

Article

Bottom-Up Initiatives for Sustainable Mountain Development in Italy: An Interregional Explorative Survey

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Abstract: In recent years, citizen-led initiatives have emerged to complement top-down development policies, particularly to pursue sustainability objectives and benefit traditionally left-behind communities and places. Existing research on this phenomenon in Italian mountain areas suggests a primary emphasis on revitalizing the natural environment, preserving local culture and traditions, and delivering social services to address the absence of public facilities. However, there is still a lack of understanding regarding their profiles, key features, social and environmental impacts, and challenges at the national level. As part of a broader research project, this empirical work contributes to the literature on bottom-up sustainability-oriented initiatives in mountain regions by conducting an explorative interregional online survey. We gathered original data on 196 initiatives from the mountain areas of the Italian regions of Basilicata, Lombardia, Marche, Sicilia, and Veneto. The findings indicate that our sample shares common traits, visions, and values, making a positive contribution to the sustainable development of their respective territories. However, these initiatives must contend with internal and external challenges to enhance their resilience and impact. Importantly, the research may support policymakers at various levels in the design of public policies that harness the full potential of bottom-up initiatives, ultimately enhancing the development and sustainability of these lands.

Keywords: sustainable mountain development; bottom-up approach; post-growth model; mountain economics; impact evaluation; small enterprise; community



Citation: Polin, V.; Cavalli, L.; Spinazzola, M. Bottom-Up Initiatives for Sustainable Mountain Development in Italy: An Interregional Explorative Survey. *Sustainability* **2024**, *16*, 93. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16010093>

Academic Editor: Yong Tan

Received: 13 October 2023

Revised: 3 December 2023

Accepted: 5 December 2023

Published: 21 December 2023



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1. Introduction

In Italy alone, mountains cover 35% of the emerging land and are inhabited by 12% of the population [1]. Considering both the Alps and the Apennines, they provide much of the country with water and biodiverse habitats and are strictly connected to cultural practices from the north to the south of the peninsula. Despite this relevance, they have been progressively marginalized from economic and social development, particularly for the reduction of high-land and small-scale agriculture and of extractive activities [2–5]. Though experimental public programs aimed at supporting rural and mountain development and welfare states with a participatory and place-based approach are in place [6–9], as of today most mountain areas still suffer of depopulation, aging, unemployment, economic marginalization, and structural under provision of key infrastructures such as rail and road connections or the internet, and a lack of services in health, education, and entertainment, thus further pushing to the abandonment of these high-lands [5,10–12].

To partially tackle these structural challenges in mountain regions, constellations of experimental research action projects and local bottom-up micro-enterprises have recently emerged, in many cases initiated or with the support of distinguished scholars who have been working on these issues for years [4,5]. This flourishing of initiatives contributes to changing a certain consolidated perception of Italian mountains, fostering a new (and

positive) narrative, promoting social innovation, and defining new potential connections between mountains and urban centers [13–15]. These initiatives encompass highly diverse entities, ranging from associations established to reuse dismissed industrial plots or buildings and organize cultural festivals to microenterprises specialized in the production of local foods or artifacts and those operating in the creative, cultural, and environmental sectors. Additionally, there are cooperatives dedicated to supporting minors, immigrants, or women [16–18]. Driven by the desire to regenerate the ecological, social, and economic landscape, these initiatives may complement and stimulate top-down public policies in achieving sustainable development for mountain areas and pursuing the Sustainable Development Goals [19].

Although this emerging phenomenon is recognized and the aspirations to establish sustainable enterprises in remote areas have already been explored, along with the analysis of some pilot cases of mountain social innovation [20–27], a comprehensive national quantitative mapping of the key features, primary objectives, and local impacts of these initiatives has not yet been provided. An aggregate overview across regions would be beneficial since Italian mountains possess historical, cultural, social, and economic peculiarities that may influence the development, traits, and challenges of these bottom-up initiatives [1,2,5,28]. To partially address this literature gap, we propose an original interregional explorative survey on bottom-up sustainability-oriented initiatives in mountain areas to offer a first comprehensive geographical perspective. This empirical study is part of a three-year research project conducted by the Department of Economics of the University of Verona (Verona, Italy) and the Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei (Milan, Italy) aimed at developing a participatory and mixed-methods approach to the study of sustainable development in Italian mountain regions [29–32].

The present study aims to address several key questions: to comprehend the quantitative relevance of these initiatives across regions and their trends; to quantitatively analyze the combination of economic activities, features, challenges, and long-term perspective; to explore the presence of common visions and values across initiatives of different regions; and to assess their contributions to the promotion of sustainable local development. To achieve these objectives, we first identified and collected in a database 395 bottom-up sustainable initiatives from five different mountain regions in Italy (Basilicata, Lombardia, Marche, Sicilia, and Veneto). Then, an online survey was designed and implemented to gather additional original data directly from the mapped initiative. We received 196 responses (response rate: 49.6%), which is a good result for an online survey. The findings indicate that sustainability-oriented bottom-up initiatives exist in mountain areas from the north to the south of the country, with a similar combination of economic activities. Furthermore, these initiatives are relatively young and have seen numerical growth in the last decade. Interestingly, they share common traits, visions, and values, primarily contributing to the social and sustainable development of their respective territories. However, they also exhibit significant weaknesses and vulnerabilities that may, in the long run, hinder their effectiveness and economic survival. Importantly, as these initiatives possess a unique understanding of their environment and socio-economic relationships [33], increasing their engagement would significantly contribute to the effectiveness and legitimacy of national and international policies, including the National Strategy for Inner Areas and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan [9,32,34]. Ultimately, this place-based cooperative governance approach [10] will be crucial for addressing complex environmental and social issues and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals [35,36], particularly considering the challenges associated with their implementation at the national level [37,38].

The remaining paper is structured as follows: The next section provides a brief overview of the main issues related to mountain development in Italy and delineates the theoretical framework underpinning bottom-up initiatives for sustainable development. The third section outlines the approach and methodology employed to identify the initiatives, administer the online questionnaire, and analyze all responses. The fourth section

highlights the key findings and compares them with the broader literature. Finally, the fifth section concludes the paper with the most significant take-home messages.

2. Background

2.1. Mountain Sustainable Development in Italy

High altitudes are characterized by major slopes, harsh climates, remoteness, and exposure to natural hazards [39,40]. Previously compensated for by the abundance of natural resources, in the last century these factors have hindered industrialization and economic and human development, leading to socio-economic and infrastructural marginality [41].

Other than purely territorial advantages or disadvantages, in fact, marginalization results from the complex interaction of multiple dimensions, including the availability of adequate infrastructure, the adoption of new technologies, cultural and social variables such as the availability of quality education, and economic competitiveness [5,42]. Lower opportunities available for individuals and organizations initiate a depopulation process, which sets off chain reactions of recessive effects. The demographic decline weakens the population's structure and invalidates the population's capacity for consumption, income production, and the provision of local services. These phenomena contribute to the abovementioned depopulation, thus sustaining a vicious cycle of marginalization that is extremely challenging to reverse.

As with other mountainous regions in Europe, the Italian mountains have been significantly impacted by these economic and demographic processes [4,5]. Many mountainous areas continue to endure the adverse consequences. The birth rate remains low, youth out-migration is high, the population is aging, and employment opportunities for young people are scarce, primarily concentrated in the primary sector and in the tourism sector—the main driver of economic growth in recent decades [28,43]. Moreover, these structural challenges are exacerbated by outdated mountain legislation awaiting updates for years [44]. National public policies, largely oriented toward assistance, contributed to the problem. A notable exception is the positive experience with the National Strategy for Inner Areas, reflecting an innovative vision for the development of these territories [7]. Furthermore, recent public funds have been allocated for specific initiatives in mountainous areas to address certain infrastructure challenges [32,34].

Despite the challenges and constraints faced by these territories, academic and public attention to mountain sustainable development has increased over the last two decades. Italian mountain areas contribute to the national income by 16.1% [45] and are essential for the provision of freshwater and clean energy. This can be extensively generated through dams, wood biomass, and wind installations. Similarly, the implementation of schemes for the payment of ecosystem services could create additional income opportunities for residents, especially small-scale farmers or herders [46,47]. Moreover, they represent fertile ground for potential new initiatives in the green transition and the broader scope of local sustainable development.

Furthermore, the physical and functional transformation of brownfields, disused industrial sites present in many mountain regions, could represent a regeneration opportunity for numerous mountain communities. This transformation aims to counteract climate change and enhance socio-economic conditions, bringing positive benefits to younger generations and the local economy [36,48,49].

Additionally, according to scholars, there are interesting signs of recovery in relation to the neo-population phenomenon of mountain areas [5]. Empirical evidence indicates that this “mountain demand” involves various profile types [50]. These include new mountain residents who relocate (or desire to relocate) from urban areas to the mountains [20,25] or returning mountain residents who come back to their places of origin [51]. Additionally, there are foreigners who invest economic and human resources in business projects in the Alpine and Apennine areas [21] and residents “by force”, such as refugees and asylum seekers placed in villages and small towns in areas far from services [52,53]. In addition to these new or potential inhabitants, the phenomenon of voluntary remaining

youth, “restanza” [54], is significant, as analyzed in a recent empirical project, “Giovani Dentro” [23,55].

This human capital “in action” has contributed to the establishment of various bottom-up initiatives, projects, and microenterprises that are reshaping the narrative of living, working, and producing in mountain areas [5,27,30,45,56,57]. As supported by the Camaldoli Manifesto [58] and the MATILDE Manifesto [12], this could lead to a new centrality of the mountains, serving as a laboratory to experiment with sustainable innovative practices that foster economic and employment opportunities, encourage collective participation, promote commons and active citizenship, and generate new flows between urban areas and mountain zones [15].

2.2. Bottom-Up Initiatives for Sustainable Development

Issues related to sustainable mountain development have been approached by a multiplicity of disciplines and approaches, often within the framework of multi-level governance [59]. This concept originated in the literature on the commons [59], pointing to the contribution that different societal actors may make to manage complex environmental challenges. As already shown, mountain challenges are often a combination of environmental, social, and economic issues, ranging from climate change to economic depression to depopulation, and are frequently intertwined in a complex network of causal mechanisms [1]. Accordingly, equally complex governance arrangements are required, in which both national and international policies and local actors interact and collaborate with their own resource activities [33,35,36]. Hence, in this perspective, bottom-up initiatives contribute to the sustainable development of their territory by leveraging traditional knowledge and institutions as well as by injecting new resources into their territories [1,27,60].

Indeed, bottom-up initiatives epitomize community-driven efforts that prioritize local participation, self-determination, and a grassroots approach to development [10,11,33,61,62]. This concept is rooted in the principles of community engagement and empowerment, where residents take the lead in identifying and addressing economic challenges specific to their locales [16,23,27,33,61,63]. Academic perspectives emphasize that bottom-up initiatives encompass a diverse range of activities, including the establishment of microenterprises [17], cooperatives [18,64], social entrepreneurship ventures [65], and grassroots associations [66]. These initiatives are characterized by their decentralized decision-making processes [67], with community members actively participating in the planning, execution, and management of projects [68]. The key to their success is the localization of decision-making, enabling residents to design economic solutions tailored to the unique needs, resources, and cultural contexts of communities [16,27,61,62]. Scholars have highlighted the importance of understanding these challenges to create effective, sustainable, and context-sensitive bottom-up initiatives that contribute to the economic well-being and resilience of mountain regions [69]. Moreover, they underscore the significance of bottom-up initiatives in fostering a sense of community ownership and self-reliance, thereby enhancing the prospects for sustainable economic development in mountain areas [27,70].

For these reasons, bottom-up initiatives (regardless of their form) are regarded as a fundamental contribution to the sustainable development of mountain areas, with the potential to rejuvenate local communities and economies while protecting the natural environment [11,61].

Considering the existence of strong community relations and a local sense of identity [62,71] Italian mountain areas may constitute a valuable laboratory ground to explore novel forms of social innovation, rural mountain commons, and green economies that place the community at the center and emerge from the convergence of top-down policies and bottom-up sustainability initiatives [27,30,45,58,61,62,72,73]. Accordingly, this is where bottom-up and sustainability-oriented initiatives could contribute the most by leveraging the richness of natural and human resources available in mountain areas [27,30,62,71,74], particularly to regenerate the natural and social environment and improve the quality of life for residents [11,23,75].

However, to promote the creation of new bottom-up sustainable initiatives in mountain areas and enhance the potential of existing ones, it is crucial to have a clear and comprehensive understanding of their characteristics, strengths and weaknesses, values, and visions, as well as the contribution they provide in terms of social and environmental sustainability. While existing literature has provided some insights, primarily through the analysis of case studies and using a qualitative approach [25–27,56,76], there are still unanswered questions. For this reason, our empirical work aims to provide key answers regarding the ongoing bottom-up sustainable initiatives in mountain areas across five Italian regions, aiming to contribute to the development of a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Database Construction

Following an initial conceptualization phase [27,29,31,63], the research questions have been formulated, and the methodological approach has been defined.

Specifically, our empirical analysis aims to answer the following questions on bottom up sustainable initiatives in Italian mountain regions:

1. What is their spread across regions, and what trends do they show over time?
2. What type of economic activity is carried out, what are the main characteristics and challenges they must face, and what are the long-term perspectives?
3. Are there common visions and values across initiatives in different regions?
4. How can their contributions to the promotion of sustainable local development be assessed?

Considering our exploratory approach, we chose to use a technique of investigation that enables us to gather both quantitative and qualitative data.

As mentioned earlier, there is no national mapping of various bottom-up sustainable initiatives launched in Italian mountain areas. Therefore, our data collection was structured in two steps. The first phase involved the identification and selection of initiatives through desktop research and the creation of a dedicated database with the names of the initiatives and some additional information available on the web. The second phase, instead, entailed the collection of original data by directly contacting the initiatives included in our dedicated database.

Furthermore, given that this is a pilot study, we have currently decided to limit our data collection to five regions. Specifically, it was decided to focus on the regions of Basilicata, Lombardia, Marche, Sicilia, and Veneto. They vary in size, level of economic development, and location, spanning different mountain ranges such as the Alps and the Apennines [28]. This heterogeneity enriches our analysis, and since the five regions are situated in the north (Lombardia and Veneto), the center (Marche), and the south (Basilicata and Sicilia), this geographical criterion enhances the representativeness of our findings [46].

Moreover, systematic monitoring of bottom-up sustainable initiatives in these five regions has received limited academic attention in the past.

Now, we will provide a detailed description of the first step of our data collection, which began in October 2020 and lasted approximately 8 months.

Our bottom-up sustainable initiatives were primarily identified through web-based approaches, utilizing Google queries with keywords (e.g., translated from Italian “sustainability AND mountain AND initiative AND region name”) and searching for information in the programs of academic and other public events related to this specific topic. Additionally, some extra initiatives were suggested directly by the participants in the second phase of our research, namely, a dedicated survey.

Before being included in our database, all initiatives were scrutinized to meet the three following selection criteria (Figure 1). Firstly, as they were located within one of the five chosen regions, they also had to be positioned within mountain municipalities as defined by ISTAT based on altitude parameters [77].

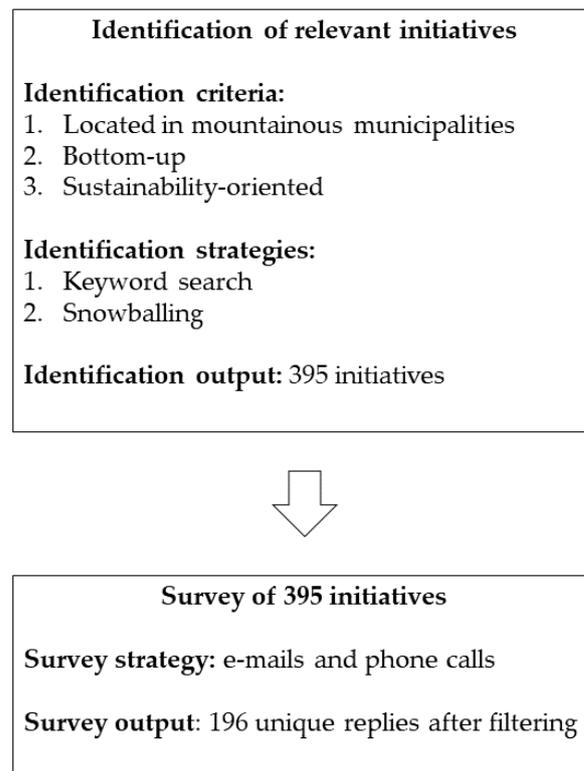


Figure 1. Bottom-up sustainable initiatives' identification and survey strategy. Own elaboration.

Secondly, to qualify as bottom-up, initiatives had to be registered as micro and small enterprises, associations, and cooperatives, or as recurring small-scale projects (such as local festivals) organized by one of the abovementioned organizations or by local public entities (e.g., municipalities, mountain communities, etc.) [10,78]. This heterogeneity was relatively open and free of preconceptions, as these initiatives often adopt different institutional forms according to local circumstances. Accordingly, before being included in the database as bottom-up initiatives, publicly available web materials (such as websites, Facebook pages, and news articles) were scrutinized and interpreted with qualitative content analysis to search for elements indicating both a strong community identity and participation and a strong commitment to increase the wellbeing of the local community [10,11].

Thirdly, as the focus of this study is on the bottom-up initiatives contributing to sustainable local development, the same web material was scrutinized with qualitative content analysis, searching for a robust sustainability narrative [79,80]. Specifically, only initiatives that expressed a concern for sustainability, environmental protection, landscape, and social wellbeing and actively claimed to contribute to one of these aspects were included in the database [19,81]. Hence, both the second and third criteria were based on a structured assessment of publicly available material and self-reported information [82].

This detailed process resulted in a sample of 395 bottom-up sustainable initiatives (Figure 1). For each initiative, a card with the key information (such as name, location, economic sector, and a summary of main activities) was filled, constituting the primary database of this study. An overview of the initiatives' distribution by region is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Bottom-up sustainable initiatives' distribution across different mountain regions, as available in the constructed database.

	Basilicata	Lombardia	Marche	Sicilia	Veneto	Total
Total	50	79	58	94	114	395

Source: Self-constructed database. Own elaboration.

3.2. Survey Preparation and Analysis

In this section, we provide a detailed description of the second step of our data collection, which aims to gather original data to address our research questions by directly contacting the initiatives mapped in our database during the first phase. To this end, an online survey with CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing) has been implemented on Google Forms to obtain first-hand insights into these 395 bottom-up sustainable initiatives through a structured questionnaire titled “We, pioneers of mountain care” [83,84]. The decision to conduct an online survey aimed to maximize reach at a reasonable cost, particularly since potential respondents were geographically dispersed and distant [83,84].

Our original questionnaire counted a total of 37 main open, multiple-choice, checkbox, and linear-scale questions, divided into four different sections (see Appendix A). The first section aimed to collect basic information on the bottom-up sustainable initiative, such as organizational form type, sector, and location. The second section focused on the relationship with the local territory, supporting factors, and challenges. The third section investigated the development vision of these initiatives in terms of balancing economic, environmental, and social priorities, key activities, and actors. Lastly, the fourth section required self-assessment of the impact on environmental, social, and economic dimensions at the local level.

This online questionnaire was shared with the 395 bottom-up sustainable initiatives in our database via email, starting 10 October 2021. We invited responses from founders or managers with sufficient experience in the respective initiatives. Over the following eight months, bi-weekly reminders were sent, and phone follow-ups were conducted to reach those for whom web participation might have been more challenging, especially considering the lack of digital infrastructure and competencies that affect mountain areas [72,85].

By 31 May 2022, when the online questionnaire was ultimately closed, a total of 211 responses to the survey had been recorded. Though they did not include personal information about the respondents, a precautionary approach was adopted to handle the provided information in compliance with existing standards [83]. Once the responses were further cleaned, 196 univocal answers by an equal number of initiatives (response rate: 49.6%) were obtained. An overview of how responses are distributed is available in the results section (Figure 2).

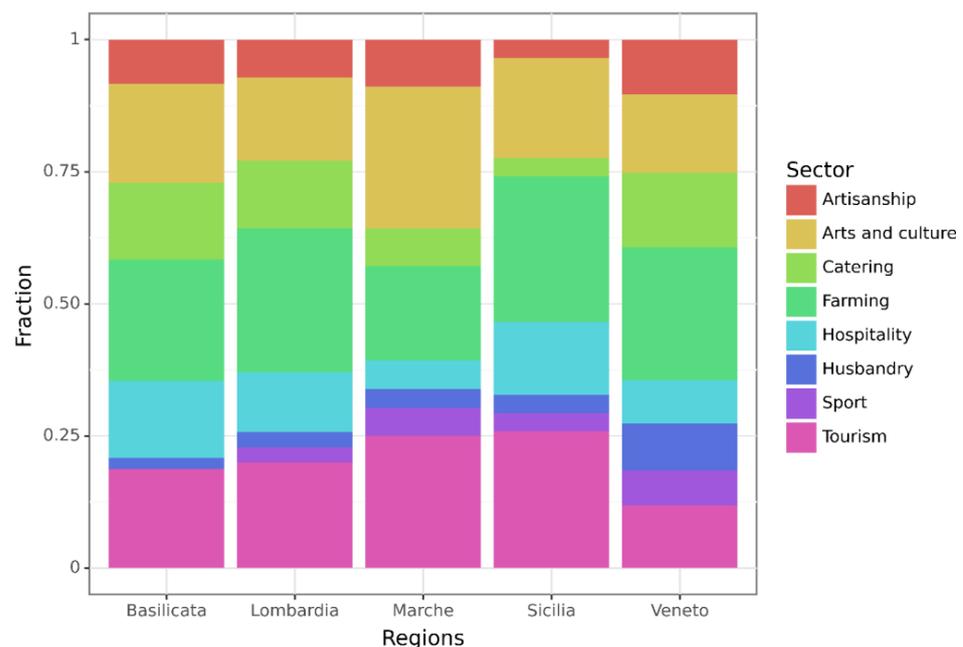


Figure 2. Bottom-up sustainable initiatives’ distribution by economic sector. Source: “We, pioneers of mountain care” survey. Own elaboration.

As the first pilot study of its kind in the Italian mountains, the regional sampled bottom-up sustainable initiatives, and the results from the online questionnaire did not aim to be statistically representative of all bottom-up sustainable initiatives in the country. Instead, they were employed to collectively provide a first overview of the key traits that such initiatives possess. Therefore, the objective was to use all initiative as pieces to construct a larger comprehensive mosaic of features rather than as individual observations whose features could be effectively measured to infer on a larger population. This approach was derived from previous similar studies [19] and is common in exploratory and inductive research [86,87].

4. Results

4.1. Bottom-Up Sustainable Initiatives' Profile

Bottom-up sustainable initiatives could be found in marginal or semi-marginal areas in the North, the Center, and the South of the country (Table 2), as 17 (8.7%) mountain municipalities in Basilicata, 43 (21.9%) in Lombardia, 33 (16.8%) in the Marche, 32 (16.3%) in Sicilia, and 71 (36.2%) in Veneto hosted at least one. This is a positive result, as southern mountain communities have been traditionally more exposed to marginalization than their peers in the Alps [46,88]. Though extremely heterogeneous, most of them could be categorized as a business (48.5%) or as an association or foundation (27.0%), thus indicating a mixture of for-profit and not-for-profit motives. Interestingly, cooperatives only account for 7.1% of all initiatives, despite their traditional relevance in the agricultural sector [89]. Many initiatives spanned across industries, predominantly agriculture, farming, and herding; artisanship, arts, and culture production; tourism and sports; catering; and hospitality. This is not surprising, as tourism is notoriously driving demand for local food and non-food products, and many new successful enterprises are operating at this intersection [47]. Indeed, while the number of small-scale farms is overall decreasing [90], bottom-up initiatives generally start with farming activities to regenerate their territory [11]. Despite minor differences, such as the higher prevalence of arts and culture in the Marche and a lower prevalence of tourist initiatives in Veneto, these trends are generally confirmed at the regional level (Figure 2).

Table 2. Bottom-up sustainable initiatives' distribution across different mountain regions.

	Basilicata	Lombardia	Marche	Sicilia	Veneto	Total
Total	17	43	33	32	71	196

Source: "We, pioneers of mountain care" survey. Own elaboration.

Interestingly, it was found that these initiatives have been launched by locals in the majority of cases (58.1%), and respondents displayed an intimate relationship with the landscape. On the one hand, once asked to describe what mountains mean to them, as the wordcloud shows (Figure 3, see Appendix B for a regional disaggregation), answers highlighted the relevance of terms such as "nature", "freedom", and "beauty", as well as "homeness" and "community". On the other hand, when they inquired about their relationship with the specific location where the initiative was located (Figure 4, see Appendix C for a regional disaggregation), the same methodology revealed a strong and personal attachment, underpinned by terms such as "home", "live", "work", and "family", resulting from both their past (e.g., "born" and "roots") as well as their expectations about the "future". Accordingly, even if they are foreigners to the location, respondents appear to possess a strong and personal connection with the mountains and specifically with the territory where the initiative is located. These findings are consistent with the new wave of mountain bottom-up initiatives driven by migrants from non-mountain areas, returnees, or young "restanti" aspiring to improve their quality of life by closing the distance with nature [23,25,50,75,89,91]. Indeed, these processes may drive social innovation and rejuvenation in mountain areas by acting as forces or catalysts in environments rich with natural and social resources, breaking social and economic stagnation [23,24,27,92–95].

cant (29.4%) contribution. This is extremely positive since the two groups are frequently marginalized from decision-making processes in mountain settings [29].

Last, when the year of founding was available, the relative newness of these initiatives emerged as 37.24% had less than 10 years and 21.43% had less than 5 (Figure 5). While this could be interpreted as a confirmation of the recent emergence of bottom-up initiatives, it hints that they may be relatively short-lived [95,96]. Interestingly, Figure 5 suggests a peak in the number of new initiatives in 2019 and then a sharp decline in the following two years. This is not surprising, as 2020 and 2021 were characterized by high levels of uncertainty due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which severely affected the birth of new economic activities [97,98]. Nonetheless, responding initiatives remain largely optimistic about the future. When asked to imagine what their initiative could look like in ten years (Figure 6, see Appendix D for a regional disaggregation), they largely emphasized terms connected to the expansion and flourishing of the initiative itself (e.g., “grow”, “develop”, etc.), as well as to proactive behaviors (e.g., “aim”, “project”, etc.). This is, of course, a positive finding, even though previous research has shown that entrepreneurs are sometimes incapable of making realistically accurate predictions for their organizations [46]. Accordingly, a follow-up would be required in a few years to see what initiatives will have survived, as well as if the pre-COVID-19 trend will be repristinated. Interestingly, we observe that this growth is particularly strong in Lombardia and Marche, possibly as a result of the major investments in the tourist sector by the two regions in the last few years [99,100].

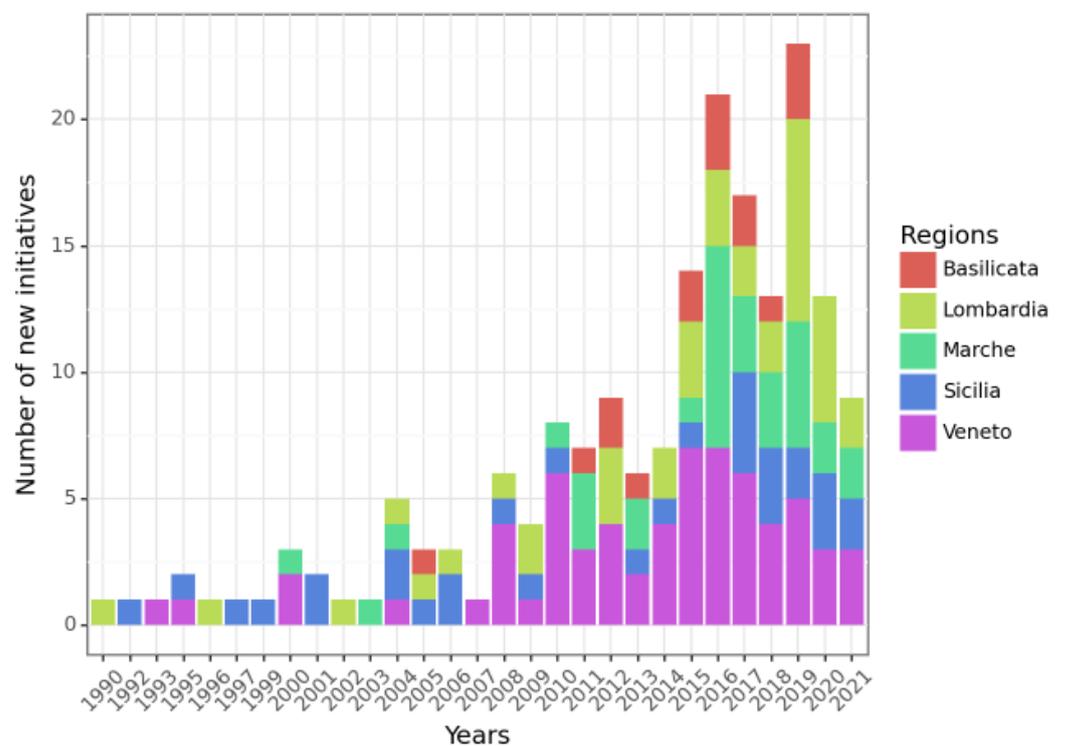


Figure 5. Distribution of bottom-up sustainable initiatives by founding years. Source: “We, pioneers of mountain care” survey. Own elaboration.

well as sustainability objectives, these initiatives could probably count on sufficient support from crowdfunding [104,105].

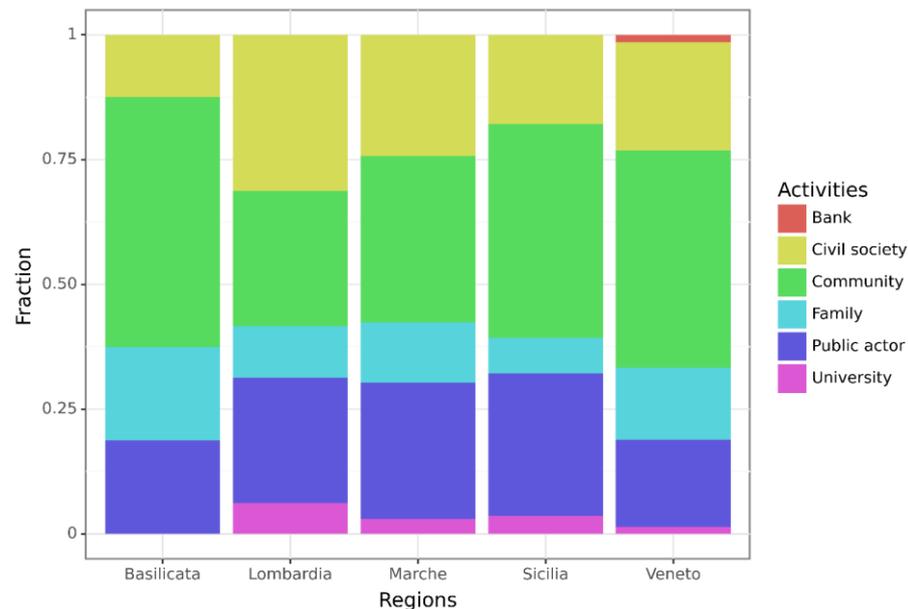


Figure 7. Distribution of the most supportive actors. Source: “We, pioneers of mountain care” survey. Own elaboration.

This would not only improve their opportunities to invest but also the sense of participation and ownership of the local community and supporters, such as in successful schemes for ecosystem services [65]. Conversely, the strong dependence on public funding, though justified by cohesion policies and the common benefits resulting from these initiatives, severely exposes them to unreliable external funding [10].

4.3. Bottom-Up Initiatives’ Sustainable Mountain Development Vision

A dedicated section of the questionnaire investigated the sustainable development vision of the bottom-up initiatives. This concept is currently used to describe a multiplicity of ethical, economic, and ecological perspectives. Accordingly, respondents were asked to describe what sustainable development is for them, and their open answers were quantitatively analyzed. Figure 8 (see Appendix E for a regional disaggregation) shows that terms such as “economy”, “respect”, and “growth” are highly used, thus suggesting the idea that “sustainable development” may be a form of development that respects the environment and social life. This intuition was also supported by reading individual replies, and overall it confirms that respondents largely adopted a vision of “sustainable development” extremely similar to the original one proposed in the Brundtland report and the concept of a triple bottom line [106,107], hence a balance between economic development, human and social development, and natural protection.

Despite this belief, however, from the following questions, a stronger focus on the environment and the social dimension than on the economy emerged. They seem to value the preservation of the local culture and identity above all else (55.0%), followed by the protection of the natural environment (30.9%), and to be only marginally interested in purely economic priorities such as industrial development and employment opportunities (14.1%). Conversely, when asked to identify the most important economic activities, 23.2% of initiatives indicated artisans valorizing the local identity, 34.7% indicated art and culture for the local community and tourism, 40.0% indicated green entrepreneurs valorizing the environment, and only four (2.1%) mentioned industrial activities employing local labor (Figure 9). Indeed, despite interpreting sustainable development as a balance between its three dimensions, the initiatives appear mostly focused on environmental and social

trality of citizens is consistent with the protagonist role that bottom-up initiatives see for themselves and with the place-based approach [10,27,29,33,62]. Most importantly, it appears to be extremely consistent across regions. Since a commitment to the local community was a criterion for the selection of these initiatives in the first place, this result confirms the accurate selection of the sample and the comparability of initiatives across regions.

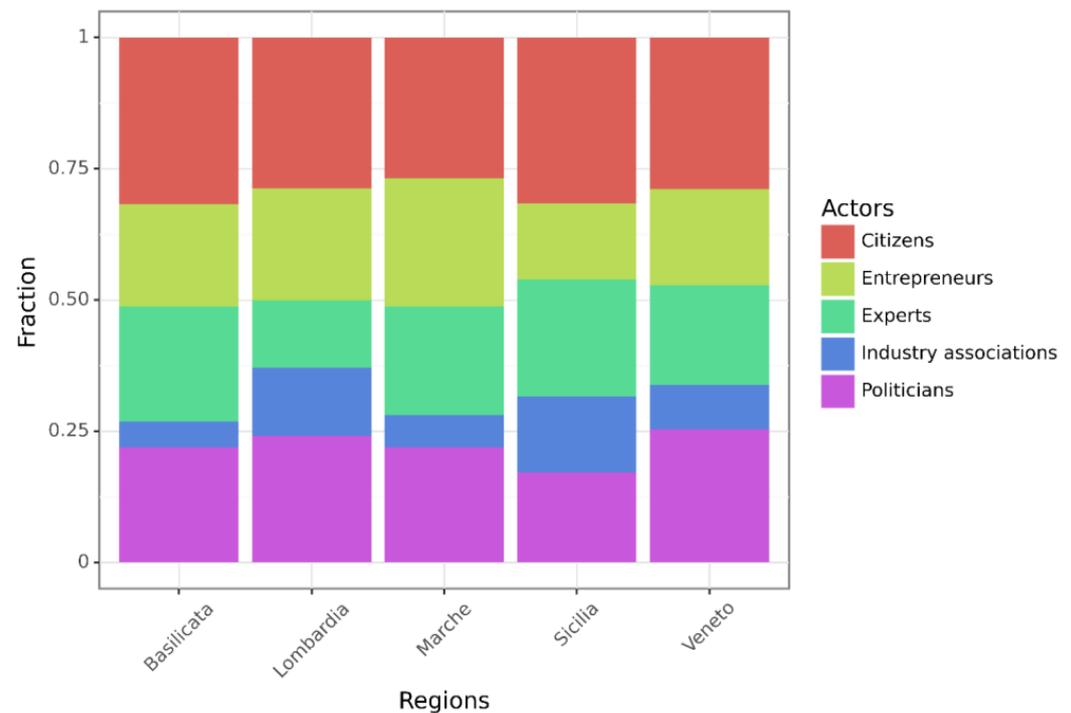


Figure 10. Distribution of the most important actors. Source: “We, pioneers of mountain care” survey. Own elaboration.

4.4. Bottom-Up Initiatives’ Impact Self-Assessment

Lastly, and consistent with their worldview, respondents claimed to be actively pursuing objectives related to the protection of the natural environment, the enhancement of social life and relations, and ultimately profit and economic growth. Invited to choose one or multiple alternatives, 75.0% declared to pursue “environmental objectives”, 69.9% “social objectives”, and only 57.6% “economic objectives”. Nonetheless, answers to a dedicated open question revealed that “quality” and “profit” occupy a dominant position, though balanced by an equal emphasis on terms such as “sociality”, “life”, “relationships”, “sustainability”, etc. (Figure 11, see Appendix F for a regional disaggregation). Altogether, these results suggest that the initiative’s vision goes beyond the simple principle of “do not harm” and equilibrium between the three dimensions of sustainable development [106] and rather adopts a proactive and caring behavior towards the local community [27,108]. Moreover, 84.6% affirmed that they could achieve this by combining tradition and innovation. On the one hand, this required employing novel, environmentally friendly processes and technologies in their focal activities. On the other hand, and most importantly, their approach was what they deemed most innovative, as it placed greater emphasis on the wellness of people and the environment than on profit [75,109]. These results are consistent with existing findings on “new farming” practices [11,23,27,30,89].

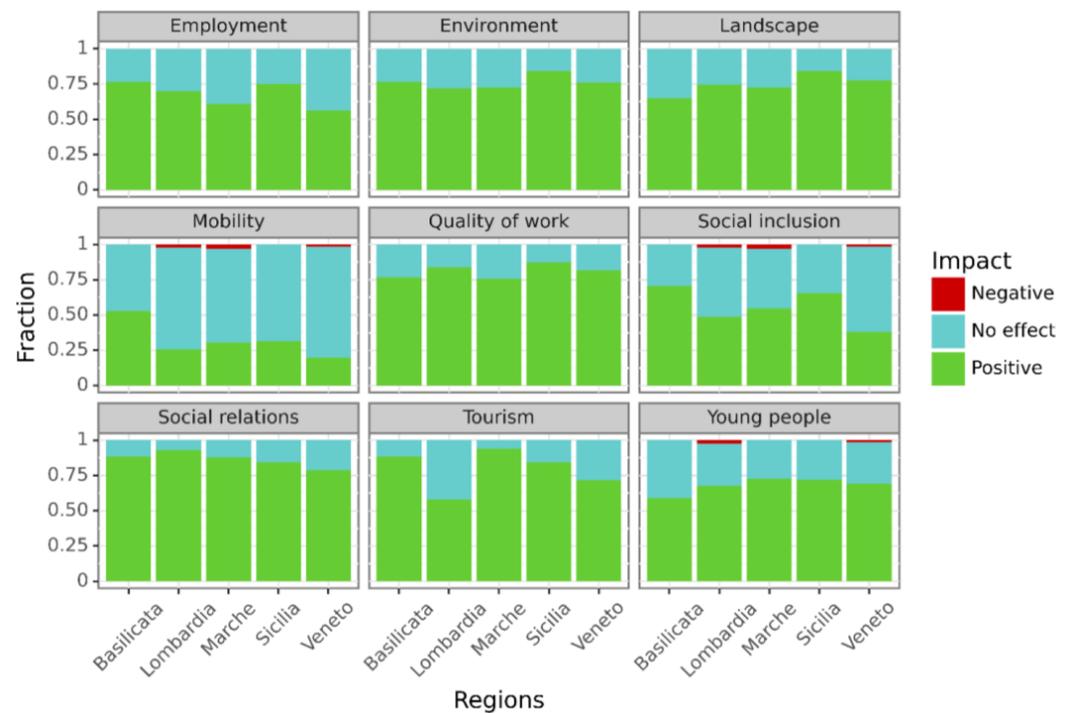


Figure 12. Self-assessed positive impact on sustainability dimensions. Source: “We, pioneers of mountain care” survey. Own elaboration.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Though not entirely new, this study presents the first structured mapping and assessment of bottom-up and sustainability-oriented initiatives occurring in five different regions, covering both the Alps and the Apennines. We collected original data from a large number of diverse initiatives through an elaborate research process. The findings provide valuable insights into the features and impact of bottom-up sustainable initiatives in Italian mountain areas, contributing to the quantitative validation of some of the evidence already emerging from studies within this research strand.

The results support the existence of a common growing trend of bottom-up initiatives in mountain areas, characterized by diverse constitutional forms and involvement in various economic sectors. This trend extends beyond regional borders and arises from the entrepreneurial efforts of both locals and “new mountaineers”. Our sample exhibits shared traits, visions, and values, making a positive self-assessed contribution to social and environmentally sustainable local development. From a multi-level governance perspective, these heterogeneous forms of bottom-up initiatives may be fundamental to addressing complex environmental and social challenges and fostering a shared vision on the use of existing resources. Nevertheless, these short-lived initiatives face internal and external challenges that require appropriate public policies to unlock their full potential. The opportunity to create more sustainable and developed mountain areas depends, at least in part, on their capacity to build a critical mass, engage in networking, interact with a multiplicity of actors, and enhance common resources.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, V.P. and L.C.; methodology, V.P. and L.C.; software, M.S.; validation, V.P., L.C. and M.S.; formal analysis, V.P., L.C. and M.S.; investigation, V.P., L.C. and M.S.; resources, V.P., L.C. and M.S.; data curation, M.S.; writing—original draft preparation, M.S.; writing—review and editing, V.P., L.C. and M.S.; visualization, M.S.; supervision, V.P. and L.C.; project administration, V.P. and L.C. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Authors would consider sharing their data under request.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A. Questionnaire “We, Pioneers of Mountain Care”

- What is the name of the initiative you are implementing in the mountain area?
- What is the legal form of the initiative? Mark only one option.
- Sole Proprietorship; Simple Partnership; General Partnership; Limited Partnership with Shares; Limited Partnership; Limited Liability Company; Joint-Stock Company; Cooperative Association; Public Entity; Other.
- What role do you play within the initiative?
- Where is the initiative based (street, house number, municipality)? If the activity takes place in more than one municipality, indicate them.
- What is the business sector of the initiative? Select all applicable options.
- Agriculture; Livestock; Herding; Hospitality; Gastronomy; Arts and Culture; Handicrafts; Sports; Tourism; Services; Public Administration; Other.
- What is the starting year of the initiative?
- Is/was the founder/originator of the initiative a “mountain man”? Mark only one option.
- No; Yes.
- Since the initiative was started, have there been generational changes in management? Mark only one option.
- No; Yes, but the change in management did not affect the initiative; Yes, and the change in management did affect the initiative.
- Are young people (under 30) involved in the initiative? Mark only one option.
- No; Yes, but they make a negligible contribution; Yes, and they make a major contribution; Yes, and they make an essential contribution.
- Are women involved in the initiative? Mark only one option.
- No; Yes, but they make a negligible contribution; Yes, and they make a major contribution; Yes, and they make an essential contribution.
- If the initiative targets particular segments of the population, could you identify them from the following? Select all applicable options.
- Elderly; Disabled; Women; Youth; Migrants; Other.

Kindly complete the following sentences:

- In pursuing this initiative, the main support (e.g., economic, psychological, local, legal, social) came from:
- In pursuing this initiative, the main obstacle (e.g., economic, psychological, local, legal, social) has been:
- How do you envision the initiative developing 10 years from now?
- What are the main purposes the initiative seeks to pursue? Select all applicable options.
- Environmental; Economic; Social.
- Was it necessary to turn to the banking system to meet investments? Mark only one option.
- No; Yes, but requests were not fulfilled; Yes, and requests were fulfilled in part; Yes, and requests were fulfilled in full.
- Has the initiative received any public contributions? Select all applicable options.
- No; Yes, the initiative received local contributions; Yes, the initiative received regional contributions; Yes, the initiative received national contributions; Yes, the initiative received European contributions.

- Have financial resources been raised through crowdfunding campaigns? Mark only one option.
- No; Yes; I am not familiar with these campaigns.
- Do you think crowdfunding could be useful for the initiative?
- Does the initiative aspire to combine tradition and innovation? Mark only one option.
- No; Yes.
- If you answered positively to the previous question, could you indicate what tradition you are carrying on and what element of innovation you are experimenting with?
- Is the initiative collaborating with other actors in the area (other associations, businesses, public agencies, etc.)?
- No; Yes.
- If you answered positively to the previous question, could you indicate which actors?
- In your opinion, would it be possible to carry out the initiative with the same goals and results in a different mountain setting?
- Could you justify your previous answer?
- In your opinion, would it be possible to implement the initiative with the same aims and results in a non-mountain setting? Mark only one option.
- No; Yes; Don't know.
- Could you justify your previous answer?
- Is caring for the mountain landscape one of the values of the initiative?
- For each of the following, could you tell whether the initiative is having spillover effects? Mark only one option (Positive; No effect; Negative; Not applicable) per line.
- Local employment; Social relations among villagers; Quality of the environment; Sustainable tourism; Professional opportunities for young people to stay in the mountains; Local mobility; Quality of the landscape; Quality of your work and the people you work with; Social inclusion of vulnerable groups.
- Generally, economic activities pursue profit maximization; what does this initiative want to "maximize"?
- Could you describe, in a few words, what "sustainable development" is to you?
- What is the first word you associate with the term "mountain"?
- What does the area in which the initiative takes place mean to you?
- In your opinion, what is the most important thing likely to promote the sustainable development strategy of the area where the initiative is implemented? Select the main one.
- "Green" business activities that can enhance the environment and mountain landscape; Industrial/commercial activities that employ local workforce; Craft activities that enhance local knowledge and identities; Artistic and cultural activities that can weave community networks and open up new prospects for tourism.
- In general, when selecting projects with local impact, which aspect do you think is most relevant? Mark only one option.
- Creation of new jobs; Environmental protection; Preservation of local identity and historical and cultural heritage of the community.
- In the local development process, which actors in the area do you think should be involved? Select the two most important ones.
- Politicians and administrators; Entrepreneurs; Citizens; Industry associations; Experts/scholars/researchers; Other.
- The survey is finished, we thank you for your time. We would love to stay in touch to share future developments in our research project. Would you be interested in being contacted again? Please mark only one option.
- No; Yes.

Appendix B. Wordclouds for Answers to “What Terms Do You Associate with Mountains?”



Figure A1. Basilicata.



Figure A2. Lombardia.



Figure A3. Marche.



Figure A4. Sicilia.



Figure A5. Veneto.

Appendix C. Wordclouds for Answers to “What Does the Territory of the Initiative Represent for You?”

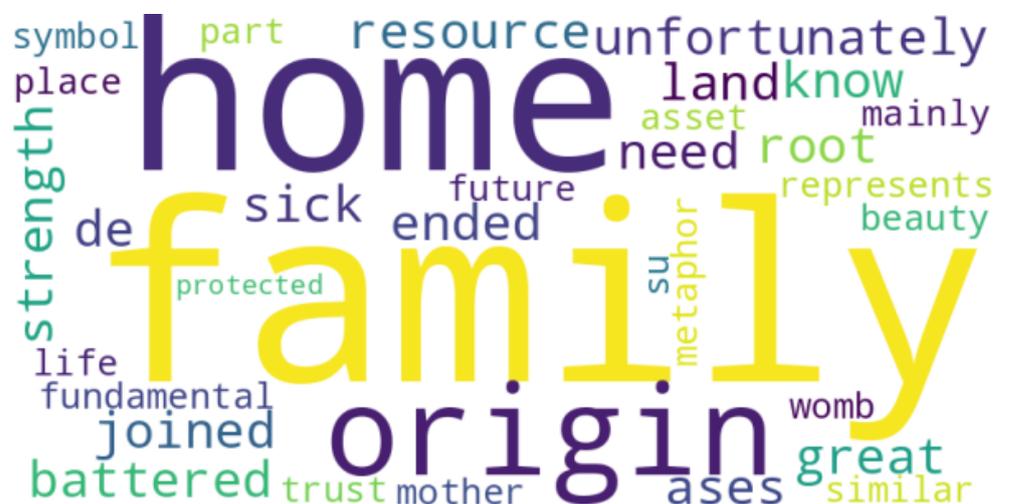


Figure A6. Basilicata.



Figure A10. Veneto.

Appendix D. Wordclouds for Answers to “How Do You Think the Initiative Will Look Like in Ten Years?”



Figure A11. Basilicata.

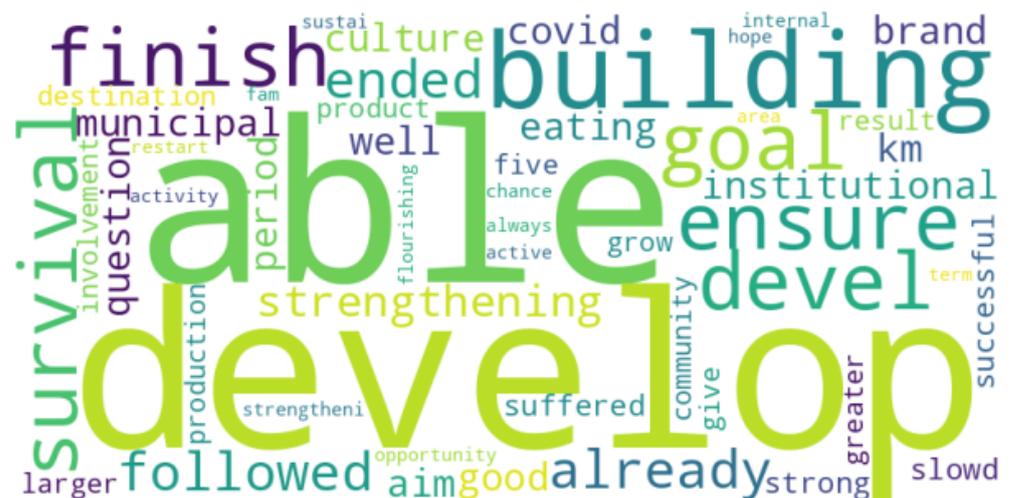


Figure A12. Lombardia.

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