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## A description model for regeneration through urban tourism in rural towns with underused historic real estate

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### Abstract

This paper deals with the construction of a description model that will be helpful for an actual decision aiding situation posed by the urban planner for tourism development of rural towns in Sicilian hinterland areas. The decision problem concerns the town of Cianciana, which in recent years has become the protagonist of a particular international tourism phenomenon. We propose a multi-criteria evaluation framework for the rehabilitation of the historic town centre through tourism development. The description problem model that is presented here is focused on aiding decision makers to identify the best usage strategy of under-utilized historic real estate for tourist accommodation. Although the evaluation framework has been inspired by the particular case of Cianciana, it would fit well for evaluations undertaken in analogue circumstances.

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*Keywords:* underused real estate; tourism development; decision aiding; description problematic; cognitive artefact; urban restoration; local development.

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### 1. Evaluations for the rehabilitation of old towns

The conservation, renovation, and re-use of urban cultural heritage and forlorn areas are strategic actions of urban planning that are taken in order to achieve sustainability for cities (European Sustainable Cities and Towns Conference, 1994). The tourism industry is a key economic sector in Italy (Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, 2013),

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and it is regarded as an activator of urban physical and social renovation (Lew, 2007; Owen, 1990). Foreign visitors are mainly attracted by historical and artistic cities (44%), and seaside (17%), lacustrian (9%), and mountain (9%) resorts (ISTAT, 2016). In general, internal rural areas are not typical tourist destinations, unless they are included in special tourist networks. Nevertheless, as the case of Cianciana demonstrates, rural areas can offer peculiar destinations as cultural environments that have an attractive power on tourists with whom they create an empathetic link.

The financial evaluation of an urban rehabilitation project has a crucial role even in its early stages, when it can guide decisions on changing or dropping the plan (Cilona & Granata, 2015 a; Morano & Tajani, 2013). But, as the rehabilitation of old towns pose special questions due to existing physical and social ties, the widely recognised supporting role of multi-criteria evaluation in sustainable urban planning is more useful than ever in approaching these really complex contexts (Bellia, Granata, & Scavone, 2014; Cilona & Granata, 2014, 2015 b; De Mare, Granata, & Nesticò, 2015, Fusco Girard, Cerreta, & De Toro, 2005; Rizzo, 2003; Torre, Morano, & Tajani, 2015).

In this paper, a multi-criteria decision-aiding evaluation framework for the rehabilitation of historic Sicilian rural towns through tourism development is proposed. The evaluation framework has been inspired by the particular case of Cianciana, but would fit well for evaluations undertaken in analogous circumstances. The following sections present the tourism situation of Cianciana, and go on to describe the proposed framework for a description (Roy, 1985) assessment model, represented through the cognitive artefacts of a decision-aiding process (Tsoukiàs, 2007). The final section presents some reflections in conclusion.

## 2. The case study

### 2.1. *The case of tourism in Cianciana*

Cianciana is a small rural town in the territory of Agrigento, covering a relatively small area of 37.7 square kilometres (Atlante statistico dei comuni ISTAT, 2013). Its geographical points of reference are the Platani River and some mountains (the peaks of Chiappara and Cavallo, at 703 and 756 metres respectively).

The oldest parts of the town date back to 1583, and are located near the Chincana hamlet that was founded in the roman period. In 1646, Duke Diego Joppolo received authorisation (Licentia Populandi) to create a city of one hundred houses, a church, shops, a prison, and other infrastructures (Antista, 2013). Nowadays, we can see that the route traced by the main street, running along the royal country road (“trazzera”) called “Lettighe”, created the order of the city (Sanzeri, 2007). In the historic centre of Cianciana there are some ancient buildings that are without any particular historical or artistic values.

The population of this small town reached its peak in the century when sulphur mines were active, from about 1850 to 1960. In fact, the population went from 4,604 inhabitants in 1861 to 7,740 residents in 1961. Subsequently, when the mines closed, the population decreased, until 2011 when the last census registered just 3,517 inhabitants.

Despite its marginal context, typical of inner and rural areas, Sicily is an island that is endowed with many material and immaterial resources that are different from those available in other parts of the Italian territory. Here we can find a good climate, beautiful landscapes, an appreciated traditional gastronomy, a natural heritage, and a slow dimension of life that is encouraged by an insufficient accessibility (Prestia & Scavone, 2014).

Consequently, Cianciana has recently become the protagonist of a strange new phenomenon: since 2005 many tourists have chosen to live there. These tourists buy houses, refurbish them, and stay on in the town to live with the local inhabitants. They buy crumbling and abandoned houses and restore them, often with projects that are inappropriate to their style. They originate from England (no. 42), France (no. 9), Sweden (no. 3), Denmark (no. 11), Finland (no. 2), Russia (no. 2), and United States of America (no. 6). They don't want to find work, because they already have jobs. Generally, they are actors, directors, writers, reporters, photographers, and artists, and with the rise of technology they can use the Internet to work. According to them, in Cianciana they can find relaxation, peace, natural and cultural heritage, and good food and wine. Furthermore the town is near to seaside places that can be easily and quickly reached, such as Borgo Bonsignore, Bovo Marina, Eraclea Minoa, and Torre Salsa. It is interesting to note that the phenomenon probably stems from the idea of the sole local estate agent (My house) to sell abandoned houses, apartments, and big farms in the old centre of the town or in the surrounding countryside.

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