



May 2018

promoting youth involvement and  
social engagement

## **PROMISE: Promoting Youth Involvement and Social Engagement: Opportunities and challenges for conflicted young people across Europe.**

**WP6: From Conflict to Innovation: Ethnographic Case Studies**

<http://www.promise.manchester.ac.uk/en/home-page/>

### **No Tav: Stigma as a drive for social change**

**Italy**

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#### **Executive summary:**

This report presents the findings of a research carried out amongst the young activists of the *No Tav* social movement in Italy. Despite being strongly stigmatised by the mainstream media and the national authorities as highly conflictual youth, they engage positively in society and they become interpreters of instances of social change. The hypothesis that lies behind our research is that the young activists, despite the strong stigmatisation they are subjected to, succeed in interpreting instances of social change by borrowing from the overall movement they belong to the key features that allow them to turn stigma into a positive value. Our theory is that the intergenerational dimension is key to the innovation process the young activists are bringing about. Through the conscious adhesion to the community and the relationship of trust and solidarity established with its members and particularly with the elderly, the young activists are able to convey their innovative potential. They convert such potential into actions that point at consciously boosting a social change, with a view to gradually investing not only in their individual life but that of an entire community – a community whose boundaries start locally but stretch out to reach national and even European ones.

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## 1. Introduction

This report presents the findings of research carried out amongst No Tav young activists between May 2017 and February 2018. The No Tav is a social movement that has opposed the construction of a high-speed railway (the TAV, in Italian) between France and Italy for over 25 years. The protest gathers the great majority of the population of the Susa Valley, an alpine Valley situated not far from the city of Turin. As it addresses an infrastructure of high national interest, the No Tav protest has rapidly captured the interest of politicians and mainstream media and it has increasingly turned into a national case over the years<sup>1</sup>. Over the years, the No Tav movement has expanded its scope and incorporated new issues, creating national and European networks with similar social movements. As a result, 'The Susa Valley has left the local borders to become a national case' (Diamanti, 2012).

While the No Tav movement has been, and is still being, widely researched both from sociological and political perspectives, no research studies have specifically targeted the young sector of the movement yet. Nevertheless, the youth participate very actively in the movement and their role is regarded as of strategic relevance to its future development by the older generations within the movement itself. In this perspective, they place themselves within the frame painted by Della Porta and Piazza (2008, p. 53) in their study on protest campaigns against large-scale public works, who suggest that 'mobilization is produced by multiple and (both socially and ideologically) heterogeneous actors. These become 'networked in action' (and) extend vertically from above (activists) to below (citizens) as well as along the generational dimension (young and old)'.

Additionally, the young No Tav activists are also targets of a strong stigmatisation process brought about by national authorities and mainstream media. In fact, images widely conveyed by the media about the No Tav movement are usually associated with clashes and guerrilla-like sceneries where young people are often on the frontline and they are portrayed predominantly as hostile and violent towards law enforcement agencies (Askatasuna, 2012; Senaldi, 2016).

The public discourse on the No Tav in Italy depicts the activists alternatively as anti-progress 'primitives' (Senaldi, 2016) or as Nimby (Not in my Back Yard) (Roccatò and Mannarini, 2012) unable to look beyond their own garden or – particularly when referring to the young portion of the movement - as black-blocs, terrorists and 'professionals of violence' (Senaldi, 2016, pp. 22-23). This kind of narrative practice seems to conform to Goffman's (2003, p. 171) elaboration of the social function of stigma, where 'the stigmatization of those who have a bad moral reputation may serve as a social control device on a formal level'. As Senaldi puts in regards to the process of criminalisation that targets the No Tav movement: 'Beyond the distinction between the good and the bad guys, as one can infer, the goal is unique - namely, create a monster of which the 'normal' person should be afraid and fearful' (Senaldi, 2016, p. 85).

Interestingly, while the young No Tav are represented as highly conflictual by mainstream media and national authorities, they are, at the same time, perceived as potential agents of innovation to look up to by large social sectors. This holds particularly true for the activists of similar social movements against large-scale public works in Italy, but also for many young people all over Italy

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<sup>1</sup> The main reason behind the movement is that a new high-speed railway line in the area is not truly needed, its only purpose being the profit of the many private companies that have shares in it. Additionally, the construction of the new line would destroy a huge part of the Susa Valley, causing not only an environmental but also an economic and social damage that would affect severely the local population. The No Tav activists propose, instead, their own development plan for the area, which must be based on the principle of social and ecological sustainability, and includes supporting the production and consumption of local products, enhancing low-impact transportation, and promoting eco-tourism, among other issues.

who sympathise with the themes pushed forward by the No Tav movement even though they are not activists.

Contemporary studies on the young generations in Italy tend to represent them as ‘self-centered, less idealist, [overwhelmed by] a transformation that pushes young people into a condition of isolation, disorientation and uncertainty and drives them to distance themselves from traditional politics which does not represent them at all’ (Savonardo, 2013, p. 19). As a result, ‘in the last years, it seems that young people have lost their political and social subjectivity’, thus, gaining the label of ‘invisible generation’ (ibidem). In this perspective, the No Tav youth seem to be following a completely different path - a path of social participation and visibility – and this is achieved in harmony with older generations, as the findings presented in this report will demonstrate.

The case study presented in this report proceeds from the inherent contradiction between the above mentioned representations of the young No Tav. Research findings depict a scenery of proactive young people who, thanks to their enriching interaction with the older generations within the movement, succeed questioning themselves socially as well as in their individual lives, always looking ahead to the future. In doing so, they propose concrete actions, aimed at consciously activating social changes that can gradually invest not only their life but that of an entire community, whose boundaries start locally but may encompass the national and even the European ones.

The hypothesis that lies behind our research is that the young No Tav activists, despite the strong stigma they are subjected to, succeed in interpreting instances of social change by borrowing from the whole movement the key features that will allow them to turn stigma into an asset. Through the conscious adhesion to the No Tav community - and the relationship of trust and solidarity established with its members and especially with the elderly - the young No Tav are able to convey their innovative potentials, transforming them into concrete actions for the benefit of the whole community. Our theory is that the intergenerational dimension is key to the innovation process the young No Tav activists are bringing about.

## 2. Methods

Due to the interest in capturing the insiders’ points of view, and, in particular, the youth’s own perception of their own agency, the research adopted an ethnographic approach in agreement with all project partners. The ethnographic methodology led to the use of semi-structured interviews as the primary means of investigation. The interview outline developed in agreement with the partners of the PROMISE project served as the basis for a new outline developed to better suit the case-study on No Tav youth. The outline acted as a ‘guide’, providing cues to encourage discussions pertinent to the research. However, it did not exclude the possibility of asking unforeseen questions that proved useful to the researcher during the course of the conversations, adding context to the study. The case-specific interview outline identified five main subject areas (motivations; youth and intergenerational relations; participation and agency; stigma and conflict; social change and future) within which the interviewer pinpointed specific issues to be addressed. Conducted in this way, the guided narrative interview was sufficiently malleable and adaptable to the context and the interlocutor’s specific needs.

From this point of view, that is, to underline that the abovementioned case study required a considerable amount of preliminary work due to positioning of the object of investigation. The No Tav movement arose, and is still today, in Susa Valley – a valley located in the north-western part

of the alpine arc near the Italy-France border - the area which is mostly affected by the construction of the high-speed railway (TAV). The field research area is about 700 km from Rome – location of the IPRS, the research centre conducting the study for the PROMISE project – and the field work preparation required an extremely accurate preliminary work phase aimed at arranging the subsequently necessary details for the permanence in the valley. The preliminary phase lasted for about 2 months and included getting in touch with potential privileged witnesses as well as phone conversations with *gatekeepers* who provided additional information on the context and, at time, helped in facilitating contact with the locals. The first stay in the field (beginning of June 2017) lasted one week; it was a full-immersion in the Valley, rich of conversations and encounters with the locals of every age range. The external researcher experienced a surprising feeling of inclusion and trust along with the perception of a very unite and strong community. During this first stay, 7 semi-structured interviews with young activists were conducted and audio-recorded. The stay in the field also allowed for the observation of various events related to the research topic, which contributed even more to improve the understanding of the social environment and the dynamics of the relations of young people participating in the research.

Due to the political implications of the case and the overall complexity of the context, the need for more frequent and longer visits emerged in order to fully understand it, therefore, the collaboration of a local, very close to the movement was sought. Therefore, the research team in the fieldwork phase was assisted by a local researcher. Although not falling within the category ‘peer’ and because of her being of an age slightly higher than the research target, her participation ‘on the research side’ has been a decisive factor and contributed extensively to the quality of the research outcomes.

This methodological strategy enabled the development of more specific topics and more accurate and appropriate questions based on a deeper, long-standing and practical knowledge of the topic. Moreover, it contributed to widen the research team cognitive horizon, being it external to the No Tav movement and at the same time, to the geographic area of the research. Finally, it has definitely facilitated the fieldwork phase with regards to logistics, reducing all difficulties usually associated to the research of contacts and to the access of external researchers in a given community.

The pairing of the internal-external researcher showed to be an extremely valid method especially concerning the accuracy of the collected data as well as the subsequent analysis, creating the opportunity to incorporate in a single interpretative frame both the outsider and the insider point of view. This is a methodological approach we mean to keep on experimenting in future ethnographic research and which we endorse because of all of the aforementioned reasons.

Overall, the field research methodology comprised the following techniques and resources:

- ✓ *Semi-structured interviews*: 20 semi-structured interviews with 20 young No Tav, 9 females and 11 males, were conducted and all were audio recorded and lasted on average one hour each. The age of the interviewees ranged between 18 and 27 years, with the exception of 3 interviewees aged between 30 – 34 years. Their participation was crucial to enriching the historical dimension of the collected interviews. Seven (7) interviews were conducted by the ‘outside’ researcher in May-June 2017 and 13 more interviews by the ‘inside’ researcher between January and March 2018. Outside of the recorded interviews, many informal conversations took place with the young activists, adding fruitful information to the data gathered through the interviews. Many informal conversations took place with the elderly, too.

- ✓ *Participant observations* - this included participation in informal meetings as well as in leisure opportunities and events, both with young people and with the elderly. In particular, observational work has included, among others:
  - Attending meetings of the No Tav Youth Committee;
  - Attending informal meetings of other No Tav members;
  - Having lunch/dinner with various NT members, including with the elderly;
  - Visiting and spending time at cafès and other key-meeting sites to observe daily interaction between NT members of different ages;
  - Visiting some of the main sites of conflict (e.g., sites where the pre-construction work is being carried out, sites of serious clashes between the police and the NT in the past, sites that are presently fenced and guarded by the police and the army).
- ✓ *Field diary*– this was written by the ‘alien’ researcher only, while the local researcher was asked to describe by voice all major facts and events observed and participated by her.
- ✓ *Collection of secondary data*: various forms of documentation (e.g., social media, pictures, newspaper and online articles) were collected in order to support and enrich the data resulting from the interviews.
- ✓ *Photo elicitation*: The young interview participants were told about the opportunity to provide pictures taken by themselves and showing their own perspectives of the NT movement. Many seemed enthusiastic about the idea but did not provide any picture in the end, possibly due to judicial concerns (see below paragraph on Ethics).

Following the field research, all audio interviews, field diaries, and ethnographic notes were transcribed and coded using Nvivo. Text coding involved two steps: first, text extracts were identified and ‘labelled’ in accordance with case-specific criteria (Level 1 labels/nodes); subsequently, all Level 1 nodes were grouped within broader labels (Level 2) that had been previously agreed within the Consortium. The analysis presented in this report is based on the data coded with Nvivo.

## **2.1. Notes on the conduction of the interviews**

Differently from other cases in PROMISE, the young participants in this case-study are characterised by a high degree of awareness of the reasons lying beyond their agency. They are also used to debating about and reflecting on the stigmatisation process that targets them – a core issue in our research. While on one hand such awareness has certainly represented an asset to the conduction of the interviews, on the other hand, it sometimes stood as a constraint to obtaining information that would not just reproduce preconceived thoughts. This forced the researchers to adopt alternative strategies (questions or topics) in order to obtain accounts that would truly recall their personal experience. For example, it was necessary to ask many ‘Why?’ questions at the end of an account; or ask about personal emotions in regards to specific events; or ask ‘Who says/said so?’ when the interviewee’s speech sounded very theoretical. However, even in the few cases where the interviewees were less likely to speak freely, they would drop such an attitude after the first 20-30 minutes of their interview.

All the young participants have expressed lively interest to our research, with many among them explicitly asking to read the outcomes of the research once they are ready.

Finally, it is important to highlight that the presence of the ‘alien’ researcher was accepted at once with an attitude of openness and inclusiveness, not only by the youth but also by the elder members of the community. This contributed largely to facilitate the conduction of the field research, in addition to providing for additional opportunities of observation and informal interaction.

## **2.2. Ethical issues**

As previously agreed within the PROMISE Consortium, all interview participants were asked to sign informed consent forms for their participation. Prior to this, the researchers presented the project and provided clear and detailed information about the research, its purpose and the possible uses of the information received. This was done individually with the first interviewees; later, it was decided to inform about the project and the research at one meeting of the Youth Committee. Researchers ensured that each participant fully understood the aim of the research and its implications. Although the young participants had no objections in participating in the interviews, they showed concern about having the collected data circulating out of the project Consortium. Such concern is due to the juridical situation of many of them. In fact, some NT young activists (and even elder activists) are presently prosecuted under criminal law as a result of their participation at demonstrations and protests and other young activists, who are not under prosecution, have raised concern that their declarations might be used against them. A deeper concern regards the circulation of pictures that may be out of their concern and for this reason, they refused to take part in the photo elicitation proposed by the researchers, although they expressed great interest for it and did not exclude the opportunity to adopt it in future projects or activities.

## **3. Key Findings**

### **3.1. Engaging factors/Turning points**

Many amongst the young interview participants grew up in the Susa Valley in an already full-blown No-Tav protest. Almost all of them tell how the NT movement during their childhood was already present in their families. They still have a live and intense memory of the first demonstrations they took part in with their parents, describing it as a joyful image where a key factor for the children’s appreciation was the feeling of a ‘family-like’ environment.

I started taking part in bigger activities when I was a kid, and to be honest without asking myself too many questions (...) When you are a child you just tell your mum, Let’s go to the march, Let’s go to the march, and yes, this is beautiful, like in a big family. (Francesca)

I was already in it as a child and I had to experience it as something positive because when you are a child you take part anyway, it was a serene environment, and the demonstrations and the whole context felt very homely. (Piero)

I remember when I was a kid, I was going to primary school and for my first one, my parents took me.... (Giulio)

For what concerns young activists who grew up in the Valley, the deeper motivations of the protest can be traced back to their family cultural climate and social surroundings they have lived in since their early childhood. From their words, a kind of personal growth path strongly emerges which led them to start reflecting on their participation in the movement:

Then I started asking myself some questions, why not, I mean I started to get informed, I didn't take it for granted... (Piero)

...And then I started asking myself questions... (Francesca)

Let's say until I was 15, 16 years old, yes, I went to the demonstrations because my parents took me there, then since I turned 15, 16 I started going because I wanted to go. (Paolo)

They also express a sense of gratitude towards their parents (and often the whole community) who charted a course which eventually became their own path and their own choice:

I have to thank my parents because they let me know this reality and....growing up to continue with this background idea became my own choice. (Giulio)

There are also young people who arrived in Susa Valley as adults, after having had initial contacts with the NT movement away from the Valley, sometimes through participation in other movements or contexts that share a common political perspective with the No Tav movement. The curiosity to get to know better the No Tav reality stemmed from such situations as well as from the news watched on TV:

It's by watching these videos and reading some interviews that I started to be interested in it and discovered what the No Tav movement was. (Clara)

Because of how the mainstream media handled the news about the No Tav movement, confining its existence to the chronicle pages, it was very hard for this young activist to get a clear idea of such a lively and heartfelt protest. Likewise, images of clashes between protesters and police did not explain anything about the dynamics which led to the clashes whereas it seemed they simply aimed at suggesting a closed interpretation of No Tav activists as terrorists and black-blocks, in addition to being anti-progress and nimby:

It was mostly about how the No-Tav were described at that time, like terrorists, black-blocks... it was something that even if you were outside of it (...) if I had to trust in the public opinion, possibly I would have never understood anything of the No-Tav movement, what it really was...(Clara)

In other cases, it is the urge to ask oneself questions to answer to the stigmatisation that becomes one of the triggering factors to join the protest. Francesca, for example, who grew up in the Valley with her mother who sympathised with the movement, experienced the stigma as soon as she left the Valley to attend high school in Turin:

I really was in trouble there, I mean, I felt as though I was living in two different worlds, when I talked about the TAV they all looked at me as though they were saying 'Noooo, such a thing is just not true (...) It's you people in Susa Valley who are crazy'. (...) I



wouldn't say justify myself, but I had to give them good reasons. Since then I started to get informed to be able to give a detailed account so that I could also answer (...), attending events on my own will, and that is how it all started. (Francesca)

### 3.1.1 Feeling of injustice

According to the data gathered from the interviews, one of the major motivations pushing young people to embrace the protest is the need to oppose the feeling of injustice. This motivation is shared by both young people from the Valley and those who arrived as adults:

Q: Looking backwards, if you had to explain what attracted you the most?

A: Definitely in the beginning, I felt a strong feeling of injustice about what was happening to the people there. (Clara)

...That the police beat up the elderly or some people we knew. That is... possibly beating up a neighbour whom I knew was a very good person... This messes you up... What did they do wrong to get beaten up... (Alice)

Since I was a child, I was always upset by injustice and the like and I always experienced it almost personally (...) I studied law, I studied, and seeing the discrepancy between what you study and what actually happens... It really made me question myself, wondering 'shouldn't they (the police) protect the citizens, make sure rights are implemented and respected? Why instead of having people respect those rights they breach them?' (Francesca)

Seeing how people got beaten up, I couldn't understand how they (the police) could be possibly right. I mean, if someone is right there's no need to show it like that (...) Considering that my mum too was beaten up then... well, the 'well, maybe they are right' was discarded at once. (Piero)

The feeling of injustice recurs in all the interviews and it is strongly felt by the young activists. It appears to be a decisive factor leading young people to engage and participate more actively in the movement. Within this topic, personal experience and injustices perpetrated by representatives of institutions intertwine; they especially connect to the injustice of the cause, namely the construction of TAV, at the root of the movement which keeps on growing. In this sense, Clara's words are enlightening:

You say: I wonder why they want to build something like that which should be of European interest but nobody is happy about it. I mean, if something is beneficial then the people should be happy. If the people aren't happy, then why is it like that? And then if you consider the repression, you say: ok, even if they were right, and obviously they are not, there's such a strong repression, and if it doesn't even come up in the news, not once, well then something doesn't add up. (Clara)

### 3.1.2 Sense of community

There is not only the will to fight the feeling of injustice to push these young people to actively take part in the protest. As emerging from the tales of the interviewed youth, there is also a sense of community meant as a positive collectivity of individuals sharing the same reasons and values:

I like to be with my comrades, with people from the movement, because I really feel to be part of a community, a family, I feel good as well. (Alice)

It also emerges how individuals are aware of belonging to this community and contribute, together, to creating a new cultural system. The strength of this unity originates from the very fact of belonging to the No-Tav community, as explained by one of the gatekeepers who helped us in better understanding the internal dynamics of the movement before starting the fieldwork: 'I welcome you as a No-Tav, because you are in the right. Because the No-Tav movement is not only a protest against a train, it is the sharing of a set of values which makes you one of us.' (Gatekeeper 01)

From the point of view of a young NT activist, the feeling of belonging to the No-Tav community can be explained as such:

...I mean one's own feeling of belonging to a community and the idea that we are all small pieces of it, right? It's together we can get results and (...) when someone leaves it is an important part of it that goes, and when a new one arrives, it's an important one that joins us. (Roberto)

Considered as such, the added value of the No-Tav community lies in its being a collection of 'small pieces', so that 'even people coming from outside, when they come here they feel part of something which is bigger than the total sum of its parts, its people.' (Clara). Each little piece has the same value as any other one by virtue of the belonging criterion. Only joining the other ones can one give sense and meaning to the actions of the whole community. Moreover, the positive function of the community on single individuals belonging to it, also consists in the principle of solidarity regulating relations between its members. In turn, the principle of solidarity results in the sharing of responsibilities and the need to protect each community member:

For example the community gives me (...) a good level of serenity which makes me feel protected, so that I know that if something happens to me, the community is with me. (Roberto)

The feeling of being part of something bigger giving protection but at the same time, benefitting from the contribution of every single piece, and the feeling of belonging stemming from it, reinforces the young people awareness of having a reference group which they share values and actions with. As we will demonstrate in the following pages, being able to rely on a reference group is crucial, not only in favouring the youth's active participation, but also in the subsequent transformation of the stigma they are subjected to into an effective means of social change.

The perception of a sense of inclusion and cohesiveness characterising the No Tav community is also shared by those who grew up elsewhere and came to the Valley as adults, such as Clara. The impact with the No-Tav community was intense, immediate and it led her to confront with her own context of origin, namely the city of Turin; she identifies in the absence of dialogue and sense of belonging the major constraints to building a 'community' as the No Tav one:

There are actual bonds...with the place, the valley, the people... and in my opinion this is the heart of this struggle. There is this sense of belonging connecting everyone (...)

Something I believe is missing in an urban context. Because possibly there is not as much dialogue and sense of belonging, even. (Clara)

### **3.2. *Belonging and trust***

The interviews carried out indicate that the young NT activists are very aware of the existing connecton, linking their sense of belonging to the No-Tav community to their identity as young adults, as the below excerpts indicate:

If I hadn't lived in Valsusa, I wouldn't be the person I am now. (Piero)

I don't feel different just because I pose myself certain questions, but I do believe my experience in such an environment contributed to it. (Francesca)

When thinking about what I experienced in general I say... How good that I was born in the Valley! (Roberto)

Well, let's say that if I am what I am it's because of training, education and my parents and a lot of other things but it's also thanks to the NT movement. Definitely. (Luca)

In the youth's perception, the No Tav community mapped the way for them and the young activists are ready to pick up the baton and carry it further. They do so by actively participating in the movement and committing themselves, in turn, to pass this baton on to a public of younger people, as we will explain in the below pages of this report. The very idea of social engagement, of the need to act even individually for the sake of a common end, is inherited by the movement and it became part of the youth's own life path:

I really like the idea itself of movement, of people who are not 'one' anymore, who don't act only for themselves but jointly with others, in friendship and harmony with others. (Michele)

The heterogeneity characterising the movement itself also contributes to support the idea of participation being a value and also leads the youth to consider diversity as an added value and a strength:

You get the old man and the baby in the pram, the anarchist, the communist and the catholic, absolutely in a non-conflictual manner... There is no difference between the black block and (the old lady) who goes to a demonstration... (Piero)

Regarded as a resource, diversity is converted into a further push to act in society. The recent commitment of the No-Tav Youth Committee to the migrants' issue (see below) is an example. Heterogeneity as a key feature of the movement also allows young people to provide the interlocutor with a different key to read the conflict:

There's no difference between the guy removing a barricade and the old man taking part in a demonstration, because it has always been said within the movement that each person contributes according to its own means, to what they feel like doing, giving what can be given. (Piero)

Another major key value that the young interviewees regard as having a crucial role in shaping their identities as well as determining their overall agency within the movement is trust - which the young people acknowledge to have been passed on to them since they were children:

This way of thinking, the trusting other people, I learned it when I was a child and my parents gave me a flask and told me 'Go' when there were the blocks on the highway (...) It makes you trust people you don't know, so....you are more familiar with the idea of being able to change things you don't know and open up, let's say so. (Piero)

Trust seems to be the common thread in the growth of young activists growth and it becomes almost a reference point to guide their choices. As a positive value as well as a negative one: the lack of trust seem to be pivotal to the conflictuality expressed by the youth. So, on one hand, trust acts as the glue that binds the community together and traces the path of an opening towards change and all that is new. On the other hand, the youth refer to their relationship with State authorities as marked by a lack of trust:

I'd say over the years I've started losing trust in the State in general, in the institutions in general, meaning I don't feel protected, neither as young person nor as citizen, meaning that I don't feel free to think, mainly to have my say without being afraid of consequences. (Francesca)

I don't feel the Italian state is on my side... (Piero)

I don't like to be represented by this State, I don't feel represented, got it? (Roberto)

Following on, the young activists seem to place conflict within an imaginary space created by the lack of trust that marks their relationship with State institutions, including law-enforcement agencies, and mainstream media – namely, all the actors identified by the youth as producing the stigma they are subjected to:

An act of sabotage such as removing a fence, yes I completely agree with something like that and I think these acts are a consequence of the total indifference of State institutions. (Piero)

The youth's word seem to suggest that stigma is thus accompanied, if not produced, by a lack of trust and that is precisely where conflict may arise.

You cannot be a terrorist just because you have different political ideas. (Roberto)

I know people who have been accused of terrorism whom if I'll ever have a child I would gladly entrust for a day (to look after the child), because they are really good people. (Roberto)

When they stop me at a roadblock I always wonder 'Do they stop me because I have the (No Tav) sticker on the car or because they are really doing random stops?' (Francesca)

The urgency to respond to the stigma they experience and the awareness of being able to rely on a cultural system (the community and the relationship with older activists) supporting them will be

pivotal in understanding the reasons that lie beyond the youth's agency, as we will try to clarify in the following pages.

### 3.3. Agency and activities

I believe young people really want to get out of their hideouts and say, well, we are also here and... We want to take part in it, in this process of change! (Pamela)

The participation of young activists in the No-Tav movement takes place on three levels: in their individual life; becoming members of the No-Tav Youth Committee; and taking part in activities in the overall movement, where the generational dimension is cross-cutting.

#### 3.3.1 Individual level

All interviewed young people have explained how their engagement with the movement has led them to adopt life-style choices that are in line with the motives of the movement itself:

...To follow some kind of line of thought in the daily life, the fact that a person can fight for it day by day, simply by discussing with one's own friends or families, trying to lead a life more coherent with nature. (Piero)

Within this perspective, they highlight the need to consume products respecting workers' rights and dignity, and the need to reduce all that can damage the environment – thus, giving preference to the consumption of local food products, and reducing waste and the use of polluting vehicles, among other options. Some young people even made a life choice out of this awareness. Such is the case of Luca, who moved to the Susa Valley soon after his first casual contacts with the movement. He applied for a loan and set up his own farming project, which he sees as his own contribution to social change. More specifically, he points at opposing the TAV construction by proposing an alternative way to value what the Valley has to offer. His words provide a clear example of the close attention the young activists pay to issues linked to the concept of development and its implications:

Revolution, or any change, can be also brought about by going shopping (...) You can always choose to buy from me... to support me and the land, in order to add value to the whole area, so that it is cared for, monitored and it doesn't fall apart (...) Another kind of development is possible and it could imply that no other train as fast as TAV should transit. (Luca)

#### 3.3.2 The No-Tav Youth Committee

In 2010-2011, some of the young activists of the Valley, who were already active in the movement, gathered together to create a committee with only young people, the so-called No-Tav Youth Committee. The Committee stems from the need of the youth to cut out a specific space within the movement that be *for* young people and *by* young people:

It's something I feel that makes me say, do participate, it's ok to keep asking questions, it's ok to work on big issues but do take part actively in everything, it is important! There's the need of something made out of younger people, and it is important that everybody makes an effort to do something, even in one's own small way. (Francesca)

When the Committee first came to life years ago, 'It was a very hot moment and there were events continuously', as Roberto, one of the main promoters of the Committee, recalls. Back then, the Committee 'had a moment of very intense activity and then it kind of got a bit lost', thus, reproducing the internal dynamics of the wider movement which in the last two-three years, experienced a decrease in the activities as well as, according to some people, in the ability to attract new people. Young people abandoned by the Committee then, moved on to feed the ranks of other Committees that are always active in the Susa Valley and are open to activists of any age. Therefore, the participation of young people in the movement did not stop; what was missing was the specificity of the youth issue. More recently, however, due to the boosting out of events that were new to the overall movement (e.g., the migrant issue), a renewed need for a specific youth component in the movement led the young activists to form again the Committee, in September 2017:

It's been some years now that young people do not question themselves anymore and I think this was what was missing in the network. (Pamela)

As mentioned, the aim that the youth assign to the new Committee conforms to the historical moment of the whole movement:

It is now a different time, a time when we demand less. Therefore, this is the perfect moment for us to create an idea, or even only inform young people about what is happening in Valsusa, but not only about that: about all that is happening in general concerning young people and not, which can be relevant for us. (Roberto)

The Committee embraces a wide range of activities - from organising cultural events and debates on current issues (e.g., women's issues, migrant issues, school-work alternation); to setting up a film club; to claiming from local authorities (many of whom openly support the movement) the availability of public studying and socialising spaces for young people in the Valley; to sensitisation events in schools, etc. Additionally, some of the activities of the Committee address a wider audience than just young people – examples of these are the organisation of dinners that are open to everyone; and the activities linked to the consolidation of the national and European network of the movement. There are a great variety of activities, nonetheless, all of them are aimed at sensitising, raising awareness, particularly among the youth, on issues that are usually presented through the mainstream media only. The youth's major purpose is to contribute to raise critical thinking and aim at social change starting from the bottom of society:

The aim is to engage young people and make them interested in the issue. (Roberto)

I'd like to see a part of the movement to be made out of young people, it has to be thinking as well. (Clara)

I'd like to enter the conscience of all these young people. (Giulio)

We created this group to get closer to younger people and ask them questions, on the situation in general (...) To provide information, to say, oh well, I packed your suitcase more or less, now it's time for you to go on your own journey and form your own opinion! (Francesca)

Shaking the youth's consciences is not always an easy task though. The accounts of the interviewed youth reveal that they reckon that the younger generations who are external to both the Valley

and the movement are often uninterested in the issues linked to the movement. Speaking out to them can, thus, prove to be a frustrating experience:

Well there are many who are not interested in it (the movement) or who are not willing to participate (...) I mean, I may be 5, 6, 7, or 8 years older than them and they would look at me and say: Mhmm, and then? There's an inherent difficulty in not being able to pass on the message. (Francesca)

Well, we are especially concerned with the youth world, to understanding the reasons why young people are not able to get interested, to take position even... (Giulio)

Stemming from the assumption of the scarce attention paid by average young people to the social topics that should be of high relevance, the young activists who joined the Youth Committee have set as their main aim that of informing and raising awareness on various issues beyond the very No Tav protest:

We not only try to push forward the reasons of the movement, we also try to raise awareness among young people who may experience it a bit from the outside, trying to engage them with political issues as well as non political ones... Let's say get them have a taste of reality, because at times young people live in their own world (...) It's not their fault though, there's a whole society leading them not to care about such topics. (Giulio)

With these premises, the Youth Committee's main attention since it was restarted focused on the situation of migrants in the Valley. Many people of all ages living in Valsusa engaged in forms of active solidarity towards migrant women, men and children, who in 2017, arrived to the Valley in a desperate attempt to cross the Italian-French border on foot and in extremely adverse weather and environmental conditions, often risking their own lives. In open contrast to the national Government and the scarce attention paid to this issue by the media, the young members of the Committee called for the support from all local inhabitants of the Valley, who responded positively offering clothes and food as well as accommodation in their own houses in some cases. As in the case of the injustices perceived on many occasions of the No Tav protest, the young Committee members were particularly struck by the injustice suffered by the migrants who were not allowed to cross the borders, while most people in Italy would not even show any interest in them:

Even though migrants are out of the world for some people, I cannot understand how something like this is possible... And many people, you know, do not wonder about that at all. (Francesca)

Many young interviewees talked extensively of the migrant issue and explained how being in direct contact with them turned to be an extremely enriching experience for them, both personally and politically. An example of the great attention paid by the Youth Committee to the migrant issue is the petition promoted by them in order to get signatures in favour of migrants.

It's quite a while that the Susa Valley is experiencing the problem of migrant fluxes on its own land (...) Our land has always been a transiting and welcoming land. By collecting signatures we reiterate the Valsusa community shared feeling - according to which it is not acceptable that on our mountains, young people and even children, have to put their life at risk in order to move from one place to

another one (...) We want to conclude by asserting that the Susa Valley, besides being the land we know, is also a way of thinking and acting, a system of values which can be joined and shared by anyone. We are on the migrants' side (Youth Committee)

Beyond the specific focus on migrants, the text of this petition is particularly interesting to us in that it clearly reveals the connections linking the Youth Committee agency with the No-Tav movement. Most importantly, it reiterates the relevance, in the perception of the young activists, of their sense of belonging to the wider No Tav and Susa Valley community. It is thanks to this culture - this 'way of thinking and acting' and 'system of values' that is characterised by openness and inclusiveness since it 'can be joined and shared by anyone' - that the young people of the movement feel motivated to mobilise on the migrant issue, as well as on other social issues, and ultimately strive to achieve social change.

### 3.3.3 Youth in the overall movement

Besides the activities presented by the No-Tav Youth Committee, young activists directly take part in the other activities of the movement such as assembly and decision-making moments, or in the organisation of events on local or National scale. Among those events, one of the most renowned recently is the *Festival dell'Alta Felicità*<sup>2</sup> that takes place in mid-summer and offers music and live-shows. In its second edition, in 2017, the Festival had an extraordinary success, with as many as 100,000 people, mostly youth, who attended it:

I think the best thing we are doing to engage young people is the Festival dell'Alta Felicità. I understand that the Valley is not easily accessible to everyone. (Clara)

Considering the size of the Festival, its organisation is very complex and based on the synergies between several committees that take care of logistics and communication. Young people are very active in the various committees, working very closely with activists of every age, in the preparatory phase as well as when managing the festival and in the final phase of dismantling and cleaning. As written on the dedicated website, the festival is 'completely free, supported by the strength of the No-Tav movement' and it entails the participation of 'dozens of actors, writers, artists and people from all around the world (...) contributing in their own way (...) and taking back home some more reasons to support a popular protest such as the No-Tav.' The aim of the festival, as mentioned by the promoting committee, links back explicitly to the motives of the protest and to the values rooted in the whole No-Tav community:

In the very valley where they want to build something useless and devastating, we want to create a different world. We can do it together and we know that all together, all according to one's own possibility, we are invincible. (Festival promoters' website)

## 3.4. Intergenerational relations

One of the beautiful aspects of the movement is its being cross-generational (...) Diverse people who, differently from most (...) other cases in this country, succeed in gathering with an aim, with a purpose. (Michele)

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<sup>2</sup> The name *Festival dell'Alta Felicità* (High-Happiness Festival) is a word pun, as it sounds in Italian like *Alta velocità* (high-speed), thus, directly recalling the No Tav protest.



The interviewed youth told about their relations with the elderly people of the movement with great emphasis. They identify the intergenerational relation as one of the main strengths of the movement itself, in addition to being of great significance to their personal and political growth. Intergenerational relations are presented in the words of young people as a sort of unwritten agreement based on trust and mutual respect:

When we do things as young, even within the No Tav movement we are recognised, we are stimulated, because then even having a feedback is important you know (...) It is important what comes back, and if what comes back is more than what you put, it is a stimulus to do something else... (Roberto)

Relations with the elderly also provide for a source of knowledge deriving from their lived experience which the youth are happy to be allowed to access. For this reason, many of the interviewed young activists expressed a great sense of gratitude towards the elderly people of the movement:

They literally walk with us, point the way out for us basically saying that they will come with us up to a certain point so that then we can continue on our own (...). They are holding out their hand, let's take it! (Francesca)

The youth acknowledge that the strength of the whole movement lies in the intergenerational relationship and they seem to be perfectly aware of its extraordinary nature - a trait that, according to them, contradicts the average intergenerational trend in the country:

You get to spend a lot of time with people even older than you (...) and it's not something that happens in a normal life (...) This being cross-generational of both interests and relations (...) Also on a personal and individual level, hell you are in a situation where everyone has been interested in a certain series of topics, have done years of reasoning, of struggles and then, hell, for us it is, in short, a huge opportunity, more unique than rare, I'm very happy to be born in Susa Valley [smiling]. (Roberto)

Young people admit elderly NoTavs have great listening skills and 'they take good care of speaking or using a common language which is understandable by the youth (so that) young people simply let themselves get involved in that' (Stefano) and this is a valuable contribution to the creation of a climate of trust and mutual respect. Based on the interviews done during the research, the awareness of how distinct the two different approaches are – the approach of the youth and the one of the elderly - also emerges, along with the need for the adoption of both points of view within a comprehensive approach that makes the struggles of the movement more effective:

Maybe the older adults aim at... I don't know, more peaceful actions, more thought out and better analysed, instead we simply go (...) So we do this, then that and then maybe we look back at what we have done and think, and this means that maybe we can make the two approaches go together, because... Well, it is not just a mere doing, there's also more work behind it. (Francesca)

Among the young people, those who are a bit older describe a sense of evolution whose origin is implicitly attributed to the movement: 'I remember well how it was before and it wasn't like that at all, (...) now (...) it became something absolutely equal to to the (relation) you can have with your peers.' (Stefano). Some of the younger activists recall how relations with the elderly are one of the reasons which pushed them to join the movement in an active way:

The very fact that I felt involved when I was among people who were older than me, who trusted me. I mean, they wanted me to feel involved and they made me feel as their peer (...) I believe it is like that for all younger people, for all those living here, and this is the starting point...(Alice)

The protective attitude towards young people runs deep: the elderly are ready to bring both material and emotional solidarity, as well as solidarity in the case of the many judiciary proceedings involving young people from the movement. A very good example of this protection mechanism emerges in a specific event which has been reported many times during our stay in the Valley, by young people and less young people, always with amused tones. The fact dates back to one night in September 2015. A few evenings earlier, a group of young activists assaulted one of the pre-construction work sites for the TAV – massively patrolled by the police and the army day and night. The group threw ‘fireworks and much more in the construction site and then ran away, there may have been two or three who got arrested (...) but on the news it read that the black blocs (...) assaulted the building site.’ (Piero). The story goes on like that:

Some days after this ‘terrorist attack’, as it was called by the police, there was another terrorist attack carried out by people over 70s who did exactly the same thing but did not run away and got themselves caught. When their balaclavas were removed, it became evident that they were 70 years old or more, and this fact did not come up in the news. (Piero)

The denial of the arrest of those who are jokingly called ‘old block’ or ‘grey panthers’ by the movement itself, became the symbol of youth stigmatisation caused by media and State authorities. A stigmatisation against which older activists feel compelled to respond even through the use of sense of humour and irony: ‘Our aim was to end up in the police station. They didn’t want to take us there.’ This episode demonstrates how the efforts for the deconstruction of stigma are shared by the whole movement, as it appears in the description of the website which, more than others, voices the requests of the movement:

The group of dangerous 60 years old, like all grandparents, have teachings to pass on, in this case they showed how the opponent is deeply troubled when facing the ‘NoTav enemy’ who cannot be stigmatized with the characteristics useful to create the monster to slam on the front page in order to create tensions and fears. (notav.info)

The young ones understand the meaning of the action of the elderly. Their words reveal how aware they are of the effects of stigmatisation produced against them and how important it is to adopt a communication strategy based on counter-narration:

To show a 70 years old person throwing a stone or fireworks against institutions, clashes with the imaginary of the black block, of the anarchist. (Piero)

Even though they are often presented as conflicting youth, the relation they have with the elderly within the movement and especially the over 70s, shows that the young No Tav do not fight authority as such but those institutions representing the State. A State that in their view is not willing to listen to them and which they perceive as not representing them. In this sense, the strength of intergenerational relations has a double effect on the younger ones because it also outlines a frame of belonging – the community – which becomes a reference group to identify with and to make them feel recognised and fully supported:

I don't know if that happens because of the movement or because of their awareness, but they got to know many of the problems we face as young people and thus we feel very supported by this generation here, whereas in other contexts (...) the contrary may occur, often presenting an antagonistic position between the youth and the elderly (...). We actually feel very cohesive. (Giulio)

The fact of having a reference group, to share ideas and values with, makes the difference in managing stigma. Within the community, young people acknowledge and respect the authority represented by older generations, because of the very respect they show them; outside of the community, young people are in conflict with the authority of the State, as much as the older activists. The awareness of this shared external hostility, makes the community even closer and enables young people to feel better understood, supported, and as many underlined, 'aware of being right'.

One of the more relevant aspect of intergenerational relations within the movement is generational replacement. The movement has lasted 25 years and many of the first promoters of the protest in its inception are now old while most of today's young activists were either too young or not even born then. Therefore, one of the biggest concerns of the elderly nowadays is the 'after us' issue. This is a concern that the young people of the movement show to understand and share, and with respect to which they are already activating:

I believe that (...) there is a big problem of transmission of values from one generation to the next one (...) Which does not necessarily mean that you'll have to stay in the Valley for the rest of your life, nor that you'll have to be forever part of the NoTav fight (...) It means that while you are staying here, there has to be a sparkle, something (...) A baton which fell on the ground for future generations to pick up and take over from there. (Roberto)

From the informal conversations held with the elderly in the course of the research, the sense of a negative evolution has emerged in regards to the interest of local young people towards the roots of the protest. School, which once acted as an active interpreter of the demands of the movement, would seem today to be more difficult to approach, and so are the very young students. In the last few months, though, the call for activities aimed at raising the awareness of the young ones has been answered by the Youth Committee which made youth awareness its priority. Once more, the young activists seem to work towards the shaping of this baton, while the elderly openly show their support to the Committee activities:

Yes, I believe that now as a Committee we are treated a bit like the little grandchildren, yes, because everyone looks at us with shining eyes...I mean they try to help us on this journey and it's a beautiful thing, in my opinion, in the sense that they involve us, they ask us, they make us publicity... (Francesca)

## 4. Conclusions

The concept of the PROMISE project stems from the idea according to which the effects of stigma and marginalisation reduce opportunities for young people to engage positively in social action and that much of the innovation potential is lost as a result. The case study presented in this

report demonstrates that stigmatised young people have the capability to counteract such negative effects by using stigma to their advantage and, thus, turn it into an asset - a drive for (positive) social change. To achieve this goal, however, it is crucial to consider the key role played by other factors – the community or group they feel they belong to; and the relationship established with the elderly. In the case presented in this report, both the community and the elderly are supportive of the youth's agency and this is key to transforming stigma into a positive value.

Young No Tav activists are heavily stigmatised in Italy as violent and anti-progress because of the protest they are part of. Additionally, they are also stigmatised as young adults and, thus, perceived as inactive and lacking initiative, passive and disengaged from society. Given these premises, the research presented in this report has aimed at exploring the following issues: i) The effects of the stigma produced and reproduced through the mainstream media on the young No Tav and the modalities through which they manage it and respond to it; ii) How the young NT perceive themselves and the overall movement, how they perceive their agency within the movement, the specificities of their relationship with the other generations of the movement and that with the young people who are not part of the movement; and iii) How the movement has changed their lives and how they intend to change society through movement.

Some authors identify *uncertainty* as the main characteristic of today's society, where uncertainty is regarded as the '*non erasable fact*' (Savonardo, 2013, p. 21) that younger generations, differently from the previous ones, have to confront with. Rosina (2013, p. 8) stresses that '*The high rate of change and the degree of complexity that characterizes modern advanced societies projects young people in a context of uncertainty regarding risks and implications of their actions, something never experienced by previous generations*'. Our research findings suggest that it is precisely the strong intergenerational partnership established within the No Tav movement that can represent a valid response to the uncertainties that seem to undermine the innovative potential of today's young people.

Research findings outline a completely different scenario with regards to the No Tav youth. They firmly believe in values such as justice and social equality which are the background of the protest. They are socially very active and their outreach embraces, on one hand their individual daily practices, on the other hand, the envision of a 'fairer world' where sustainable development is the core. Their actions are not limited to the local context and the need to inform and raise awareness on such topics is of paramount importance and reaches out to get in touch with the wider population and other groups and movements in Italy and Europe. In so doing the stigma, far from having negative effects, becomes an opportunity for change.

Furthermore, our research findings indicate that having a reference group – the 'Community' in the No Tav case – for the young activists to identify with and by which feeling supported and protected – is crucial in devising effective strategies to manage stigma. Far from being only endured, the stigma can be overturned into a value. In so doing, the young No Tav activists seem to be well aware of Goffman's (2003) view according to which stigmatisation results from 'the need to control information'. In this process, the certainty and the awareness of having a system of values and social norms and standards to refer to has been pivotal and goes against the system represented by institutions. The relationship with the elderly - where trust and mutual respect constitute the preconditions and the backbone of this social and cultural community – represents maybe a true 'cultural revolution' in contemporary Italian society.

## 5. Future analysis

Within the framework of the PROMISE project, the findings of our research have highlighted the following themes that can be regarded as of particular interest to cross-case analysis:

- Youth who are in conflict with the State and institutions but at the same are in synthyony with their group of belonging and the older generations within it;
- Youth able to transform the stigma from a negative label into positive value;
- Youth participation in ‘local’ social movement protest;
- In youth’s perception, the relation between *sense of belonging* (to a community or a reference group) and social engagement; and
- In youth’s perception, how intergenerational relations impact on their individual and social agency.

Additionally, research findings suggest some hypothesis that could be usefully analysed through triangulation with quantitative data:

- The attention given by the youth to certain specific topics (e.g., solidarity, sustainable development, social justice) may be an indicator of active participation in society and/or of the capability to be promoters of social change/innovation; and
- Having a good relationship with the community of origin and the older generations may be an indicator of the capability to be promoters of social change and innovation.

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## Videos

*Assault by the Over60 NoTav:*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=212&v=zpVDIb4GQv0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=212&v=zpVDIb4GQv0) (Accessed on: 27 April 2018).

*Giù le mani dalla nostra terra:* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wgybAmDsJYs> (Accessed on: 27 April 2018).

*Notav gli indiani di valle:* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BS6Wlg5OK0s> (Accessed on: 27 April 2018).

*Tutto questo è Valsusa:* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P3XGTONqJsU> (Accessed on: 27 April 2018).

*NPA - NO TAV, oltre il ponte la resistenza continua:*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJdG7tpJnQo> (Accessed on: 27 April 2018).

*'Sarà dura!' - Coro Notav in Valsusa:* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0qrZSXoYn\\_Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0qrZSXoYn_Q) (Accessed on: 27 April 2018).

*Val Susa, il corteo pacific dei No Tav:* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LjSdCAHgPhE> (Accessed on: 27 April 2018).

## 7. Appendix: Table of respondents' socio-demographic data

<i>Name (fake)</i>	<i>Interview date</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Employment</i>	<i>Family status</i>
Roberto	22.01.18	23	M	Attending University	Occasionally with his parents	Lives with parents
Giulio	23.01.18	22	M	Attending University	Occasional jobs	Lives with parents
Francesca	24.01.18	23	F	Attending University	Educator	Single; shares flat with friends
Piero	29.01.18	18	M	Attending University	Occasional jobs	Lives with parents
Paolo	02.02.18	22	M	Attending University	Waiter	Lives with parents
Martino	06.02.18	18	M	Attending high-school	NA	Lives with parents
Anna	06.02.18	18	F	Attending high-school	NA	Lives with parents
Luisa	07.02.18	20	F	Attending University	NA	Lives with parents
Clara	30.05.17	24	F	BA degree	Baby sitter	Single; shares flat with friends
Alice	30.05.17	27	F	Almost MA	Occasional jobs	Lives with boyfriend
Fulvio	31.05.17	25	M	High-school	NA	Lives with parents
Camilla	31.05.17	19	F	High-school	NA	Lives with parents
Andrea	31.05.17	23	M	Attending University	NA	Lives with parents
Valentina	31.05.17	27	F	High-school	Bar woman	Single; lives on her own
Luca	31.05.17	25	M	Attending University	Farmer	Single; lives on his own
Davide	07.02.18	23	M	Attending University	NA	Single; lives on his own
Michele	17.02.18	26	M	BA degree	Physiotherapist	Single; lives on his own
Pamela	19.02.18	31	F	High-school	Bar manager	Cohabitation
Stefano	23.02.18	34	M	Attending MA	Eco guide	Has children
Simona	05.02.18	33	F	BA degree	NA	Cohabitation