposed urban model disconnected from residents' socio-economic realities—that rendered the town's revitalization unsustainable. The voices of residents and critical observers reveal how the project's ambitions were undermined by the very absence of the community at its core.

Figures 5 through 7 visually trace this transformation: from the lived density and informal rhythms of Gibellina vecchia (Figure 5), to the abstract monumentality of the Cretto di Burri (Figure 6), a monumental land art artwork constructed on top of the ruins of Gibellina Vecchia: the rest of the towns were "buried", as the alienating streets of Gibellina Nuova (Figure 7) were built 17 km apart from the old site. These photos of Gibellina showcase the contrast, only 50 years apart, explicitly showing how urban form can either anchor or sever a community's identity (Ferrara 2014).



Figure 5: Gibellina vecchia  
[Source: Antonella Ferrara]



Figure 6: Cretto di Burri  
[Source: Antonella Ferrara]



Figure 7: Gibellina nuova  
[Source: Antonella Ferrara]

### 2.2.3 LEGACY

Despite the ambitious efforts, Gibellina continued to lose its population. By 2019, ISTAT recorded fewer than 4,000 inhabitants, with many young residents migrating northward for employment opportunities (Il Post, 2021; ISTAT, 2021). Local businesses dwindled, and long-term prospects for community revitalization faded. As noted by Nino, one of the few remaining business owners, emigration persists: "In 2020, many people left, called to work in schools or elsewhere, mainly in Northern Italy" (Il Post, 2021). While visually striking, the town's artistic landmarks proved insufficient to counter the socio-economic forces driving depopulation.

The legacy of Gibellina Nuova stands as both a cautionary tale and an unresolved experiment in rural revitalization. Its incomplete state—monumental, fragmented, and partially deserted—has often been described as a "new ruin," a material symbol of unfinished utopian ambition (Williams, 2018). Critics have labelled it the "**cemetery of the avant-garde**", underscoring how the radical urban vision ultimately faltered under the weight of its aesthetic and ideological aspirations (Williams, 2018).

Yet Gibellina Nuova's failures do not solely stem from its top-down inception or avant-garde architectural choices. Rather, they reveal the deeper issue of sustaining community involvement throughout all stages of revitalization. The initial enthusiasm that characterized the early reconstruction phases gradually eroded, replaced by frustration, detachment, and migration. The town's monumental structures, devoid of the organic social ties and everyday practices that once characterized the old Gibellina, became symbols of disconnection rather than renewal.

Gibellina Nuova's story also continues to provoke reflection on the role of culture, memory, and community in shaping sustainable rural futures. Recent initiatives, such as those by the Fondazione Manifesto, emphasize the need to **reclaim ownership** of the town's spaces by re-engaging local communities. Their efforts frame Gibellina not solely as a failed experiment but as a living, evolving site where questions of belonging, identity, and revitalization remain active ("Perché Gibellina," 2024).

## 2.3 PECCIOLI

Peccioli, a small municipality in Tuscany's Valdera area, is frequently highlighted in academic and media discussions as an emblematic case of rural revitalization driven by local initiative (Farinosi et al., 2019). Facing economic decline and demographic shrinkage during the late 20th century, Peccioli's leadership, under Mayor Renzo Macelloni, adopted an unconventional strategy in the 1980s: transforming the local landfill from an environmental liability into the town's primary economic engine (Corriere della Sera, 2024).

This strategic pivot laid the foundation for the **Sistema Peccioli**, a governance model integrating the municipality, the municipal company **Belvedere S.p.A.**, and the cultural foundation **PeccioliPer** (FarWest, 2024). Revenues from the landfill operations have not only supported infrastructural and cultural investments but have also shaped Peccioli's socio-political landscape, blurring the lines between public administration, private enterprise, and community participation (Corriere della Sera, 2024; Farinosi et al., 2019).

The landfill itself has become more than just a site of waste management; it has evolved into a catalyst for spatial, cultural, and economic transformation. Over time, the area was reimagined not only as a technical and financial asset but also as a symbolic and aesthetic landscape. Large-scale contemporary artworks have been installed within the landfill perimeter, turning it into an open-air exhibition space that is now accessible to the public. These interventions contribute to the broader narrative of Peccioli's rebranding—where infrastructural pragmatism and cultural ambition intersect. **Figure 8 shows one of the so-called “Giants of Peccioli,”** a monumental sculpture that forms part of the landfill's land art program, exemplifying the municipality's strategy of embedding symbolic value into everyday infrastructure (Mancini 2021).



Figure 8: One of the 'Peccioli's Giants', a land art piece decorating the town's landscape and landfill. [Source: Eleonora Mancini]

### 2.3.1 THE SISTEMA PECCIOLI: GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES AND INITIAL OPPOSITION

At the heart of Peccioli's revitalization strategy lies **Belvedere S.p.A.**, a public company co-owned by the municipality (25%), a foundation (36%), and individual citizens (39%) (Corriere della Sera, 2024). Its financial model involves selling shares and convertible bonds to residents and investors, guaranteeing high annual returns—reportedly around 14% after taxes—which has incentivized widespread local buy-in (Corriere della Sera, 2024).

However, Peccioli's landfill-based strategy was not initially embraced without resistance. During the project's early phase in the 1980s, Mayor Macelloni faced public opposition, particularly in **Legoli**, a small town within the municipality. He recounted holding an assembly in Legoli, where 80 of its 350 residents attended and debated for over three hours. Macelloni's approach was emblematic of his leadership style: "You don't trust me, but I have a plan and I'm moving forward," he stated, ending the evening with a communal meal (Corriere della Sera, 2024). This moment is crucial in understanding the early governance dynamics—where top-down decision-making coexisted with efforts to engage residents.

Such political continuity and strong leadership persisted over time. Electoral records show that Macelloni has served as mayor for seven consecutive terms, shaping the municipality's long-term developmental trajectory (Ministero dell'Interno, 2025).

### 2.3.2 DIALOGUE, REINVESTMENT, AND PERCEPTION SHIFTS

While early decisions demonstrated a predominantly top-down approach, Peccioli's leadership gradually incorporated participatory mechanisms to legitimize ongoing development projects. Public forums, participatory workshops, and transparent communication channels became routine, particularly in conjunction with significant infrastructure investments (Farinosi et al., 2019). In Figure 9, it is evident how these investments have reshaped the physical and symbolic landscape of the town. Projects such as Palazzo Senza Tempo, a restored historic structure now functioning as a cultural and civic hub, and Endless Sunset, a striking



Figure 9: Aerial view of the city center of Peccioli [Source: Comune di Peccioli]

pedestrian bridge that connects the old center with peripheral areas, exemplify Peccioli's strategy of integrating architectural quality with accessibility and public life. These interventions not only enhance connectivity and visibility but also serve as tangible symbols of the municipality's long-term commitment to revitalization.

One of the most prominent vehicles for disseminating this narrative is **Peccioli Notizie**, a municipally curated magazine that showcases ongoing projects, cultural events, and investments in public infrastructure. Across its issues, the publication paints a cohesive image of Peccioli as a forward-looking, inclusive community, often emphasizing the successful interplay between governance, private enterprise, and citizen engagement (Comune di Peccioli, 2021–2023). Through this carefully crafted narrative, the municipality reinforces a sense of civic pride and progress while projecting an image of seamless consensus. Peccioli's inclusion in the 2020 Venice Biennale of Architecture further solidified its image as a model of rural revitalization (QuiNewsValdera, 2020).

This celebratory approach was also evident in the **participatory process launched in 2020** in collaboration with the University of Udine. Mayor Macelloni introduced an ambitious suite of urban renewal projects—ranging from multi-level parking structures to new educational complexes—explicitly stating that citizens would be actively involved in shaping these initiatives (QuiNewsValdera, 2020). Yet, the participatory process was not without criticism. Opposition leaders publicly questioned the purpose of such studies, arguing that if the administration already describes Peccioli's community as highly cultured, technologically advanced, and participative—as reflected in both public discourse and official publications—then the research appears redundant. As one opposition figure commented, *"If the community is already depicted as possessing such remarkable social and cultural qualities, what more can this research truly reveal?"* (QuiNewsValdera, 2023).

### 2.3.3 PARTICIPATION OR PROPAGANDA?

The words of the opposition leader suggest that these participatory efforts may function more as legitimizing mechanisms than as genuine co-governance structures (Willett, 2023; FarWest, 2024). The same leadership circle continues to oversee both the municipality and **Belvedere**, consolidating decision-making power while embedding the community's economic fortunes within a single governance framework (Corriere della Sera, 2024).



Figure 10: Members of the “Valdera Avvelenata” citizens’ committee protesting near the Legoli landfill site. [Source: Valdera Avvelenata]

These observations invite a critical reflection: **Is Peccioli’s participatory governance a model of democratic innovation, or a carefully curated narrative masking centralized control?** While participation certainly occurs, its nature appears shaped less by shared deliberation than by strategic consensus-building around pre-established agendas. Cultural embellishments—such as public art installations near the landfill—may operate symbolically, smoothing over complex tensions and obscuring dissent rather than resolving it.

Figure 10 shows a group of residents from the citizens’ committee “Valdera Avvelenata” protesting in Legoli, illustrating the ongoing local opposition to the perceived

imbalance between environmental sacrifice and municipal development gains.

In this light, the participatory infrastructure in Peccioli may be better understood as a form of managed inclusion: an interface that enables selective engagement while preserving the continuity of leadership and the economic logic of the landfill. Participation, in this context, functions not as a site of contestation and transformation, but as a stabilizing tool that risks slipping into performative governance.

## 2.4 COMPARING THE TWO CASES

At first glance, Peccioli and Gibellina Nuova present contrasting trajectories in rural revitalization. However, both cases share a striking commonality: their initial success was rooted in strong leadership and the strategic use of art and culture to galvanize community engagement. In Gibellina, Corrao’s utopian vision attracted global artists and intellectuals, temporarily aligning municipal ambitions with residents’ post-crisis hopes. Similarly, in Peccioli, Mayor Macelloni’s leadership transformed a municipal landfill into a cultural and economic engine, reinvesting revenues into public infrastructure and cultural projects to secure public support. This generates genuine grassroots enthusiasm and bottom-up efforts from the community.

However, some Peccioli residents have expressed scepticism, viewing the landfill’s art installations as a metaphor for the municipality’s governance—where artistic visibility masks opaque decision-making processes and underlying socio-environmental tensions. This parallels the long-term disillusionment experienced in Gibellina, where monumental architecture eventually disconnected from everyday needs. While art and leadership initially legitimized development strategies in both cases, questions of transparency, inclusivity, and long-term community ownership remain central to assessing their outcomes. This tension echoes earlier critiques of neo-endogenous approaches, which often seek to blend external support and local agency but risk becoming performative when power remains centralized or symbolic participation substitutes for real influence. As seen in both cases, charismatic leadership and grand cultural narratives may obscure internal divisions and silence dissenting perspectives until the unanswered questions and doubts of the community become overwhelming and cannot be tolerated, generating a sense of repulsion towards the development of the residents.

Ultimately, both Gibellina and Peccioli reveal that the long-term success of rural revitalization projects hinges less on the objective coherence of the plans themselves and more on the fluid, subjective processes of community negotiation and adaptation. Corrao’s blueprint for Gibellina, though visionary, faltered precisely because it lacked a gradual, stepped engagement with residents’ concrete conditions—particularly those of displaced farmers still living in precarious barracks. The absence of compromise between utopistic cultural ambitions and the immediate socio-economic realities resulted in disillusionment and fragmentation. This reflects how fixed, top-down planning—regardless of artistic merit—may fall short when imposed in contexts of vulnerability. As previously explored, such projects may align with the rhetoric of renewal but fail to embed flexibility and local responsiveness in practice.

Conversely, while Peccioli is often celebrated as a participatory success story, a closer examination reveals that its governance model is not without critique. Efforts to involve and convince residents—through reinvestment, cultural integration, and public forums—risk reinforcing an increasingly narrow consensus, potentially alienating dissenting voices over time. As noted earlier, participatory mechanisms must be evaluated not only for their presence but also for their capacity to accommodate dissent, adapt over time, and avoid legitimizing top-down logics in local disguise.

Both cases, therefore, illustrate how, without continuous, transparent mechanisms to incorporate contestation and dissent, even well-intentioned participatory strategies may fail to prevent social alienation. Particularly in rural settings already marked by demographic vulnerability, such failures can contribute to ongoing population decline as individuals who feel excluded or dismissed quietly opt to leave.

Perhaps the most glaring testimony of this ambiguous boundary between participation and exclusion, inclusion and propaganda, emerges in the radically different levels of institutional transparency encountered during the research process. What began as a simple comparison of governance models quickly revealed how access to information—and how it is structured, mediated, and framed—can reinforce a sense of shared ownership or deepen the impression of being deliberately left out. These differences do not just illustrate technical discrepancies between municipalities; they expose how participation can become a staged performance and how transparency can slide into legitimacy-building, persuasion, or even soft propaganda.

In Peccioli, the municipal website is updated regularly, is well-structured, and is easily navigable, featuring publicly accessible documents, schedules, and community-oriented services. A seasonal publication issued by the municipality, *Peccioli Notizie*, plays a central role in shaping the town's narrative. Although it resembles the format of a newspaper—invoking an image of objectivity and journalistic distance—it functions primarily as a celebratory chronicle of what the municipality has done. The fact that the same entity performs and narrates the action, using the authoritative aesthetics of a “newspaper,” further blurs the line between transparency and self-legitimation. This dynamic transforms communication into a symbolic apparatus, where information serves less to stimulate public debate than to affirm the coherence and success of the governing vision. It is a model of governance where visibility replaces contradiction, and participation risks becoming a spectacle.

From a political perspective, this tension also points toward rethinking what *bottom-up* governance entails. As will be elaborated in the following chapter, this research proposes a definition that is not based solely on the origin of an initiative (local vs external) but on the ability of a governing majority to actively integrate and engage the wider community—including dissenting voices. In this sense, a bottom-up process is not simply one that emerges from below but continually seeks legitimacy by opening space for dialogue, negotiation, and inclusion. Peccioli, while often celebrated under this label, shows the risk of confusing broad consensus with actual participation. Its communication strategy—framed through highly curated narratives and symbolic visibility—may, in fact, function as a tool to reaffirm the vision of a dominant majority rather than creating genuine mechanisms of co-governance. When dissenting needs are left unaddressed or reduced to noise, transparency becomes performance, and participation becomes symbolic. In such conditions, even rational decisions can be ideologically rejected by those who feel unheard or excluded.

In stark contrast, Gibellina Nuova offers little in terms of accessible institutional memory or public-facing transparency. Archival documents related to the reconstruction are scarce, often available only through second-hand accounts, critical commentaries, or oral histories. The municipal website remains challenging to navigate, with minimal updates and little information about governance processes or strategic decisions. This opacity contradicts expectations commonly associated with top-down governance models, where bureaucracy and documentation usually abound. In Gibellina's case, the reconstruction narrative has primarily been preserved through fragmented, partisan, or anecdotal channels. Many of these narratives originate from individuals who either directly experienced the events or inherited memories of them—testimonies that, while subjective, also reflect the absence of formal platforms for public accountability. These personal perspectives can be interpreted

as expressions of people who do not feel adequately heard within official channels and, therefore, resort to alternative means of articulating their experiences and critiques.

This divergence complicates the top-down/bottom-up binary even further. While Peccioli exemplifies a bottom-up narrative supported by highly curated and centralized communication, Gibellina's top-down model lacks even the bureaucratic consistency that could at least offer residents a coherent framework of what happened and why. In both cases, power is enacted through decision-making and the control—or absence—of information. Through this control, legitimacy is constructed or undermined, and it is through the politics of transparency that communities feel either engaged or abandoned.

## CHAPTER 3: A HYBRID MODEL FOR A COMMUNITY CENTRED RURAL REVITALIZATION

The cases of Peccioli and Gibellina Nuova reveal that the conventional binary distinction between top-down and bottom-up models fails to adequately capture the fluid, relational dynamics that shape rural revitalization processes. Instead of viewing these categories as fixed structural forms, this chapter proposes reinterpreting them through the lens of **community engagement as an evolving negotiation between minorities and majorities**.

In this redefined understanding, **bottom-up approaches** are not inherently participatory simply by their origin at the municipal or grassroots level. Instead, they are characterized by the degree to which a majority within the community actively supports, shapes, and feels ownership over the revitalization process. Crucially, a bottom-up initiative retains legitimacy only when it continually engages dissenting minorities, seeking not to silence but to incorporate their perspectives, thereby strengthening the cohesion and adaptability of the majority.

Conversely, **top-down interventions**—whether led by external experts, visionary leaders, elites, or governmental institutions—should not be viewed solely as impositions. Instead, they represent minority-driven initiatives that must continuously strive to convince and coalesce community support. Their success hinges not on the authority of their origin but on their capacity to persuade the broader community of the validity and relevance of their ideas, adapting them through dialogue and compromise.

This flexible, relational model acknowledges that majority and minority positions are not static. An initiative that begins as top-down can evolve through sustained engagement and transparent negotiation into a bottom-up endeavour as community buy-in grows. Equally, bottom-up projects risk becoming exclusionary if they consolidate narrow leadership circles without refreshing consensus.

The overarching principle guiding this rethinking is rooted in the democratic imperative: revitalization efforts must foster an environment where **debate, negotiation, and mutual persuasion** are central. Governance structures should institutionalize participatory mechanisms and pathways for dissent, disagreement, and compromise, ensuring that both majorities and minorities are continuously engaged in shaping sustainable futures.

This conceptual shift sets the foundation for the hybrid governance model elaborated in the following sections, emphasizing genuine participatory engagement, balance between external expertise and local knowledge, flexibility, and transparent power distribution.

### 3.1 GENUINE PARTICIPATORY ENGAGEMENT AT ALL STAGES

A key lesson from both Gibellina and Peccioli is that community participation cannot be reduced to isolated moments of consultation. In Gibellina, early alignment between leadership and residents' aspirations faded when sustained dialogue and compromise failed to materialize. Conversely, Peccioli's participatory mechanisms—public forums, cultural events, reinvestment narratives—initially legitimized municipal initiatives but increasingly risked consolidating a narrow consensus, sidelining dissenting voices.

A genuinely community-centred model must ensure participation is not a procedural formality but an ongoing process embedded at all planning, implementation, and evaluation stages. Structures such as citizen assemblies, transparent public forums, and periodic consultations should be institutionalized, with built-in mechanisms to prevent elite capture and amplify marginalized perspectives. Crucially, participation must go beyond legitimizing pre-decided plans; it should dynamically shape the trajectory of development.

### **3.2 BALANCING EXTERNAL EXPERTISE WITH LOCAL KNOWLEDGE**

Both Gibellina and Peccioli highlight the importance—and risks—of external expertise in rural revitalization. In Gibellina, renowned architects shaped a vision that overlooked local socio-cultural realities, fostering alienation. In Peccioli, technical input aided development, but centralized leadership left little room for dissent.

A hybrid governance model must balance external technical knowledge with embedded local understanding. While expert insights are crucial—particularly in infrastructure, finance, and environmental planning—they should serve as tools to support, rather than override, community priorities. Co-design processes, collaborative workshops, and knowledge-sharing platforms offer concrete ways to align professional expertise with lived experience, fostering ownership and relevance at the local level.

### **3.3 EMBEDDING FLEXIBILITY AND ITERATION**

Rigid plans that lack flexibility often fail in rural settings. Gibellina shows how an uncompromising utopian vision can alienate residents, while Peccioli reveals how prolonged leadership risks stagnation when decision-making is not regularly renewed.

A sustainable hybrid model must institutionalize flexibility. Revitalization strategies should be treated as iterative processes, with regular assessments, feedback loops, and the capacity to modify initiatives as community conditions and preferences change. Embedding periodic review boards or participatory budgeting sessions—where community voices influence recalibration—ensures that development remains responsive and avoids becoming detached from local realities.

### **3.4 ADDRESSING POWER ASYMMETRIES TRANSPARENTLY**

Transparent acknowledgement of power dynamics is crucial in any revitalization effort. In Gibellina, initial enthusiasm masked more profound structural inequalities: decisions were primarily shaped by political and cultural elites, with limited avenues for ordinary residents to influence long-term outcomes. In Peccioli, despite participatory frameworks, sustained leadership control risks concentrating authority, reinforcing a governance structure where dissenting or minority perspectives may be sidelined.

A hybrid governance model must actively confront and mitigate these asymmetries. Transparent financial management, clear delineation of decision-making responsibilities, and accessible communication channels are essential to prevent governance opacity. Equally, mechanisms must ensure that marginalized groups—economically disadvantaged residents, younger generations, or minority voices—are consistently included, not merely as symbolic participants but as meaningful stakeholders.

### **CONCLUSION: PRINCIPLES FOR A SUSTAINABLE HYBRID MODEL**

The comparative analysis of Peccioli and Gibellina Nuova highlights that rigid governance classifications—top-down or bottom-up—fail to capture the complex, evolving realities of rural revitalization. Top-down models, such as that of Gibellina Nuova, can mobilize resources and expertise but risk alienation when imposed without sustained local engagement. Conversely, bottom-up strategies, like Peccioli, may foster more substantial community legitimacy but risk co-optation or stagnation when power remains concentrated. Success is not determined solely by the origin or formality of participation but by the authenticity, depth, and continuity of community engagement.

Maintaining this dynamic, transparent, and inclusive space is essential in rural environments already marked by demographic fragility and socio-economic pressures. Gibellina's lack of compromise between cultural ambition and concrete social needs undermined the project over time. In contrast, despite growing concerns about governance opacity, Peccioli's ability to negotiate with its residents and continuously reinvest in public goods helped secure a degree of long-term support. Only through ongoing negotiation, compromise, and reflexivity

can revitalization efforts avoid reproducing patterns of exclusion and disconnection, ensuring long-term viability rooted in genuine community ownership

A hybrid, community-centred model requires more than symbolic gestures of inclusion. It demands transparent power-sharing, flexible governance structures, and sustained dialogue that respects local knowledge while integrating external expertise. Crucially, mechanisms must be institutionalized to adapt and recalibrate strategies in response to shifting community needs, preventing the ossification of decision-making and the alienation of dissenting voices.

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