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Countryside and Communities—Fshat i Komuniteteve

Countryside as Equitable Territory: Empowering Rural Communities

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What are today's communities in the mountainous countryside of Southern Albania? Who will be living there by 2050? To date, many former inhabitants have left their villages, and several villages are already completely abandoned. Some former residents keep their connection to the plave through remittances, seasonal presence, and active investments. Others have lost hope in their territory and might never return. For young women, migration to the urban centres seems to be the only solution for their emancipation. Farmers, for whom cultivating their land is no longer economically viable, give it up to work in the service sector.



A vulcanizer at work near Gjirokastër, 2019. Photograph: Gyler Mydyti.



Elderly women in Derviçan. Photograph: "100+ Villages" program [http://rdpa.al/the-regional-development-programme-albania-rdpa-a-project-of-sdc-and-ada-in-collaboration-with-the-albanian-development-fund-adf-is-publishing-the-second-grant-scheme-which-focus-is-on-regional/].



Resting on the Streets of Gjirokastër, 2019. Photograph: Gyler Mydyti.

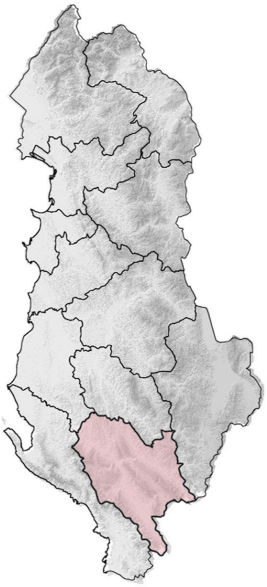


Children guiding guests in the Gostivisht village, 2019. Photograph: Gyler Mydyti.



A farmer heading home from the fields, 2019. Photograph: Gyler Mydyti.

Municipal and regional borders have changed frequently. Today's territorial borders have been defined in 2015. Due to the many shifts in the boundaries, it is difficult to understand the role of the local governances. While talking with various headmen, most of them stated not having influence on decisions regarding the villages, being only an auxiliary body of the local government. Nevertheless, it seems that in each village a certain spontaneous community structure has developed among the inhabitants.



1 County



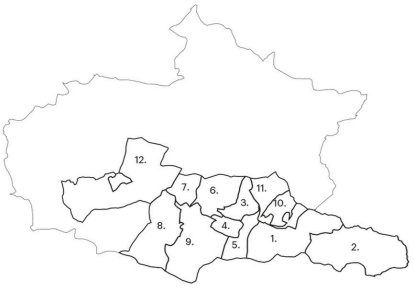
7 Municipalities



31 Local Governances containing
273 towns and villages



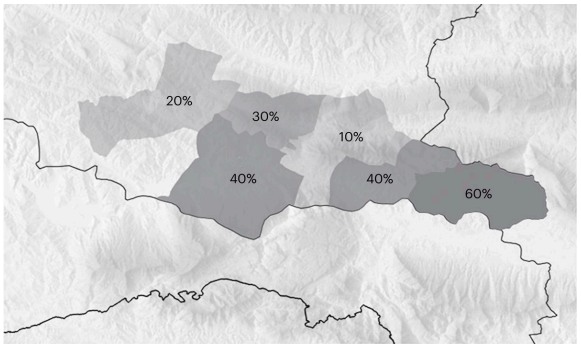
We are working on the communities of the municipalities of Dropull, Libohovë, Gjirokastër, and partly Tepelenë.



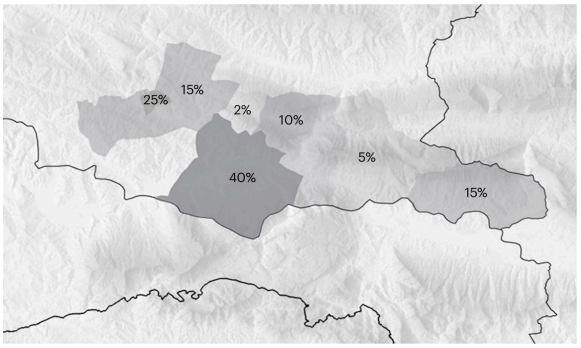
Those four municipalities are divided into seventeen local governances, containing around 100 villages. Our focus though will only be on the 13 local governances in direct relation to the Drino Valley: 1. Dropull i Poshtëm, 2. Dropull i Sipërm, 3. Antigonë, 4. Gjirokastër, 5. Lazarat, 6. Lunxhëri, 7. Odrie, 8. Picar, 9. Cepo, 10. Libohovë, 11. Qendër Libohovë, 12. Tepelenë, 13. Qendër Tepelenë.



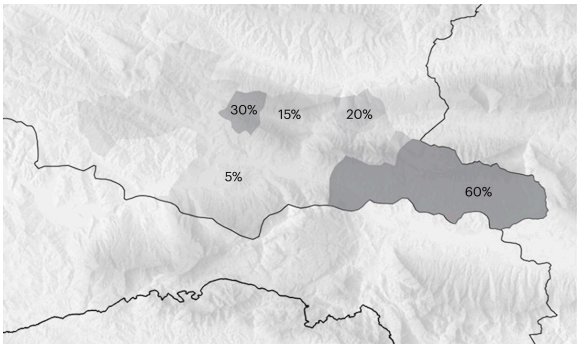
Villages of the study area.



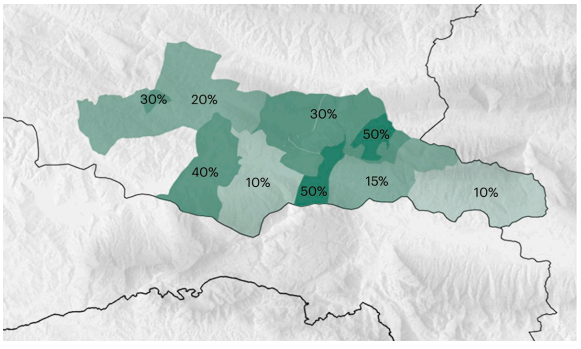
Unoccupied Dwellings.



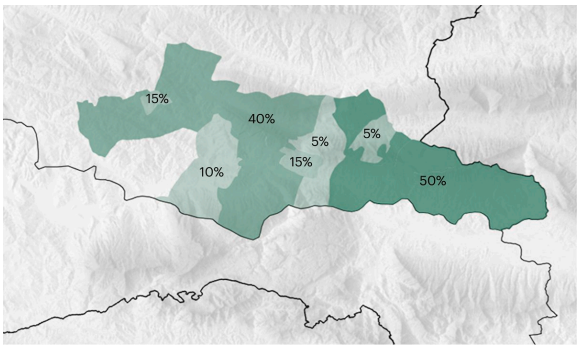
Vacant Dwellings.



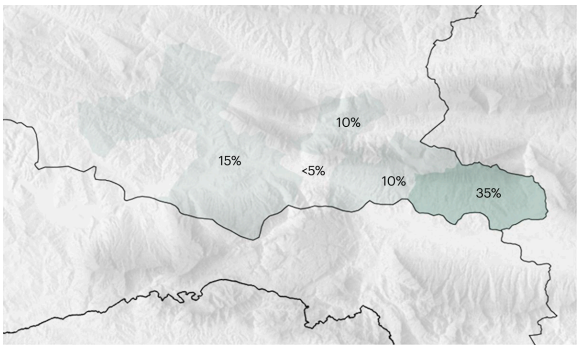
Seasonal Use.



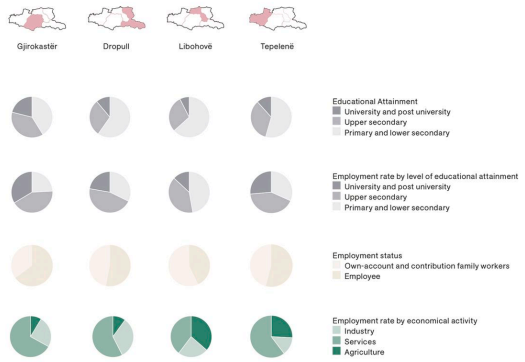
Self Employment.



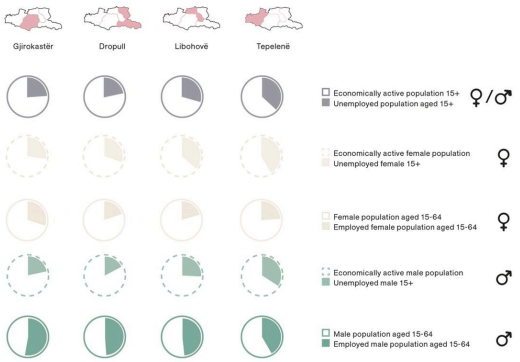
Pensions.



Remittances.



Educational Attainment, Employment Status and Economical Arctivity.

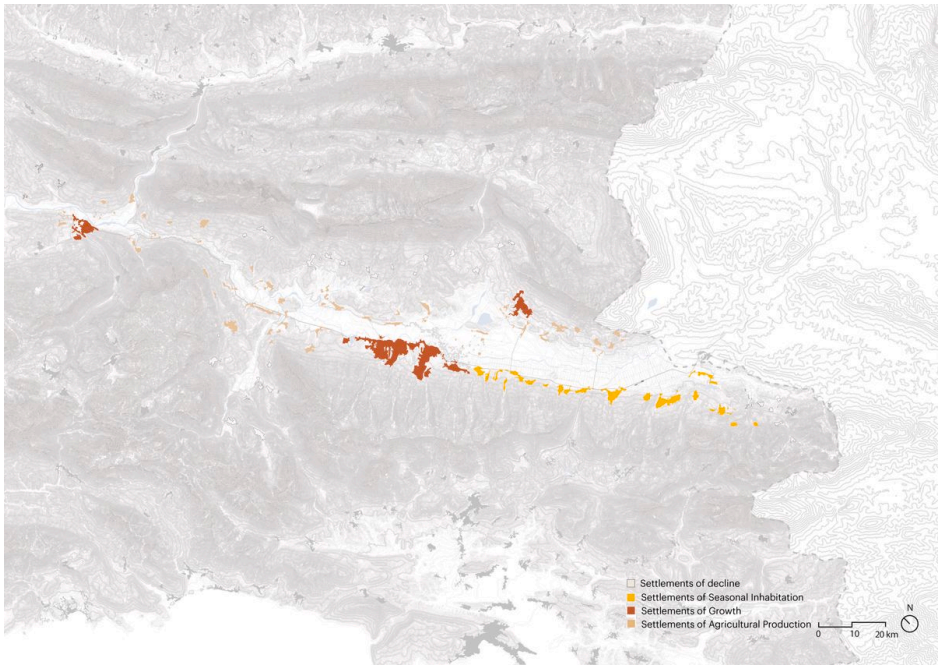


Employment and Unemployment Rate according to Gender.

Gjirokastër, Tepelenë and Libohovë are the main villages of the valley, reflected through the highest percentage of employees. Towards the Greek Boundary one finds higher percentages of people relying on remittances/pensions and a high percentage of unoccupied dwellings, mostly seasonally inhabited. In the highland, the percentage of vacant dwellings and pensions are extremely high, in particular for the most remote local governances.

The majority of the population only attained primary or lower secondary in their education. In the municipality of Gjirokastër, two third of the economical activity is based on services. In Libohovë and Tepelenë the economy varies between services, agriculture and industry. There is an equal percentage of male and female population in the valley. The percentage of female unemployment is higher than the male's one.

The Settlements of the Drino Valley



The 2020 four Drino Valley's settlements types: Decline, Seasonal Inhabitation, Growth, Agricultural Production.

REMOTELY FINANCED SETTLEMENTS

Historically Albania and Greece have always been represented in a certain territorial proximity. Nowadays this relation is still present. Most inhabitants of the settlements towards the boundary of Greece are speaking Greek and consider themselves Greek.



The Greek community of Derviçan celebrates the Greek Independence Day. Source: Shqiperia [https://www.shqiperia.com/].



"Most of the people who stayed in the village are pensioners, while the labor force work on big companies such as Glina and Gjirofarma outside the village. I don’t have an influence on decisions regarding the village. The headman is an auxiliary body of local government. The Diaspora invests into the road infrastructure, lighting or on their dwellings. 95 % of the houses are reconstructed.“ Xhimo, Headman of Goranxi.



"My daughters live abroad, but I don’t receive any economical support from them because my wife and I work both. The oldest daughter lives in the US and comes back every one or two years. The younger studies in Greece and comes back three times a year.” Qirjako Zoto, 60 years old, food technologist, inhabitant of Goranxi.

SETTLEMENTS IN DECLINE

During the Ottoman Empire the economy of the highland villages was kept active through the seasonal travel of the families' fathers going to work abroad and in order to be able to invest in the local craftsmanship at their return. Today, this is still visible in the fountains, the street's pavement, the public squares, the churches and the houses of those villages: this territory is rich in cultural heritage. During the socialist regime the relations to foreign countries were abolished and less attention was payed towards the economical activity of the highlands. This led to today's lack of social and commercial infrastructure. Furthermore, the deficit of the water supply system inside the dwellings and the undeveloped heating technologies are pushing people to leave. The main inhabitants are pensioners.



Women filling water in the common wells due to the lack of water supply in the houses. Photograph: "100+ Villages" program [http://rdpa.al/the-regional-development-programme-albania-rdpa-a-project-of-sdc-and-ada-in-collaboration-with-the-albanian-development-fund-adf-is-publishing-the-second-grant-scheme-which-focus-is-on-regional/].



"The school was built in the 19th century as a dwelling house, was then expanded and adapted. Today, it is no longer used as a school due to the low number of students."



“I own a processing plant, only 3 or 4 of my employees are from the village. Of Dhoksat’s 120 homes only 40 are inhabited today.” Inhabitant of Dhoksat, 100 Villages.

SETTLEMENTS OF SELF-SUFFICIENCY

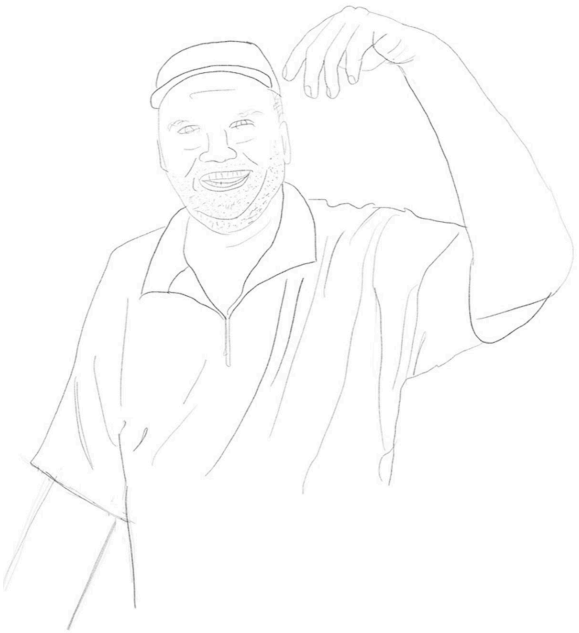
The lowlands did not experience such a strong economical decline as the highlands. In Nepravishtë, the population has remained constant over the years, with a slight decline after the 1990s. Some of the inhabitants who in the first years of the 1990s left Albania have returned with new knowledge and money to afford technical equipment for agriculture in order to increase production. In most villages, the population is shrinking. Consequently, there is a lack of renewal of the population. Most schools are located in this territory, but some consider to close because of the lack of students. Villages do not have a proper healthcare centre. There is one building which encompasses this function, mostly in poor physical condition, equipped with one bed and no permanent doctor. Doctor mostly comes from Gjirokastër two to three times a week. Inhabitants strongly depend on Gjirokastër, Libohovë or Tepelenë for better services.



Narrow historic pathways in Benje Village. Photograph: Gyler Mydyti.



“We have a good relation with our neighbouring villages. Also with the Greek villages, because most our workers go to work there. Nowadays, the population of the village is shrinking because of the emigration and the absence of jobs.” Lulzim Dervishi, headman of Nepravishtë.



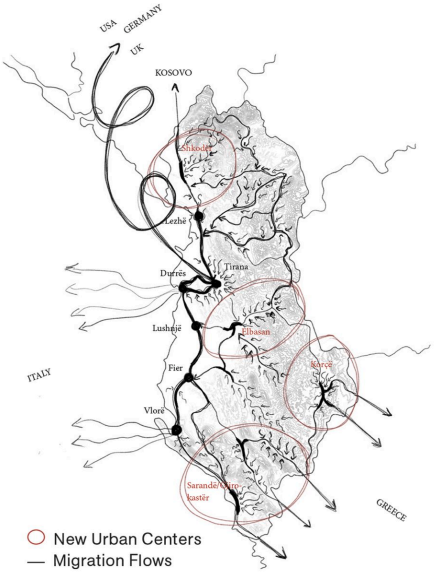
“Two times a day a privately organised van serves for the transportation of the inhabitants. There is no police station in the village. Emergency and fire services are covered by the municipality of Gjirokastër.”

SETTLEMENTS OF GROWTH

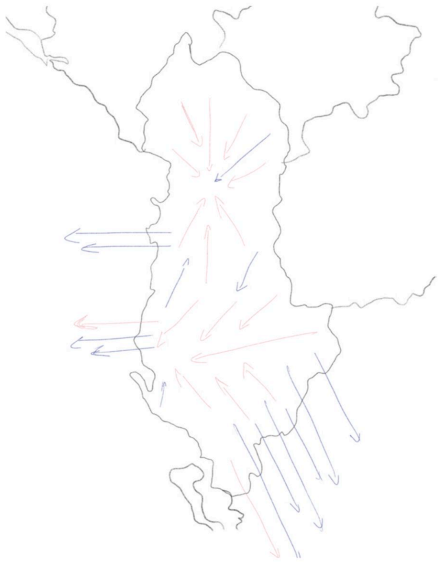
This is the territory of working opportunities. Gjirokastër‘s county population is shrinking, but the population in the urban centre of this region is growing. In this territory inhabitants of the region move for education, healthcare, shopping and work. The majority works in services and is employed. Because of the hospital, it is also the territory where doctors are living. The belief that one can lead a good life by living in the countryside is gone. For the majority, this territory of growth is only a stepping stone towards emigration to bigger urban centres along the coast. This is also the case for asylum seekers who see Albania as stop along their journey to Europe.



Students at the university of Gjirokastër.
Source: Unipupil [https://unipupil.es/].



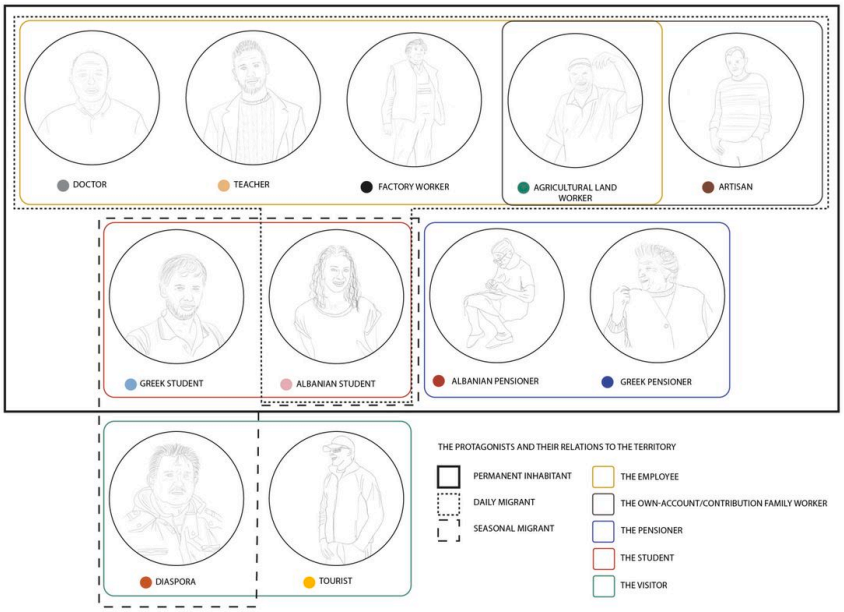
Migratory movements in Albanian territory.



Gender gap: migration of women towards the urban centres and men to foreign countries.

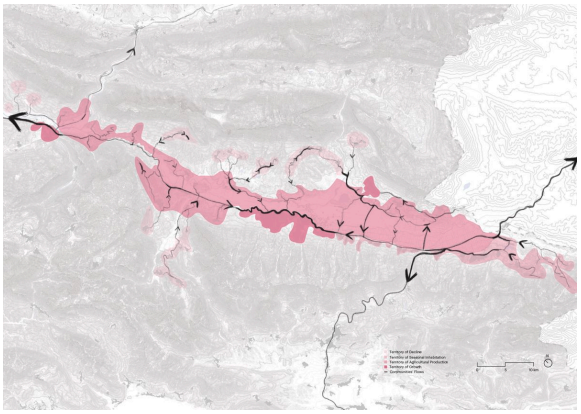
Balancing Territorial Dynamics

By relating the protagonists of this settlements to one another, we define today's communities as follows: "employed", "self-employed", "students", "pensioner" and "visitor." In the Drino Valley today, we recognise four territories: the territory of growth, the territory of decline, the territory of agricultural production and the territory of seasonal inhabitation. Those territories are intrinsically related with the dynamics of the communities. Therefore, we define territories and communities of urbanisation and do believe those have to be rethought by 2050.

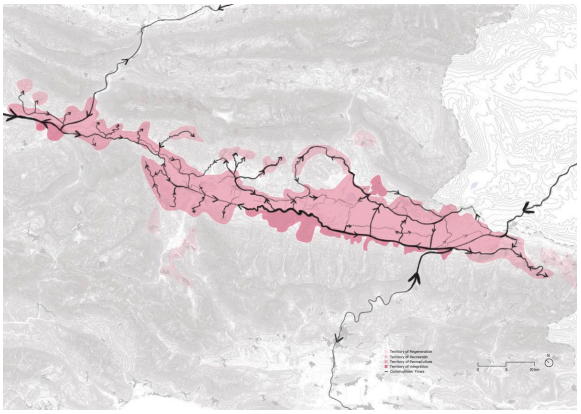


Communities of urbanisation in the Drino Valley in 2020.

In the future, the countryside will be able to offer what the growing urban centres and the crowded coast can not. The precious natural resources and the unique slowness of this territory have to be preserved. We propose a vision for the territory in 2050 aiming for a territorial equity. Accepting today's territorial dynamics we realised that rather than drastic interventions on the territory, there is a need for a social change. By introducing new protagonists and new types of relations we offer a new perspective for the Albanian countryside.



Territories of urbanisation in the Drino Valley in 2020: Territory of Decline, Territory of Seasonal Inhabitation, Territory of Agricultural Production and Territory of Growth.



Territories of urbanisation in the Drino Valley in 2050: Territory of Regeneration, Territory of Recreation, Territory of Permaculture and Territory of Integration.

TERRITORY OF INTEGRATION

We recognise the territory of growth as positive for the renewal of the population's economical activity, even though this should not happen in disregard of the countryside. Therefore, we define it as a territory of integration. The pavement of the streets and the architecture of the houses should be in line with local practices in building construction. The supermarkets will be reduced in favour of specialty shops such as a bakery, a butcher, or a vegetable store.

TERRITORY OF PERMACULTURE

In the Greek villages close to Gjirokastër, today's pensioners will not live there anymore in 2050 and their relatives will most probably live in Greece. Some houses will consequently be rented. Due to the interesting and strategic proximity to Gjirokastër we imagine those villages to give space to new businesses and associations to emerge. Rather than being active in agricultural production, this territory will be one of permaculture. The aim is the preservation of the arable land.

TERRITORY OF RECREATION

In the highlands, seasonal use will increase, especially through the installation of wifi antennas. It will become a territory of recreation.

TERRITORY OF REGENERATION

The more remote and abandoned villages will be given back to nature: a territory of regeneration will emerge.



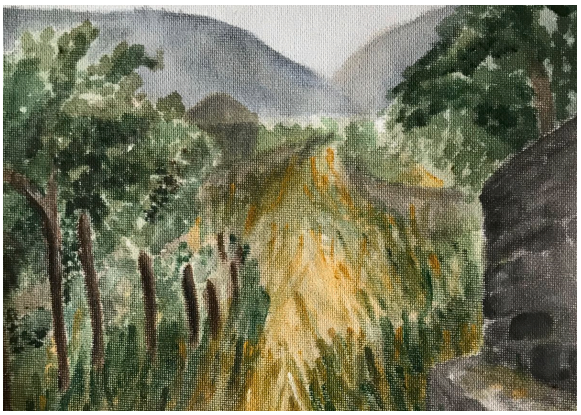
TERRITORY OF INTEGRATION
Consumers decide to go to the farm to purchase their vegetables. This way they can get in touch with the farmer. In some cases the farmer even lets them pick the fruits by themselves.



TERRITORY OF PERMACULTURE
Most farmers have graduated from the Agriculture University of Tirana. They have a certain connection and knowledge for the land. Attentively observing and reproducing the resilient features of the natural ecosystems, without use of any chemicals, they are able to produce varied and long lasting crops. Landowners with small land plots come together to found a cooperative. Women and men work the land equally.



TERRITORY OF RECREATION
The third-quarter pensioners have inherited the house of their parents. They grew up and worked abroad, but now that they have reached pension they decide to go back to their roots. They are still interested in keeping themselves active. Therefore, they develop informal businesses on the balconies of their homes. They grow vegetables in their gardens to then sell freshly prepared traditional dishes. Some of them still practice local craftsmanship inherited from their parents, such as embroidery or sculpture. With the money earned they renovate their houses and take care of the village.



TERRITORY OF REGENERATION
Fascinated by the wilderness of some regions of the Drino Valley, a 2050s traveler will get lost in the abandoned village and experience the real essence of the countryside.



OVER THE WHOLE TERRITORY
OF THE DRINO VALLEY
Architects are specialists of local craftsmanship. They work in collaboration with local craftsmen and their aim is to preserve the rustic image of the territory. They also offer summer schools for Tirana's architecture students who might be interested in learning the local building construction techniques.



OVER THE WHOLE TERRITORY
OF THE DRINO VALLEY
The young students of the villages along the fields are taught gardening at school by practicing it actively in the school’s courtyards. The aim is to break the gender gap in farming and gardening. Gjirokastër's university also developed practical work, especially in the fields of cultural heritage preservation. This attracts many students from the entire country to study in Gjirokastër. In the summer, practical summer courses are offered.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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