

A Missed Rebirth: The Rockefeller Foundation's Involvement in the Economic and Social Development of Sardinia after the Second World War

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Abstract

The stipend from the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) under the Research Stipend Program¹ has provided me with an opportunity to clarify one of the most forgotten pages of the late phase of the “Sardinian Project”² i.e., the involvement of the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) in the studies for the economic and social rehabilitation and development of the Italian Island of Sardinia in the early 1950s. The issue has been particularly debated in the contemporary history of Sardinia,³ as well as in the political debate at that time because, despite the initial great interest, the involvement of the American institution (and other international players) did not take place. On the contrary, the economic “re-birth” of Sardinia was possible mainly through the so-called “Rebirth Plan,” approved by the local and national governments in June 1962, twelve years after the “missed rebirth.”

Over the past seventy years, two main positions have emerged in this regard. One agrees that the RF was never involved “for a lira or a dollar”⁴ in the planning of Sardinia's socio-economic development. The second one states that the American foundation was, to some extent, directly involved, at least in the preliminary phase. However, to date, both theories have failed to look directly and deeply into the historical record for a more precise and objective reconstruction. This report summarizes the first results of my research conducted at the RAC in September 2022, which aims to gain a better knowledge of this page of local history, that possesses underrated - and largely unknown - national and international implications.⁵

The Beginning of the Story: The “Other Americans” in Italy

The relevance of the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) records emerged, even from my first preliminary search in the online catalog, revealing the existence of a specific folder – within the RF records – entitled “Sardinia - Socio-Economic Study, 1950-1952.”⁶ Upon further investigation, the archival papers revealed how the RF, between 1949 and 1951, actually came up with the outline of a general study, which was called the “Proposal for Socioeconomic Survey of Sardinia.” The final version of the document was drafted in December 1950. The outline’s author was John. A. Logan, head of the RF's International Health Division (IHD) unit, sent to the island for the fulfilment of the the “Sardinian Project” (1946-1951), designed to investigate the feasibility of a complete eradication of an autochthonous malaria vector and carried out by a specific agency (the *Ente Regionale per la Lotta Anti Anofelica della Sardegna - ERLAAS*).⁷

The scope of the study was to provide a picture of local human and natural resource availability and to explore the “different possibilities for the development of Sardinia.” To this end, the survey was divided into five main areas (agriculture, minerals, social issues, industry, and trade and finance) and was conducted by a specific organization made up of local, national, and international experts, headed by an advisory committee. Within seven months, the survey would produce a final report to be submitted to the attention of the Italian government. The estimated cost of the survey alone was \$248,000, nearly 482,825,000 lire.

To this design, as it emerges directly from the records, "the Rockefeller Foundation's contribution would consist of the loan of certain personnel and liaison with the Paris and New York offices." It was not a financial commitment, then, but rather a technical one, in line with the *modus operandi* of the IHD/RF.

Moreover, the archival documents reveal the genesis of this survey, which would have been preparatory to a later, more comprehensive and definitive development plan for Sardinia.

Although the RF drafted the guidelines for this survey, the idea did not originate with the Foundation. In fact, the initiative came from the other American officials in Italy at the time, namely the ones assigned to the Economic Cooperation Administration's (ECA) Italy Mission. The ECA was the US government agency created in 1948 to administer the European Recovery Program (ERP), or Marshall Plan, and to help, primarily through national field missions, recipient countries plan their reconstruction and spend the money profitably.⁸ The ECA Italy Mission - based in Rome – recognized Italy's emigration problem as one of the most crucial ones for the development of the country; the combination of a high birth and unemployment ratio was pushing many Italians to emigrate, especially from the southern regions. This new wave of migration raised serious concerns, not only for the Italian reconstruction, but also for US-Italian relations. The United States, in fact, was becoming, as it had been at the beginning of the century, a major destination for Italian emigrants. This situation was viewed by Washington with growing concern for its socio-economic implications.⁹

In 1948, the ECA started to think that the development of Sardinia could be the solution to this problem. At the time, due to difficult hygienic and economic conditions, the island was also an underpopulated Italian territory. However, the agency was aware that major local, national, and international efforts to combat malaria, in which American personalities and capital were deeply involved, had been underway on the island since 1946. Victory over this disease would return a healthy territory in which many people could live. The ECA's strategy was clearly expressed by the head of the mission in Italy, James D. Zellerbach, who in 1957 became US ambassador to Italy. After his visit to the island in April, he wrote in a letter dated May 2, 1949, to the High Commissioner for Sardinia Pietro Pinna Parpaglia, that *“ora che malaria è stata eliminata, la Sardegna è pronta a ricevere uomini, capitali, industrie e tecnici [...] che la renderanno una delle zone modello d'Italia”* [“now that malaria has been

eliminated, Sardinia is ready to receive the men, capital, industry and technicians [...] who will make it one of Italy's model areas”].¹⁰ The ECA estimated that Sardinia could take in more than one million Italian emigrants from the mainland. In this way, both the Italian labor drain and the migration flow to the United States would find an internal solution.

Rise and Fall of the *Sardinian Plan*: Multiple Reasons, One Lost Opportunity

From the fall of 1948, regional, national, and international actors involved in the fight against malaria began to think about the logical next step, i.e., the exploration of the “possibilities for the development of Sardinia.”¹¹ Among them, the ECA - that is, “the other Americans in Italy” - took a concrete step in this direction by contacting “the Americans already present in Sardinia,” that is, the RF staff.

During his visit to Sardinia in April 1949, ECA's representative, Zellerbach - supported by his assistant and future heir, Leon Dayton - advanced the idea of a project to improve socio-economic conditions on the island, directly asking that “the RF cooperate with the ECA in developing a Sardinia Plan.” The ECA proposal opened a deep dichotomy within the Foundation. On the one hand, the RF unit in Sardinia reacted positively to this request for technical, not financial, cooperation. In particular, Logan shared the initiative and began to push for it within the Foundation. In his vision, the RF's participation in both the Sardinian Plan and the latter's preliminary survey could be “the logical development of the ERLAAS project,” which at the time had become more of a rehabilitation effort than an experiment in anopheles eradication. Moreover, it was the best guarantee for preserving the hygienic results achieved, in line with President Truman's Point Four Program, which aimed to stimulate economic development of the underdeveloped areas of the world as a key to fighting communism in a tough Cold War phase. In this sense, Sardinia could have been the place for a “pioneer project.”

According to the RF official, there was not even a financial problem. In fact, as assured by ECA staff in Italy, money could be available from ERP funds, from domestic and international private investments, from the World Bank; and from the Point Four Program.¹² However, Logan's enthusiasm was not shared within the Foundation, especially in the European and New York offices. For example, for Paul F. Russell - a top and long-career RF official - the RF "should not be planning or carrying out any new major project in Italy, including Sardinia" and he does not agree that "the RF should accept the ECA invitation to set up a socio-economic study in Sardinia and then proceed to implement a 25 year project." Russell, and those who supported his position, argued that RF action in Sardinia should be limited to the conclusion of the ERLAAS project. He thought that IHD participation in development planning activities was of little interest. Most importantly, an engagement was not deemed appropriate in light of the Italian authorities' growing "dislike" toward the presence of RF personnel. In fact, Russell - who had direct contacts with government officials - noticed the emergence of a desire on the part of Italians to regain full power in the decision-making process of their affairs, a clear sign that the country's postwar phase was coming to an end. For instance, Russell attached great importance to Mario Cotellessa's words, who was, at that time, the high commissioner for public hygiene. Cotellessa had said that "he hates to see an RF man coming into his office for it means a request followed by pressure for more money from sums he has already allocated elsewhere" and that he "does not intend to the RF run his Institute."¹³

As a result, and despite Logan's activism in trying to make his case, the RF's response to the ECA proposal was initially negative. Russell's position was the prevailing one shared by key figures in the Foundation, such as George K. Strode - director of the IHD - and Chester I. Barnard - president of the Foundation itself.¹⁴

However, the situation changed dramatically a year later, in the early spring of 1950, when Strode himself said he would "welcome suggestions for the economic rehabilitation of Sardinia at the conclusion of ERLAAS."¹⁵ As for the reasons for this change, the RAC records unfortunately have some gaps - for

example, the "Sardinia-Socio-economic Study" folder does not include documentation prior to the spring of 1950, and in Logan's diaries there is a gap from the summer of 1949 to February 1950 - but from the recovered archival evidence, it is possible to provide an interpretation.

At that point, the ERLAAS project was coming to an end, and if the Sardinian experiment for the RF was becoming a "failure-as-success" (as it was then evaluated),¹⁶ it was, in any case, necessary to maximize the "success" by highlighting those aspects such as the eradication of malaria which led the way to any possible development of the island. In addition, the growing pressure from regional government officials to initiate the study of possible socio-economic planning, such as the first President of the Regional Council Luigi Crespellani and the Council Member to the Economic and Industrial Affairs Piero Soggiu, from prominent national figures (especially the Minister of Agriculture Antonio Segni) and from the ECA could not be silenced. In particular, the Foundation was well aware that the funds for the final steps of the ERLAAS project came from the ERP fund, approved by the ECA. Since the main priority for the RF was still the completion of the Sardinia Project, it would be useful to be cooperative, even on the planning of the "Sardinian Plan."

Within the Foundation, once again, Logan was the most committed and enthusiastic. By the summer of 1950, he capitalized his year-long efforts - such as the set-up of the visit of Lord John Boyd-Orr, the former FAO's head, to Sardinia in June 1950 - and submitted to the ECA the draft of a survey for the socio-economic development of Sardinia. The "suggested organization was approved" by the ECA and on July 31, 1950, it was firstly discussed in Rome in front of the Italian government, represented by Segni and the Minister without Portfolio Pietro Campilli. Although the national authorities seemed to accept "in principle" the idea of a preliminary survey to a broader plan, they expressed some concerns, especially about the risk of overlapping with similar national initiatives already underway, namely that by the regional government in application of the Autonomous Statute of Sardinia. On the contrary, the ECA and the RF had an inkling about some perplexities on the possible delays in taking a final decision, due to the slowdown of Italian governmental activities

during the month of August.¹⁷ This risk was avoided, thanks to the effort of Segni, who facilitated a new meeting with the Italian government at the resumption of institutional activities.

However, the August 31, 1950 meeting marked the start of the end of the Sardinian Plan.¹⁸ In fact, Campilli clearly pointed out to the ECA and the RF that even if a socio-economic plan for Sardinian development is required “by Italian law and the Sardinian constitution,” because of “a complicated mixture of politics, national pride, military security, etc., the Government did not feel that it could turn the entire responsibility for the development of a plan over to an outside agency.” Through these words, Rome was pointing out that the reins for this project would be in Italian hands (both national and regional ones), and just admitting that the “ECA and RF’s help would be welcomed particularly as outside experts.”¹⁹ During the fall of 1950, despite this setback, the ECA and the RF – particularly, their missions in Italy more than their headquarters - continued to work intensively on developing a final draft of the survey for Sardinia.

At the end of the summer, a “sub-committee” with ECA, RF, and Italians representatives was set up to study the details of the survey, but the international actors started to be even more “discouraged at the progress of the negotiations on the Sardinian survey.” Dayton rejected Italian accusations about the lack of money for the survey, clearly stating that “there is a billion lire available for use which the Italian Government cannot find,” but Rome was using the ERP funds not as agreed to invest in the country’s projects, but to pay general governmental expenses. At the end of September, even though the national authorities gave their green light to the draft of the survey revised by the sub-committee (the cited papers are available at the RAC and dated December 1950) which met the Italian requests and proceeded with an official request to the ECA for financial assistance, nothing was done regarding any concrete RF involvement.²⁰

Logan wrote in his diary that from that point “the initiative for the plan passes from our hands to those of the Italian Government as we will now await further

action”²¹. The expected “further action” was the formulation of an official invitation from Rome to the RF for technical cooperation on the Sardinian Plan, something that never happened.

Even at the end of the ERLAAS project, and when the notice that a socio-economic survey was under discussion became public knowledge through the publication of an article by the *New York Times* in late spring 1951,²² Logan’s and the Foundation’s position was that “when the occasion presented itself, it might be in order to advise members of the Italian Government that the RF had not lost interest in Sardinia.” Indeed, “the RF help might be available, if officially requested, in the selection of experts for the survey and in getting it organized in its early stages.” However, this availability was never realized for the proposed Sardinia Plan.²³ Instead, the development of Sardinia was included in the broader plan by the Italian Mezzogiorno under the framework of the Cassa del Mezzogiorno (for a while chaired by Campilli). A specific program for Sardinia, the so-called *Piano di Rinascita* (the Renaissance Plan) was finally set up by the regional and the national governments in 1962, after severe delays and discussion. However, by that time, the ECA no longer existed, and the RF’s interest was directed away from the Island²⁴.

Final Reflections: A Still Important Page of Local (as well as Global and Rockefeller Foundation) History Yet to Be Discovered?

Why did an official invitation to the Rockefeller Foundation never arrive?

First, the statement that the RF was not involved in the study of Sardinia’s early development possibilities does not have the support of the archival sources. On the contrary, the RAC records show that a preliminary interest by the Foundation was real, and it resulted also in concrete efforts in the early stages of the Sardinian development debate.

The reasons why this interest waned and led to the missed invitation are many,

and are also rather complex, but above all, the different interests of the actors involved and their perspectives on the issue of Sardinia's development weighed heavily. The RF, and particularly the unit deployed on the island, was studying a possible role for the Foundation (and for themselves?) in Sardinia after the end of the ERLAAS experiment. But there was also something more.

In an important and sensitive internal phase for the Foundation (see below), an engagement in development planning for Sardinia would have been useful for the Foundation both to better highlight the achievements of the eradication campaign and to see if it would be fruitful to be involved in this field at the global level, as well. Indeed, the question was whether the issue of development of underdeveloped areas could become an appropriate area of action for the Foundation as public health had been in the past²⁵.

Very different was the Italian point of view. For the national (and to some extent, regional) institutions, the planning of Sardinian socio-economic development was an internal political issue with many sensitive implications. Firstly, the set-up of a specific plan for Sardinia and the participation of international players and foreign capital would have created a difficult domestic political situation with predictable protests from the other lagging regions of southern Italy that would have protested such different treatment.

Moreover, in a very short time, the development of Sardinia became for the Italian authorities a symbol of their new-found, full decision-making capacity in the aftermath of World War II, a factor, thus, of national pride, as already mentioned, but also with important electoral implications. Indeed, it became a priority of both the national and regional governments to show themselves in the eyes of the people as the (sole?) architects of the rebirth of one of the poorest areas of the country - a pride that would be overshadowed by the participation of foreign organizations, such as the RF. Furthermore, no less problematic appeared to be the direct involvement of an entity traceable to the Western world in an internal issue of a country like Italy that was in the delicate border position between East and West in a sensitive phase of the Cold War, with the risk of exacerbating its internal political debate.

In addition, it should not be forgotten that also weighing on the Foundation's lack of involvement was what was happening internally at the time. In fact, as early as 1951, the IHD and, more generally, the RF modified their action to act abroad, leaving the initiative to act in the field of public health and socio-economic development to the welfare systems of states and to specific international organizations, such as the WHO and other specialized agencies of nations.²⁶ Finally, many of the key RF personalities involved in the Sardinian affair left office, such as Strode, along with Logan himself²⁷.

From these final reflections and from the study of the documents found in the archives, the underlying complexity of the affair has emerged. This topic still presents numerous points of research that await exploration in order to reconstruct and preserve an important page of local history that is intertwined with the history of bilateral relations between the United States and Italy, and with that, of the Rockefeller Foundation itself.

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² The Sardinian Project was the experimental eradication program of the indigenous malarious vector, carried out by the Ente Regionale per la Lotta Antianofelica in Sardegna (ERLAAS) between 1946 and the 1951, with the decisively interaction between local (the newborn Autonomous Regional Government of Sardinia), national (the Italian government and health authorities), and international actors (the International Health Division (IHD) of the Rockefeller Foundation and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA)). See: Eugenia Tognotti, *La malaria in Sardegna: per una storia del paludismo nel Mezzogiorno, 1880-1950*, (Milano: Franco Angeli Storia, 1996) and *Un progetto americano per la Sardegna del dopoguerra: comunisti e zanzare: il piano di eradicazione della malaria tra scienza e politica negli anni della guerra fredda, 1946-1950*, (Sassari: Edizioni Fondazioni Sardinia, 1995); J. Farley, *To Cast Out Disease, A History of the International Health Division of the Rockefeller Foundation (1913-1951)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 128-138); D. Kinkela, *DDT and the American Century: Global Health, Environmental Politics, and the Pesticide that Changed the World* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011, Chapter Two); Gian Lorenzo Zichi, *Il ruolo della Rockefeller Foundation nel Sardinian Project di lotta alla malaria, tra ragioni scientifiche ed equilibri internazionali*, in Mariarosa Cardia (edited by), *70 anni di Autonomia speciale della Sardegna* (Cagliari, AIPSA Edizioni, 2018).

³ The issue is particularly present in the contemporary Sardinian history: Lorenzo Del Piano, *Il sogno americano della rinascita sarda* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1989); L. Lecis, *Dalla ricostruzione al piano di rinascita. Politica e società in Sardegna nell'avvio della stagione autonomistica (1949-1959)*, (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2016). Documental evidence can be also found in the official proceeding of the Regional Government meeting of the time (Resoconti Sedute Consiglio Regionale, <http://www3.consregsardegna.it/resoconti.asp>).

⁴ «Tu sai bene che nessuna offerta di fondi per finanziamenti straordinari a favore della Sardegna è stata mai fatta né per una lira né per un dollaro»: Campilli to Crespellani, May, 1951, in Del Piano, cit.

⁵ Since 2017, the author - together with Prof. Gianluca Borzoni (History of International Relations) and Prof. Stefano Pira (Modern History) - is involved in research which aims to explore the role of international actors in Sardinia in the aftermath of the Second World War. Among the main published results: G. Borzoni, S. Pira, GL. Zichi, *Alle origini della Rinascita economica e sociale della Sardegna: gli aiuti internazionali nel nuovo contesto bipolare*, in Mariarosa Cardia (edited by), *70 anni di Autonomia speciale della Sardegna* (Cagliari, AIPSA Edizioni, 2018); Gian Lorenzo Zichi, *Occupazione, ricostruzione ed equilibri internazionali. La United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) e l'intervento sanitario in Italia: il caso della malaria in Sardegna*, in *Occupied Italy, The War in Italy - Issue n.1*, 2021, in <http://occupieditaly.org/en/occupazione-ricostruzione-ed-equilibri->

[internazionali-la-united-nations-relief-and-rehabilitation-administration-unrra-e-lintervento-sanitario-in-italia-il-caso-della-malaria-in-sardegna/](#)

⁶ Rockefeller Foundation records, Projects, SG 1.2, Series 751 Italy, Box 11, Folder 133 (<https://dimes.rockarch.org/collections/09k8oEWvNULeVsv9iu45cf?category=&limit=40&query=Sardinia%20-%20Socio-Economic%20Study>)

⁷ On the Sardinian Project/Experiment and the ERLAAS: ...

<https://resource.rockarch.org/story/eradication-or-control-the-rockefeller-foundations-global-anti-malaria-campaigns/>

⁸ On the international actors involved in Italy and Sardinia in the aftermath of the Second World War: Gianluca Borzoni, *La Sardegna e gli aiuti internazionali tra guerra e dopoguerra*, in Mariarosa Cardia (edited by), *70 anni di Autonomia speciale della Sardegna* (Cagliari, AIPSA Edizioni, 2018).

⁹ https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pnadw718.pdf

¹⁰ M. Brigaglia e S. Sechi, *Cronologia della Sardegna autonomistica, 1948-1985*, Edizioni della Torre, Cagliari 1985,

¹¹ As said by Harry McClelland, ECA agricultural advisor for Italy, in Logan Diary 1949, 11 February 1949, in RAC, RF, RG 12, Logan Diary 1948-1951

¹² John A. Logan (IHD RF in Sardinia) to George K. Strode (Director IHD), Sardinia Socio-Economic Study, 19 April 1950, in RAC, Rockefeller Foundation Records, Record Group 1.2, Series 751, Box 11, Folder 133. On the Point Four Program: Committee on Foreign Affairs, Point Four. Background and Program, July 1949, U.S. Printing Office, in https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pcaac280.pdf

¹³ Lettera Russell del 05/05/1950

¹⁴ Logan Diary 1949, 27 April 1949, p. 6, in RAC, RF, RG 12, Logan Diary 1948-1951

¹⁵ Logan Diary 1950, 1st March 1950, p. 3, in RAC, RF, RG 12, Logan Diary 1948-1951

¹⁶ P.J. Brown, *Failure-as Success: multiple meanings of eradication in the Rockefeller Foundation Sardinian project, 1946-1951*, in *Parassitologia*, 40: 127, 1998.

¹⁷ Logan Diary 1950, June – July 1950, p. 1-7, in RAC, RF, RG 12, Logan Diary 1948-1951

¹⁸ Logan Diary 1950, August 1950, p. 5, in RAC, RF, RG 12, Logan Diary 1948-1951

¹⁹ Logan to Strode, 1 September 1950, in RAC, RF, SG 1.2., Series 751, Box 11, Folder 133.

²⁰ Logan Diary 1950, 21 September 1950, pp. 6-7, in RAC, RF, RG 12, Logan Diary 1948-1951

²¹ Logan Diary 1950, 30 September 1950, p.9, in RAC, RF, RG 12, Logan Diary 1948-1951

²² Camille M. Cianfarra, *Sardinia Believes Itself Forgotten; Lag in Island's Development Is Laid to Rome Government --Malaria Overcome*, in *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/1951/03/27/archives/sardinia-believes-itself-forgotten-lag-in-islands-development-is.html> See also: Stefano Pira, *Gli americani nel primo progetto del Piano di Rinascita per la Sardegna*, in Mariarosa Cardia (edited by), *70 anni di Autonomia speciale della Sardegna* (Cagliari, AIPSA Edizioni, 2018).

²³ Logan Diary 1951, April-May 1951, pp. 2-3, in RAC, RF, RG 12, Logan Diary 1948-1951

²⁴ On the historical period of elaboration of the Rebirth Plan for Sardinia: G. Sotgiu, *La Sardegna negli Anni della Repubblica. Storia critica dell'Autonomia* (Roma-Bari:

Editori Laterza, 1996); A. Accardo (edited by), *L'Isola della rinascita. Cinquant'anni di autonomia della Regione Sardegna* (Roma-Bari: Editori Laterza, 1998).

²⁵ On the international action in the public health field by the RF see Josep L. Barona, *The Rockefeller Foundation, Public Health and International Diplomacy, 1920-1945* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2015)

²⁶ On this delicate phase see: J. Farley, *To Cast Out Disease, A History of the International Health Division of the Rockefeller Foundation (1913-1951)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 267-284); L. Hackett, *History of the International Health Division*, in RAC, RG 3.1, series 908, box 5, folder 28 - 37, https://rockfound.rockarch.org/digital-library-listing/-/asset_publisher/yYxpQfeI4W8N/content/history-of-the-international-health-division.

²⁷ A first-person account of his experience in Sardinia is that provided by Logan himself in his book: J. A. Logan, *The Sardinian Project: An Experiment in the Eradication of an Indigenous Malarious Vector* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1953).