

## **ICH in the South-Western Alps. Empowering communities through youth education on nature and cultural practices**

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### **Abstract**

The South-Western Alps, across Italy and France – broadly corresponding to the Occitan Valleys, inhabited by the linguistic and cultural Occitan community – are an area of long-lasting and significantly dense presence of diverse intangible cultural heritage expressions, resulting from the peculiar forms of relation and adaptation between the communities and the mountain ecosystems. In addition to the Occitan culture, with its specific traits, those expressions are present, for instance, in the traditional agricultural migratory routes (the Transhumance, part of the UNESCO Representative List of the ICH since 2019); in food-related practices (see the “The Food Atlas of the Monviso territory and of Occitan Valleys” and the archive generated by the AlpFoodWay project, promoting the nomination of the Alpine Food tradition to the UNESCO ICH List); and in other practices (for instance Alpinism, part of the UNESCO Representative List of the ICH since 2019).

Analogously to what happens in other peripheral and mountain localities, this area is currently facing a number of challenges: difficult transport and information accessibility, shortage of primary public services and commercial activities, aging population and depopulation, digital divide, urge of finding adaptive measures to climate change. Significant challenges also directly affect tangible and intangible cultural heritage: rural historic buildings often lie in a state of abandonment, several artisanal practices are disappearing, and the transmission of traditional knowledge and of the Occitan language is at risk. The recent events relating to COVID-19 have well highlighted the threats, and some opportunities as well, connected to living in the area. Many interesting experiences recorded during the last decade illustrate how communities are able to build up resilience and contributing to shining new vitality on the territory. Among them, the widely diffused common element is the link between local development and the different expressions of intangible cultural heritage present in the area. A virtuous case is represented by the youth empowerment programmes promoted by the Monviso Park (managing organization of the UNESCO Transboundary Biosphere Reserve of Monviso) who, together with a number of local NGOs, is implementing a strategy for raising public and youth awareness about the role of cultural heritage in local development. Santagata Foundation

has partnered with the Monviso Park for the design and implementation of youth programmes, with a specific focus, since 2018, on initiatives dedicated to population aged between 15 and 18, involved in the elaboration of proposals and demands for culture-based responses to the current development challenges, to be then addressed to the institutions responsible for managing the area. The educational activities are being implemented in close relation with local players. Among them: new entrepreneurial initiatives based on traditional food practices, like cheese-making and brewery; tourism players valorizing the local heritage; and local cultural organizations. The programme positively impacted on strengthening the collaboration among the various stakeholders (institutional, private, and the civil society), and to unveil the potential of contributing to resilience and to sustainable paths of development by investing in the future generations and in their awareness of local cultural resources. Starting from this promising experiences, analogous initiatives are currently under planning in other territories and communities in Italy.