

PRESS RELEASE

Cyclone Harry and Italian small islands fragility

Over the past two days, we've witnessed images of the effects of Cyclone Harry, which hit the coasts of southern Italy and numerous small islands on January 20th. Gusts of wind, strong storm surges, and interrupted shipping connections have once again demonstrated the morphological and social fragility of these territories.

The impact of Cyclone Harry on Italian small islands has torn away the veil of geographic and social vulnerability that island studies describe as one of the determining factors for understanding island geographies.

Cyclone Harry has demonstrated how precarious maritime connections are and prone to prolonged disruptions. Total dependence on naval transport, not only for the movement of people but also for supplies, transforms every storm into forced isolation—except for the very rare cases of islands with airports—depriving resident communities of the ability to move around and obtain essential goods. The human geography of Italian small islands is characterized by a “double insularity”, where physical distance from the mainland is compounded by the inconsistency of scheduled services, often reduced or inefficient during the winter months. This logistical precariousness impedes the development of a resilient economy and condemns residents to a state of perpetual uncertainty regarding their freedom of movement.

The lack of basic services represents the other side of the coin of this island's fragility, with healthcare and education systems suffering cuts due to the logic of large numbers. Hospital infrastructure is often inadequate to handle emergencies caused by violent weather events, forcing the population to rely on air rescue, which weather conditions sometimes make impossible. Seasonality heavily influences the provision of services, which tend to expand to accommodate the influx of summer tourists and then drastically decline during the rest of the year. This demographic fluctuation creates an institutional paradox in which the right to citizenship seems subordinated to the territory's attractiveness in terms of market.

The intermittent attention of government institutions, including in other EU countries, manifests itself in centralized planning that ignores the morphological and social specificities of small island communities. National policies tend to equate small islands with mainland municipalities, neglecting the additional costs of living and maintaining infrastructure in environments with high salinity and hydrogeological risk. The lack of a dedicated and effective legislative framework that recognizes the status of “fragile territory” prevents from the implementation of long-term adaptation strategies to climate change and extreme events like Cyclone Harry. Territorial governance requires a paradigm shift that change its focus from emergency management to building the conditions that counteract the drivers of social and environmental vulnerability that these territories share with other Mediterranean archipelagos.

Geographical reflection and the evidence of recent damage require a collective awareness of the need to protect small island communities. Recognition of the unique nature of islands must translate into sound investments, complementing what is already provided for by relevant regulations, for territorial continuity and the strengthening of local healthcare and education facilities. Only through a policy that enhances the

resilience of resident communities and guarantees equal access to services compared to mainland areas will it be possible to transform fragility into a sustainable resource. Providing tools to counter the territorial marginalization of small islands requires institutional and private commitment that goes beyond a seasonal view of local economies to embrace the daily and structured management of their geographic uniqueness.

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