THE SWITZERLAND OF THE KARST

How to Build Development Starting from a Small Territory

CHAPTER I

The Territory That Did Not Yet Know It Could Be a Project

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> *"A territory does not become peripheral because it is far from the centre.*
> *It becomes peripheral when it begins to think of itself as peripheral."*

A territory does not become peripheral because it is far from the centre.

It becomes peripheral when it begins to think of itself as peripheral.

When it constantly measures what it lacks instead of asking what it already possesses. When it begins to regard it as normal that young people leave, that a forest is merely a forest, that an old vineyard is merely an old vineyard, that collectively owned land is a relic of the past, that a minority language is a cultural matter detached from the economy, that a border is a limit rather than a geographical position.

The Karst is constantly at risk of making this mistake.

Seen on an administrative map, Monrupino-Repentabor is a small municipality on the outskirts of Trieste. Slovenia lies just beyond it. Around it are villages, woods, quarries, vineyards, meadows, paths, limestone, and sinkholes. It is a compact geography and, precisely for that reason, it can appear marginal when compared with the large centres where capital, universities, infrastructure, and decision-making power are concentrated.

But change the scale and an entirely different picture emerges.

Trieste is only a few kilometres away. Slovenia is not really "on the other side": it is part of the same landscape. The sea is close. The Upper Adriatic port system is close. Universities and research centres are close. European cooperation networks cross this region. The territory is part of one of the best-known karst landscapes in the world. Local stone has been used in buildings far from here. Wine and agricultural varieties tell a centuries-long story of adaptation to a difficult environment. The Slovenian language is not a folkloric decoration but a living component of local identity.

And then there are the collective commons.

When we first began to think about all of this, the first question was not which funding call happened to be open.

It was another question.

> *Could all these resources really exist in the same place and still continue to be treated as separate problems?*

That question is, in essence, where The Switzerland of the Karst began.

Not as an electoral programme. Not as a political party. Not as another association simply added to the many already active in the area.

The idea stated on the project website is that of an independent civic laboratory: listening to the territory, turning needs into proposals, and connecting people with expertise. The method is equally explicit: every proposal should undergo economic and financial analysis, legal and regulatory verification, research into possible funding sources, assessment of costs, benefits and risks, and the construction of an operational plan.[1]

It was a simple starting point, almost an obvious one.

But it would have less obvious consequences.

Because it means accepting that an idea does not become a good idea merely because it is attractive.

It has to survive the numbers.

The rules.

The powers of the institution that would have to implement it.

The availability of land.

The ownership structure.

The costs.

The time required.

The possibility of finding someone willing to finance it.

And above all, it has to survive its encounter with reality.

1. Why Call It “The Switzerland of the Karst”

The name was deliberately exaggerated.

That was exactly the point.

No one could seriously imagine turning Monrupino into a Swiss canton, or importing into the Karst a constitutional system born from an entirely different history.

Switzerland was not a model to be copied.

It was a question.

What enables some small territories to organise a remarkable degree of autonomy, responsibility, prosperity, and diversity?

And above all: which of those principles can be observed without pretending that the institutions themselves can simply be transplanted?

The Swiss system distributes power among the Confederation, the cantons, and the municipalities, and gives a central role to subsidiarity: responsibilities should, as far as possible, be exercised at the level closest to citizens. Federalism and direct democracy coexist with strong linguistic and cultural diversity. Official Swiss sources describe local autonomy, participation, and the ability to hold diversity and unity together as structural features of the system.[2]

Multilingualism, likewise, is not treated merely as a symbolic matter. It is embedded in institutional architecture, legislation, and the functioning of public administration.[3]

The Karst is not Switzerland.

That distinction is essential.

It has no cantons. It has no comparable degree of local fiscal sovereignty. It does not operate under the same institutional system. An Italian municipality works within a very different framework of local, regional, national, and financial rules.

But the provocation remains.

Because Monrupino-Repentabor is small, bilingual, geographically defined, and embedded in a cross-border area.

Its very size is what makes the question interesting.

Is a small territory necessarily weak?

Or can small scale make it possible to experiment more quickly, measure results more precisely, involve people more directly, and build relationships among actors who, in a large city, might never meet?

"The Switzerland of the Karst" was born from this shift in perspective.

Smallness not as a sentence.

Smallness as an experimental scale.

The border not as a margin.

The border as an advantage.

Bilingualism not as a cost to be administered.

Bilingualism as cultural and relational capital.

Collective property not as a historical anomaly.

Collective property as a question about the future.

2. The Collective Commons: The Future Hidden in the Past

In many places, development is imagined by searching for something that does not yet exist.

In the Karst, part of the answer may instead lie in something that has existed for a very long time.

The collective commons.

The idea seems to belong to a world that predates the contemporary economy. It evokes pastures, woods, customary practices, families, and village communities. It would therefore be easy to reduce it to an ethnographic curiosity: an old form of ownership that somehow survived modernity.

That would be a mistake.

The law of collective property is complex, and its different forms should not be confused. Collective commons, civic-use rights, family commons, collective domains, and other arrangements may rest on different legal foundations and be subject to different regimes. The collective commons of the Trieste Karst have themselves received specific attention in legal scholarship.[4]

The national legal framework also acquired renewed significance with Law No. 168 of 2017 on collective domains. The law recognises collective domains as legal orders of original communities and gives importance to their capacity to manage a natural, economic, and cultural heritage rooted in the territorial basis of collective ownership and conceived in an intergenerational perspective.[5]

That word — intergenerational — changes the way these assets are viewed.

Collectively owned land is not simply a surface on a map.

It is an inheritance received from the past that must continue to exist in the future.

For several categories of collective assets, the law establishes strong protective regimes and explicitly links those assets to environmental and landscape protection.[6]

At that point the laboratory's question became almost inevitable.

> *If these lands are meant to be preserved over time, can they also be used to create new value without consuming them?*

Not necessarily property-development value.

Not necessarily construction.

Environmental value.

Scientific value.

Agricultural value.

Forestry value.

Tourism value.

Energy value, where compatible.

Cultural value.

A collectively owned forest can become a laboratory for sustainable forest management.

A meadow can become part of a biodiversity conservation project.

Agricultural land can become a demonstration site.

A network of land parcels can support experimentation in carbon monitoring and ecosystem services.

A path can connect villages, landscape, and slow tourism.

A heritage managed by a community can become relevant to European programmes that ask precisely for this: pilot territories, local involvement, governance, biodiversity, and replicability.

That does not mean everything is automatically possible.

Quite the opposite.

The collective nature of the property requires more careful verification, not less.

We need to understand who owns the asset.

Who represents the community.

Which uses are permitted.

Which decisions must be taken by the competent governing bodies.

Which environmental, landscape, forestry, or planning restrictions apply.

Which activities are compatible with the legal regime of the land.

The idea, therefore, was not simply: let us use the collective commons.

It was more interesting than that.

> *Let us ask whether an institution created to preserve common resources can also become one of the infrastructures of the future.*

It was an economic question.

But above all it was an institutional one.

3. The Territory as a Portfolio of Assets

At that point the Karst began to be viewed differently.

No longer by administrative sector.

By connections.

An old vineyard was not merely agriculture. It could be genetics, memory, scientific research, tourism, training, and cultural production.

Marble was not merely extraction. It was economic history, design, technology, capital, environmental restoration, and employment.

A freight terminal was not merely logistics. It could become the place where waste, the circular economy, energy, and new industrial services are reconsidered together.

Language was not merely culture. It was a bridge to Slovenia.

The border was not merely geopolitics. It was a natural gateway to cooperation programmes.

Collective property was not merely land ownership.

The Municipality was not merely administration.

The Local Action Group was not merely an organisation that publishes funding calls.

The Region was not merely a higher level of government.

And a funding call was not a strategy.

That last distinction would become particularly important.

In small territories, development is often described through the language of funding opportunities.

A call has opened.

Money is available.

Let us see what we can submit.

It is understandable, especially where ordinary resources are limited.

But the process can easily be turned upside down.

Instead of starting from a problem and searching for the right financing, people begin with the financing and search for a problem similar enough to fit inside the application form.

The result may be a sequence of formally correct projects that are incapable of producing cumulative transformation.

The Switzerland of the Karst tried to take the opposite approach.

Strategy first.

Instruments second.

First the question:

What kind of territory do we want to build?

Only then:

What resources can help us build it?

4. Six Proposals and One Destination

The website began to fill with proposals.

They were different from one another. At first glance, perhaps too different.

The first concerned civic participation and drew inspiration from Swiss direct democracy: turning Monrupino-Repentabor into a participation laboratory in which citizens and communities could put forward ideas and contribute to territorial priorities.[7]

The second addressed local taxation by proposing a civic, bilingual tax conciliation mechanism designed to reduce conflict and facilitate dialogue over local taxes, charges, and instalment plans, while of course preserving all legal remedies provided by law.[7]

Then came the European Karst Grapevine Repository.

Here the logic changed.

The point was not simply to produce more wine.

The question was whether the genetic heritage of native Karst grape varieties could be recovered, preserved, studied, and transformed into scientific and cultural heritage as well as economic value.

An old grape variety is a strange kind of asset.

It may have little commercial value today and enormous value tomorrow.

Once it disappears, however, it cannot simply be recreated.

Preserving it therefore means treating biodiversity as capital.

Not capital in the narrow sense of price.

Capital as something that creates options for the future.

This was followed by Made & Grown Only in Monrupino-Repentabor™, designed to connect territorial identity and digital traceability through a system called KarstChain. The declared aim was not simply to create another local label, but to build a system through which the origin, authenticity, sustainability, and history of products could be verified.[7]

Then came Fernetti Circular Valley.

Its origin was different.

The project website begins from a concrete episode: following the changes introduced by Legislative Decree No. 116/2020, the withdrawal of the Fernetti freight terminal from the public waste service had affected municipal waste-tax revenue. The proposal chose not to regard that loss merely as a budget problem, but as a starting point for imagining a new economy based on circularity and services.[7]

It was perhaps the clearest expression of the method.

Faced with a loss, the traditional response is to seek compensation.

A development strategy instead asks whether the change that produced the loss can itself generate a new activity.

The sixth proposal looked to stone.

Repen Marble.

A resource with an international history already behind it, which the laboratory proposed linking — subject to the necessary legal, environmental, industrial, and financial checks — to instruments capable of attracting capital, modernising technology, and creating higher-value

processing activities. The website itself stresses the need to protect the territory and to distinguish economic enhancement from simple exploitation.[7]

Democracy.

Taxation.

Biodiversity.

Digital identity.

Circular economy.

Stone and finance.

They appeared to be six different directions.

In reality they were beginning to frame a single question:

> *How much value remains unused when the resources of a territory are administered separately?*

The project's final answer took a deliberately ambitious name:

KARST UNESCO 2035.

The proposal is to begin with the fortified hilltop complex of Monrupino-Repentabor and, over the long term, imagine a cross-border nomination for the Classical Karst, built jointly between Italy and Slovenia. In the design published by the laboratory, UNESCO is not a seventh independent project: it is intended as the destination capable of giving a common direction to the other six.[7]

Not a promise that recognition will be obtained.

Not a shortcut to tourism.

A horizon.

A way of forcing different projects to answer a more demanding question:

> *What kind of territory must we build today if, ten years from now, we want to imagine presenting it to the world as shared heritage?*

That question changes everything.

Because even if the final recognition never arrives, the objective still forces work on landscape quality, biodiversity, cross-border cooperation, documentation, community participation, heritage management, and the ability to tell the story of the territory as a whole.

In this sense, KARST UNESCO 2035 is less interesting as a nomination than as a discipline for planning.

It forces us to think long-term.

And long-term thinking is one of the hardest things for a system that is constantly working with annual budgets, administrative mandates, funding deadlines, and everyday emergencies.

5. From Idea to Feasibility

Ideas, however, have one defect.

They are free.

Anything can be imagined until someone tries to implement it.

Selection begins when a project encounters the cost of land, an article of law, a permit, municipal or regional powers, a European regulation, or a budget.

For that reason the website introduced an initial feasibility analysis of the six proposals and the KARST UNESCO 2035 objective.

The stated purpose was to evaluate the legal and institutional framework, implementation conditions, economic sustainability, critical issues, timelines, and possible sources of finance, while also comparing the proposals with the Municipal Statute.[8]

This was the most important transition.

Because it transformed the laboratory from a place where ideas were generated into a place where they were tested.

Take the grapevine repository.

The image of a European centre for grapevine biodiversity is powerful.

But who owns the land?

Who collects the genetic material?

Which plant-health rules apply?

Who manages the research?

A Municipality?

A university?

A foundation?

An agricultural enterprise?

A network of organisations?

How much does it cost to maintain the collections?

Which part can be financed through agricultural funds?

Which through European research programmes?

Which activities could generate revenue?

Which would remain activities of public interest?

Feasibility begins with these questions.

The same applies to a collective commons body.

It is not enough to say that it owns land.

Its statute, title, legal regime, permitted use, decision-making procedures, and any applicable restrictions must be understood.

The same applies to a Municipality.

It is not enough for a project to be useful.

It must fall within the institution’s powers, be compatible with planning documents, have financial coverage, and pass through a lawful administrative procedure.

This may appear to be the opposite of innovation.

In reality, it is what makes innovation serious.

The problem begins when these two worlds — imagination and procedure — stop speaking to one another.

6. Knocking on Doors

At this point we reach the least spectacular part of any territorial project.

The interlocutors.

A civic laboratory can imagine.

It can analyse.

It can write.

It can construct scenarios.

But on its own it does not possess most of the tools required to implement them.

It does not approve planning instruments.

It does not control public assets.

It does not award regional grants.

It does not amend municipal regulations.

It does not represent collective commons.

It does not manage LEADER funds.

It cannot sign an Interreg application on behalf of other organisations.

Turning an idea into reality therefore requires different actors.

The Municipality is inevitably one of them.

Not because it should do everything.

Quite the opposite.

One of the most common mistakes in local development is precisely to treat the Municipality as the actor expected to do everything.

A Municipality can authorise, plan, coordinate, participate, co-finance, make assets available, enter into agreements, join partnerships, or, in some cases, act as a beneficiary.

But some activities belong to businesses.

Others to research organisations.

Others to communities that own collective assets.

Still others to third-sector organisations, farmers, or European partnerships.

The task is not to find a single protagonist.

It is to construct the correct architecture.

This is where the Karst Local Action Group — LAS Kras — also comes in.

The Local Action Group describes itself as an agency for the economic and social development of the Karst and Italian Istria, supporting institutions, businesses, and local communities. Its 2023-2027 Local Development Strategy is explicitly built around the LEADER approach and community-led local development, with cooperation among public actors, businesses, and communities.[9]

It was therefore natural for it to enter the laboratory's field of attention.

Agriculture.

Slow tourism.

Local products.

Cooperation.

Biodiversity.

Rural innovation.

These are almost exactly the same ingredients that kept reappearing in the proposals.

But here too the difference emerged between having a natural interlocutor and automatically possessing an operational instrument.

A Local Action Group works within approved strategies, interventions, eligibility rules, selection criteria, and allocated budgets.

A good proposal can be perfectly consistent with the overall vision and yet, at that moment, have no suitable call available.

The reverse can also happen: a call exists, but there is no eligible applicant.

Or the applicant exists, but the land is not yet at its disposal.

Or the land is available, but the project is not mature enough.

This sequence of conditions began to reveal something elementary and frustrating at the same time.

> *The territory has resources. But they rarely exist already in the combination required to activate a project.*

Development also consists of assembling that combination.

The owner.

The legal entity.

The technical project.

The Municipality.

The scientific partner.

The financing.

The permits.

The market.

The community.

A single empty box can stop the entire design.

7. Funding Calls Are Not a Strategy

Monitoring funding opportunities therefore became a permanent component of the laboratory's work.

The Friuli Venezia Giulia Region.

Local Action Groups.

Interreg Italy-Slovenia.

Italy-Croatia.

Euro-MED.

LIFE.

Horizon Europe.

Programmes for forests, biodiversity, tourism, green infrastructure, energy, culture, and carbon.

Each new call was read not only by asking how much funding was available, but by asking a more concrete series of questions.

Who can apply?

The Municipality?

An SME?

A farm?

A collective commons body?

A university?

A cross-border partnership?

Must the applicant own the land?

Is management control sufficient?

Is a final technical design required?

What is the co-financing rate?

Which costs are eligible?

How long will the project last?

What must already exist before the application is submitted?

These questions gradually began to modify the ideas themselves.

That is exactly what a sound feasibility process should do.

It should not defend the original project at all costs.

It should improve it.

Sometimes reduce it.

Sometimes divide it into stages.

Sometimes reveal that the organisation initially imagined is not the right one.

Sometimes lead to abandonment.

Abandoning an idea can also be a result.

One of the most important functions of serious analysis is to discover early enough that a particular route does not work.

Long before money has been spent.

Monitoring also revealed another problem.

Funding calls have windows.

Territories, by contrast, work on much longer timescales.

A call may remain open for thirty days.

A partnership may take months to build.

A parcel of agricultural land may be perfect, but first a legal right to use it has to be established.

A building may be ideal, but there is no project design yet.

A Municipality may be an eligible beneficiary, but the idea has to enter its planning cycle.

A European call may be perfectly aligned and require five countries when the laboratory knows only one.

Territorial development therefore began to look less like a sequence of projects and more like a permanent activity of preparation.

You have to be ready before the call appears.

Otherwise the call dictates the project.

And that was precisely what The Switzerland of the Karst wanted to avoid.

8. Before Judging, Know

The more concrete the proposals became, the more one need emerged.

To know the starting point.

Not the perceived one.

The documented one.

How much does the Municipality invest?

What have its main sources of funding been?

How has the structure of revenue changed?

What assets does it own?

Which projects are already planned?

What financial constraints exist?

Which part of what the laboratory imagines has already been considered?

What has been attempted in the past?

What was interrupted?

What might be incompatible with commitments already made?

The answers could not be built from impressions.

Documents were needed.

Annual accounts.

Forecast budgets.

Planning documents.

Outstanding receivables and liabilities.

Funds.

Debt.

Assets.

Shareholdings and controlled entities.

Investments.

External funding.

Waste-tax revenue.

Budget amendments.

This is not the part of a territorial project that appears in photographs.

It is, however, the part that determines whether a proposal is serious.

The laboratory therefore began an independent reconstruction of the public documentation relating to the Municipality of Monrupino-Repentabor.

Many documents were available online.

Not all those considered necessary to reconstruct complete historical series.

At this point an important distinction must be made.

A document that cannot be found on a website is not automatically a document that does not exist.

It does not mean that it was never created.

It does not mean that the Municipality failed to produce or retain it.

It means only one thing:

the person carrying out the analysis has not located it.

That distinction lies at the heart of the method.

Because the stated objective was not to find evidence supporting a conclusion already reached.

It was to build a documentary base complete enough to be capable of disproving the initial hypotheses as well.

The material obtained was to be used to distinguish official data, analytical elaborations, hypotheses still requiring verification, and the laboratory's own proposals.[10]

The difference may appear small.

It is not.

If you begin with a conclusion and search for data that confirms it, you are doing propaganda.

If you begin with the data and accept that they may change the conclusion, you are beginning to do analysis.

9. A Certified Email and Thirty Days

During the night of 11 August 2026, a certified electronic message reached the institutional mailbox of the Municipality of Monrupino-Repentabor.

The receipt records acceptance at 02:17:49 and delivery one second later.

It was a request for generalised civic access to public information.

The aim was to obtain the documentation necessary to complete an economic, financial, asset, and planning reconstruction for the financial years 2020-2025.[10]

The request was extensive.

Annual accounts and their annexes.

Budgets and planning documents.

Budget amendments.

Revenue.

Waste taxation.

Cash.

Outstanding items.

Funds.

Debt.

Assets.

Shareholdings and controlled entities.

Investments and external financing.[10]

But the request also contained an important element.

It did not ask the administration to conduct research on behalf of the laboratory, produce new studies, or create data that did not already exist.

It asked for documents already created and held by the administration.

And because the list was extensive, it proposed a progressive approach.

Documents by year.

By subject.

Links to material already available online.

Digital folders.

Adjustable priorities.

Selective redaction of information that could not lawfully be disclosed.

Notification where documents had not been created, were not held, or were no longer retained.

A timetable for transmission.[10]

The principle was simple.

Everything did not need to arrive at once.

What mattered was to begin.

The rules on generalised civic access allow anyone, within the limits established by law, to request data and documents beyond those subject to mandatory publication; the procedure is to conclude with an express and reasoned decision within thirty days, subject to the circumstances provided for by the legislation.[11]

The deadline therefore became part of the story.

August passed.

September arrived.

As of 11 September, according to the communications received by the applicant, no documents had arrived, no decision granting or refusing access had been received, no request to narrow the scope had been made, no notice concerning third parties had been sent, and no proposal for progressive delivery had been received. Nor had the requested communication of the registration number reached the applicant. The laboratory's published material correctly specifies that any internal work carried out by the municipal offices, and the reasons why no response had yet been received, were unknown.[10]

This point deserves attention.

Because it is very easy to turn procedural silence into a political story.

Us against them.

The citizen against the institution.

The idea against bureaucracy.

It is a convenient narrative.

And it is almost always too simple.

A small Municipality may have limited staff.

A complex request may involve several offices.

Archives may be organised in different ways.

Some information may need to be redacted.

Questions of legal interpretation may arise.

There may simply be other urgent procedures under way.

Or there may have been an organisational problem.

Without documentation, we do not know.

And that phrase — we do not know — is essential.

The deadline calculated by the laboratory expired on 10 September.

On 11 September, a formal request for review was sent to the municipal Officer for the Prevention of Corruption and Transparency.

Not an accusation.

A procedure.

The review request asked the officer to verify the absence of a response, issue an express decision, allow progressive transmission and partial access wherever possible, and give specific reasons for any restriction. In the alternative, it requested the immediate transmission of documents already available in digital form and the definition of a timetable for the remaining material.[10]

The request also renewed the laboratory's willingness to agree on working arrangements sustainable for the municipal offices and expressly stated that the review did not presume irregularity and was not a personal challenge to anyone involved.[10]

In itself, this episode might seem secondary when set against the ambition of transforming the Karst.

A certified email.

A deadline.

A review procedure.

And yet it may be one of the episodes that best explains the entire project.

Because suddenly the distance between a vision and reality became measurable.

Not in kilometres.

In steps.

To plan, you need data.

To have data, you need documents.

To obtain documents, you may need to make a formal request.

To complete the request, there is a procedure.

If the procedure produces no outcome within the prescribed time, there is a review mechanism.

Every step is legitimate.

Every step has a reason.

But every step takes time.

And it is in this space that development often slows down.

10. The Problem Is Not the Silence

It would be easy to conclude that the problem was the lack of a response.

It was not.

Or at least it was not the most interesting problem.

The problem was the space between an idea and a decision.
That space exists in every territory.
But in small territories it becomes especially visible.
Imagine an apparently simple proposal.
Restoring a collectively owned area for a biodiversity project.
First, you need to know who holds title to it.
Then who has the power to decide.
Then whether the project is compatible with the legal regime of the land.
Then the Municipality may need to be involved.
Then a scientific organisation may be required.
Then the right programme has to be found.
The programme may require an international partnership.
The partnership may take months to build.
The call may close in six weeks.
And the project that appeared to be a good local idea has become a system of dependencies.
None of these steps is pointless.
Almost all of them exist to protect something.
Legality.
Competition.
The environment.
Property.
Public money.
Privacy.
Equal treatment.
Accountability.
The point is not to abolish procedure.
It is to build territorial capacity capable of moving through it.
That distinction is fundamental.
Because public debate about administration too often swings between two extremes.
On one side is the expectation that everything should happen immediately.
On the other is the idea that administrative complexity makes inertia inevitable.
Neither position is satisfactory.
Procedure is not the enemy.
But procedure without project capacity does not produce development.
Likewise, a brilliant idea without procedure remains a presentation.
The real problem is to build a bridge between the two.

11. Administering the Present, Designing the Future

Here one of the hardest distinctions to explain begins to emerge.
Administering a territory and developing a territory are not the same activity.

Both are necessary.

Administration has to guarantee continuity.

Budgets.

Services.

Taxes.

Maintenance.

Staff.

Waste management.

Deadlines.

Legal obligations.

Procurement.

Transparency.

Every day there is something that must be done simply to keep the public machine functioning.

Development, by contrast, works on something that does not yet exist.

A research centre that does not yet exist.

A new value chain that does not yet exist.

An environmental management model that does not yet exist.

An international nomination that does not yet exist.

A business network that does not yet exist.

A cross-border partnership that does not yet exist.

It is much harder to devote time to what does not exist when what already exists produces deadlines every day.

This is not necessarily a question of willingness.

It is also a question of structure.

A small Municipality does not normally have a department staffed with economists, European-project specialists, environmental technicians, financial analysts, public-private partnership experts, and innovation specialists.

Yet all those competences are needed to build a genuine territorial project.

Perhaps not full time.

Perhaps not inside the Municipality.

But they have to meet somewhere.

This is where the laboratory began to identify a possible function for itself.

Not replacing the Municipality.

Not replacing the Local Action Group.

Not replacing the collective commons.

Not replacing businesses.

Creating a space in which the pieces could be connected before they reached the desk of the institution required to decide.

In a sense, doing the work that no single actor normally owns in its entirety.

12. Fragmentation as an Economic Problem

Small territories often speak about a lack of resources.
Sometimes that is true.
But looking at the Karst, a different problem began to emerge.
The resources were there.
They were fragmented.
Land belonged to different actors.
Powers belonged to different institutions.
Funding came from different programmes.
Universities possessed knowledge.
Businesses possessed operating capacity.
Communities possessed territory.
The Municipality possessed institutional powers.
The Local Action Group had rural-development instruments.
The Region had programmes and resources.
The European Union had funding lines.
Slovenia was only a few kilometres away.
And yet none of these elements, on its own, amounted to a strategy.

> *The problem of small territories is not necessarily that they are small. It is that they are fragmented.*

This became one of the laboratory's central theses.
Fragmentation is not only administrative.
It is mental.
Tourism is discussed with those responsible for tourism.
Forests with those responsible for forests.
Agriculture with agriculture.
Culture with culture.
The budget with the budget office.
Europe with the Europe office, if one exists.
But a visitor walking along a Karst path does not cross budget chapters.
The visitor crosses a landscape.
Encounters a forest.
A local restaurant.
A vineyard.
A language.
A village.
A stone.
Perhaps a collective commons.
Buys a product.

Sleeps in local accommodation.

Reads a bilingual sign.

The experience is integrated.

Administration, by necessity, is sectoral.

Development must learn to be both.

Sectoral where expertise is required.

Integrated where vision is required.

13. The Local Action Group and the LEADER Logic

This is why the LEADER model is conceptually interesting.

The Karst Local Action Group — LAS Kras — states in its 2023-2027 Local Development Strategy that community involvement and territorial co-design should follow a bottom-up approach.[9]

These are technical words.

But they describe a simple principle.

Rural development should not arrive exclusively from above as a package already defined.

It should be built through knowledge of local needs and local actors.

In theory, this is exactly the ground on which a laboratory such as The Switzerland of the Karst should meet a Local Action Group.

Not because the Local Action Group should automatically finance its proposals.

But because, from different positions, both revolve around the same question:

How can local resources be transformed into development capacity?

In the final book, individual exchanges with the Local Action Group will need to be reconstructed from the relevant communications, requests, and replies, without attributing outcomes or positions that are not documented.

But even before entering that chronology, one lesson emerges.

A territory does not need only funders.

It needs translators.

Someone has to translate a citizen's need into the language of a project.

The project into the language of a funding call.

The funding call into the language of business.

Research into the language of administration.

Law into the language of the community.

The community into the language of Europe.

Perhaps this is one of the most underestimated functions in local development.

14. A Border That Should Multiply, Not Divide

The Karst also has one condition that makes everything more difficult and, at the same time, much more interesting.

The border.

For generations, the border represented a political and historical fracture.

Today, within the European Union and the Schengen area, that same geography makes it possible to imagine another kind of territory.

A functional territory that does not coincide perfectly with an administrative line.

Nature suggests this by itself.

The Karst does not end at the crossing point.

Groundwater does not carry a passport.

Biodiversity does not distinguish between Italy and Slovenia.

Paths have no memory of customs posts.

Grape varieties, traditions, and families have histories that cross the border.

This explains the laboratory's growing attention to Interreg and other cooperation programmes.

Not because "European" automatically means better.

But because some of the Karst's problems are cross-border by definition.

Biodiversity.

Water.

Tourism.

Mobility.

Landscape.

Cultural heritage.

Research.

If the scale of the problem crosses the border, the project should be capable of crossing it too.

And here Switzerland returned once again, not as a solution, but as a metaphor.

The ability to build institutions that allow different identities and autonomies to cooperate without becoming the same.

The Karst did not need to erase differences.

It needed to learn how to make them work together.

15. The Difficulty of Changing Perspective

At this point the deeper problem began to emerge.

It was not finding projects.

Ideas arrived faster than they could be tested.

Nor was it finding funding calls.

European and regional opportunities were numerous.

The problem was changing perspective.

For decades, many territories have learned to think of development as something that arrives.

A factory arrives.

An investor arrives.

Funding arrives.

A regional programme arrives.

A European project arrives.

A major event arrives.

But what happens if development does not arrive?

You have to produce it.

And producing it means doing less visible work.

Mapping.

Studying.

Connecting.

Calling.

Writing.

Correcting.

Requesting documents.

Reading regulations.

Finding a partner.

Discovering that the partner is not eligible.

Rebuilding the project.

Waiting for a response.

Changing route.

Sometimes starting again.

It is work that does not immediately produce openings and ribbon-cuttings.

For a long time, it produces only files.

Tables.

Certified emails.

Schemes.

Concept notes.

Analysis.

And perhaps precisely for that reason, it is difficult to assign it political and social value.

A community can easily see a newly resurfaced road.

It is harder to see the work required to prepare a European application that may produce that road, a research centre, or an environmental project three years later.

Strategic development suffers from this problem.

Its costs are immediate.

Its results are delayed.

And they are not guaranteed.

16. Risk as an Unavoidable Element

There is another word that public administrations must treat with great caution and innovators often tend to underestimate.

Risk.

For the person proposing a project, risk is the possibility that an idea may not work.

For a public official, it may also mean accountability, the legality of expenditure, audits, procurement procedures, and litigation.

These are different perspectives.

Both are rational.

Those who propose a radically new project naturally tend to focus on the possible outcome.

Those who must sign an administrative act must also consider everything that could go wrong.

This is one reason why the relationship between innovation and administration can become difficult even when everyone is acting in good faith.

The laboratory therefore carries a particular responsibility.

It cannot simply say:

This is a beautiful idea.

It must arrive on the other side of the table already carrying part of the answer.

How much does it cost?

Who pays?

What legal rule applies?

What is the risk?

Who manages it?

What is the first reversible step?

How can it be tested on a small scale?

How will success be measured?

What happens if it does not work?

This may be the real difference between a proposal and a project.

17. Know, Compare, Verify, Propose

Little by little, a method began to emerge from all these experiences.

It had not been written down in advance.

It had formed through the work itself.

KNOW → COMPARE → VERIFY → PROPOSE.[10]

To know means beginning with documents.

Not convictions.

Budgets.

Land.

Rules.

Data.

Existing strategies.

Projects already completed.

Projects that failed.

To compare means moving beyond one's own mental border.

Look at Switzerland.

Look at Slovenia.

Look at other small municipalities.

Look at European programmes.

Look at how another territory confronted the same problem.

Not to copy.

To avoid reinventing what others have already learned.

To verify means submitting the idea to reality.

Is it lawful?

Can it be financed?

Does it make economic sense?

Is there an organisation capable of implementing it?

Which permits are required?

What risks does it create?

Is there demand?

Who will manage it after the funding ends?

And only at the end:

Propose.

This sequence appears to slow the process down.

In reality, it should speed it up.

Because it reduces the number of ideas that become blocked at the worst possible moment: when they have already become expensive.

18. The Laboratory

At the beginning, The Switzerland of the Karst could have looked like a container for proposals.

After only a few weeks, it had begun to become something else.

An experiment in how development works.

The proposals remained.

Direct democracy.

Tax conciliation.

The grapevine repository.

Made & Grown.

Fernetti Circular Valley.

Repen Marble.

KARST UNESCO 2035.[7]

But gradually the most interesting question was no longer simply whether each of them would work.

It was what would be required for any proposal at all to work.

Which data.

Which actors.

Which competences.

Which timelines.

Which procedures.

What level of trust.

What capacity for cooperation.

That was the real research.

The Karst became both the subject and the laboratory.

A real territory in which to test a question that concerns thousands of other small European territories.

How do you build development when you do not have large institutional structures?

How do you activate resources that already exist?

How do you build project capacity?

How do you persuade an institution to consider a proposal born outside it without asking the institution to abandon its own responsibilities?

How do you turn a collective asset into an opportunity without betraying its nature?

How do you use a funding call without becoming dependent on funding calls?

How do you cross a border without erasing it?

How do you protect a territory while trying to create value?

There were no final answers yet.

That was precisely the point.

19. The Territory That Must Learn to Recognise Itself

Perhaps the main obstacle to development is not always a lack of money.

It may be the lack of a shared representation.

If a territory cannot describe what it wants to become, every actor behaves rationally within its own small space.

The Municipality administers.

The business sells.

The Local Action Group launches interventions.

The collective commons manages its assets.

The university conducts research.

The Region plans.

The citizen asks for a service.

No one is necessarily doing anything wrong.

And yet the sum of correct actions does not automatically produce a strategy.

A shared image is needed.

A direction concrete enough to guide different decisions without centralising all of them.

Perhaps this is the deepest meaning of the provocation “The Switzerland of the Karst”.

Not importing Swiss institutions.

Building the idea that a territory can be plural and coordinated at the same time.

That autonomy does not mean isolation.

That community does not mean closure.

That collective property does not mean immobility.

That bilingualism is not a complication to be endured.

That a border is not simply the place where something ends.

20. The Point Where the Story Really Begins

On 11 September 2026, the laboratory therefore found itself in a curious position.

It had published proposals.

It had begun to subject them to verification.

It had started monitoring funding opportunities.

It had identified the collective commons as a possible territorial infrastructure.

It had looked to the Local Action Group, the Region, European programmes, and cross-border cooperation.

It had tried to reconstruct the Municipality's economic and asset position.

And it had just activated a review procedure in order to complete that documentation.

None of this could yet be described as a final result.

No transformation had yet been achieved.

No UNESCO nomination had been secured.

No Circular Valley had been built.

No European grapevine repository yet existed.

And that was precisely the stage worth telling.

Because books about development are often written afterwards.

After the investment.

After the opening.

After the success.

By then, the path looks inevitable.

Hesitations are forgotten.

Wrong turns disappear.

Useless phone calls leave no trace.

Unanswered requests are erased from memory.

Ideas that did not work seem never to have existed.

The final result reconstructs its own past as though everything had always been leading there.

This book wanted to do the opposite.

To tell the story of the middle.

The period in which no one yet knows whether anything will work.

When every proposal might fail.

When a response might change the project.

When a document might disprove a hypothesis.

When the right financing might never arrive.

When an interlocutor who seemed secondary at first might become decisive.

It is the most uncertain part.

And probably the most useful.

Because territorial development is not a straight line between an idea and an inauguration.

It is a succession of attempts to reduce uncertainty.

21. The First Discovery

At the beginning, we thought the work consisted mainly of finding good ideas for the Karst.

After a short time, it became clear that this was the easy part.

Ideas exist.

People produce them constantly.

Some are excellent.

Some are impossible.

Others appear impossible only because no one has yet built the sequence required to make them possible.

The real work is to take an idea and accompany it through worlds that speak different languages.

The citizen.

The technician.

The public official.

The business.

The rule.

The budget.

The owner.

The researcher.

The funder.

Europe.

And to make sure that when the idea reaches the other side, it is still recognisable.

That is where the project began to change.

We were no longer simply trying to understand which proposals might be useful to Monrupino-Repentabor.

We were trying to understand how the capacity to propose is built.

And perhaps that had been the real laboratory from the beginning.

Not a place that possesses the answers.

A place that builds the method required to find them.

Know.

Compare.

Verify.
Propose.
First the documents.
Then the analysis.
Then the ideas.
And after the ideas, finally, the difficult part:
bringing them into contact with reality.
That is where this story truly begins.

Notes and Essential Sources

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