

UNVEILING THE PLACE-BASED APPROACH FOR LOCAL TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT: OBSERVATIONS IN ONE ITALIAN 'INNER AREA' (1135)

Valentina Romero Silva

Università IUAV di Venezia, School of Doctoral Studies, Research area: Regional planning and urban policies, Italy; e-mail: vromerosilva@iuav.it

Abstract. This paper explores the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing integrated territorial projects in Inner Areas of Italy using a place-based approach. The study focuses on the case study of the Bormida Valley, one of the pilot project areas under the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI). The analysis delves into the decision-making processes, multi-level governance, and mobilization of local knowledge in formulating and implementing project actions. It reveals the complexities involved in project selection, stakeholder engagement, and adherence to regional guidelines. The findings highlight the importance of context-specific approaches, local knowledge activation, and stakeholder engagement for successful project outcomes. The research contributes to understanding the intricacies of implementing integrated territorial projects and provides insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to promote sustainable development in Inner Areas.

Keywords: local development, left-behind places, place-based approach.

Introduction

The National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI for its acronym in Italian) is an experimental policy in Italy of the place-based approach (Barca, 2009). It targets Inner Areas, territories far from centres that provide essential services (mobility, health, and education). Although the SNAI has been recognised in the academic debate as an interesting novelty and a particular case of territorial sensitivity (Coppola *et al.*, 2021; Viesti, 2021), there are still some questionable aspects of the effective implementation of the Strategy in project areas. The models and approaches considered so far are only reproducible in some contexts where knowledge acquisition and capability diffusion processes have taken place with varying degrees of depth and complexity.

This paper presents the outputs of a case study. The context analysed by the research concerns the Bormida Valley, one of the three first pilot SNAI project areas in the Piedmont Region. The Valley is rich in a widespread cultural and landscape heritage. At the same time, there is an interesting project scenario recently activated by the SNAI,

the recently approved Piedmont Regional Landscape Plan and the objectives of the New Urban Agenda.

The paper attempts to illustrate the arrangements made during the operational translation of the project by answering some specific research questions: Which project objectives and principles are consistent with the place-based approach within the context of SNAI's implementation? In what manner are the central aspects of the place-based approach translated into actionable projects and their subsequent execution? The insights result from empirical research, participatory observation, interviews and first-hand experience. The field-research activities were conducted over 12 months in the local territorial authority overseeing the project.

The first part provides an overview of the development policies in Italy for marginal territories and the initiatives that laid the foundation for the place-based approach and the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI). It also discusses the objectives, key areas of intervention, and multilevel governance structure of the SNAI, highlighting the integrated nature of the Strategy.

The second part presents the case study context for this research: The Bormida Valley in the Piedmont Region. It summarises the methods and activities conducted during the research period and the specifics of the formulation process of the Area Strategy.

The third part discusses the implementation of integrated territorial projects in the Bormida Valley. It focuses on the main findings related to the decision-making process for project actions, the role of multilevel governance in supporting local interventions and the activation of local knowledge during implementation.

1. Place-based Approach and Inner Areas

1.1 Overview of development policies in Italy for marginal territories

For decades, the policies for development issued by the Italian State were focused on supporting the industry through incentives and direct interventions¹. These kinds of policies were replicated throughout the country without being articulated with the specificities of each territory. In the late '70s, the experience of *Distretti Industriali*²

¹ OECD. (2019). OECD Economic Surveys: Italy 2019

² Distretti Industriali, translated as Industrial Districts, is an Italian concept referring to geographically concentrated areas characterized by the presence of interconnected small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) belonging to the same or related industries. These districts are known for their strong inter-firm relationships, collaboration, and specialization, which contribute to their competitiveness and innovation. Distretti Industriali emphasize the importance of local production systems, clustering of similar industries, and the synergies that arise from close geographical proximity. Becattini, G. (1990). The Marshallian

(Becattini, 2000) and *Patti territoriali*³ (De Rita and Bonomi, 1998) represented a turning point in development policies as they proposed a comprehensive vision of the project area and a multisectoral approach (Cavazzuti, 2004; Trigilia, 2005). These initiatives provided essential contributions to what would later become the foundations of the place-based approach and the SNAI (Trigilia, 2005; Borghi, 2017). In particular, the *Patti territoriali* initiated active participation at various territorial levels, identified medium-small areas as objects of Strategy, and focused on improving essential services (De Fano and Mantino, 2015).

Although there are connections between the SNAI and the learning process already initiated by the initiatives mentioned above, there are two essential characteristics of political innovation (Calvaresi, 2015; Carrosio, 2020; Coppola *et al.*, 2021). First, the SNAI firmly commits to improving citizen services to trigger economic development. Second, it presents the role of national-level actors as an "external destabilising action" of local practices that perpetuate territories in the "underdevelopment trap." The Strategy seeks to act on education, health, and mobility services, essential to guarantee citizenship rights and activate local production chains. Additionally, the Strategy mobilises actors, spurs public debate, and activates knowledge acquisition processes and modifications in local governance networks in the project areas.

1.2 EU Cohesion Policy and the place-based approach

Since the 2007 Lisbon Treaty, achieving territorial cohesion has become a shared goal of the European Union⁴. Cohesion policies have undergone significant developments over

Industrial District as a Socio-economic Notion. In F. Pyke, G. Becattini, & W. Sengenberger (Eds.), *Industrial Districts and Inter-firm Cooperation in Italy* (pp. 37-51). International Institute for Labour Studies.

³ "Patti territoriali" refers to territorial agreements or contracts in Italy. These agreements represent a collaborative and participatory approach to local development, involving various stakeholders such as local authorities, businesses, community organizations, and citizens. The purpose of "patti territoriali" is to foster coordinated actions, shared vision, and strategic planning for the improvement of specific territories. Bagnasco, A. (1977). "Territorial Pacts and Local Development in Italy." *Regional Studies*, 11(1), 1-26.

⁴ Territorial cohesion, as defined in the EU Treaty of Lisbon, refers to a concept that aims to reduce disparities and promote balanced development among different regions and territories within the European Union. It recognizes the importance of all regions, including urban, rural, and remote areas, and emphasizes the need for integrated and harmonious development across the EU.

The Treaty of Lisbon, signed in 2007, explicitly recognizes territorial cohesion as a key objective of EU policies. It highlights the importance of promoting economic, social, and territorial cohesion, with specific attention to the challenges faced by less developed regions, including those affected by geographical and demographic disadvantages.

the years. A particular transformation began for the European programming period 2014-2020 concerning territory and local dimensions.

In 2009, a report commissioned independently by the European Commissioner for Regional Policy, Danuta Hübner, was published for the then Head of the Department for Development and Economic Cohesion, Fabrizio Barca. In the so-called Barca Report, the author identified critical points of cohesion policy and highlighted possible transformations for future programming periods.

The proposed agenda proposed by Barca in the mentioned Report to overcome the "blindness" to the territory, which he believed was inherent in previous approaches, is the self-proclaimed innovative place-based policy. In summary, the place-based approach is a long-term strategy to reduce inefficiency and ineffectiveness in specific places, producing public goods and services by intersecting local knowledge and needs with institutional and expert political participation and triggering multilevel governance.

The reform of the Cohesion Policy based on the recognition of the potential of places will then translate into the formulation of national territorial policies for local development.⁵, including the Italian National Strategy for Inner Areas.

The place-based approach has been demonstrated to be a valuable tool for integrated territorial policies. Integrated territorial policies holistically promote economic development and social cohesion, considering each place's unique characteristics (McCann and Rodríguez-Pose, 2011). Place-based policies can help to achieve these goals by providing targeted support to areas that need it most. According to the place-based approach literature, the policy interventions following this perspective focus on improving opportunities in terms of efficiency and equity, recognising the importance of local contexts and community involvement (Barca, 2009). To reduce socio-economic marginality, the integrated management of material and immaterial local resources proves to be a valuable tool in inner areas (Battaglia *et al.*, 2019).

By addressing issues of accessibility and marginality reduction, the attractiveness of inner areas can be augmented. Attractiveness, viewed as the mobilisation and endowment of territorial assets, is crucial in fostering territorial cohesion and creating opportunities for all parts of cities and regions to contribute to national development

The concept of territorial cohesion emphasizes the need for coordinated actions and policies to ensure that all regions benefit from EU initiatives and contribute to the overall development of the Union. It recognizes the diversity of regions and territories within the EU and aims to address regional disparities, enhance connectivity, and improve the quality of life for all citizens.

Treaty of Lisbon (2007). Official Journal of the European Union, C 306, 17 December 2007.

⁵ Other national policies...

(Tomaney, 2010; Servillo, Atkinson and Russo, 2012).

Collaborative efforts and community engagement are vital to realising the full potential of inner areas and creating vibrant, inclusive, and prosperous spaces. Adopting a place-based approach and involving multidisciplinary and multistakeholder territorial planning can effectively promote cultural territorial systems and tap into the economic potential of inner areas (Rotondo *et al.*, 2016; Battaglia *et al.*, 2019).

Engaging local communities through inclusive practices reveals new dynamics of transformation and innovation, contributing to the vitality of inner areas. Initiatives across the country emphasise the significance of built heritage and highlight the transformative power of "co-creative communities" and neo-rural practices in marginalised landscapes (Ferretti and Favargiotti, 2022; Ferretti *et al.*, 2022).

In general, place-based development can be an effective way to improve the economic conditions of places that are lagging by involving diverse stakeholders, valuing local resources, and focusing on improving accessibility and attractiveness.

1.3 National Strategy for Inner Areas and the Place-based project approach

Fabrizio Barca, then Italian Minister for Territorial Cohesion, presented the first proposal document for the SNAI in 2012 within the Partnership Agreement 2014-2020. It expressed the need for a national strategy to protect the territory and the safety of its inhabitants, promoting natural and cultural diversity and polycentrism.

The SNAI aims to counteract the decline of a large part of the Italian territory, the so-called "Inner Areas", which cover 60% of the country's land, 4,261 municipalities, where 23% of the population lives. The Inner Areas are characterised by a distance from major urban centres, a demographic trend towards ageing, depopulation, and poor economic trends. The first generation of pilot areas comprised 72 areas distributed over the Italian territory.

The SNAI, in its proposal, develops fundamental nodes of the place-based approach: (i) it prioritises participatory processes beyond the sole public-private partnerships that were at the centre of integrated planning; (ii) it intends to act on the provision and quality of services that guarantee citizenship rights as a precondition for development intended as growth and social inclusion.

The State establishes the policy procedures. Within the policy process, three decision-making moments (Dente, 2011) are recognised, which are fundamental to understanding how the strategy design works in each project area: (i) the "Draft Strategy", the first collective document drawn up by local administrators with a generic aspiration of the area; (ii) the "Preliminary Strategy", where the guiding idea is

deepened, and actions begin to be detailed, (iii) and the "Area Strategy," where the contents of the preliminary are translated into specific interventions and actions accompanied by project sheets with expected results and outcome indicators. Once the Area Strategy is approved, the Framework Programme Agreement (Accordo Programma Quadro – APQ) is the last document prepared. This implementing tool contains the activities and interventions to be carried out and the timing, implementation methods, and funding sources (Lucatelli and Tantillo, 2018).

Therefore, the SNAI is a comprehensive and structured approach that aims to address the challenges faced by inner areas in Italy, promote sustainable development, and use resources in inner areas through a place-based approach and multilevel governance. Its objective is to promote territorial development that caters to the diverse needs of these identified areas.

The SNAI seeks to combat depopulation, mitigate hydro-geological disasters, preserve cultural and landscape heritage, and foster intensive and extensive local development. To achieve these goals, it establishes intermediate objectives, including improving local populations' well-being and social inclusion, enhancing employment opportunities, utilising territorial assets effectively, reducing social costs associated with depopulation, and strengthening local development factors such as market and employment opportunities.

To accomplish these objectives, the Strategy focuses on two types of integrated actions: (i) improving essential services like education, healthcare, and mobility, and (ii) implementing local development projects. Access to these services is considered a fundamental right for quality citizenship and a prerequisite for local development. Without adequate services, it becomes challenging for residents to stay in inner areas and discourage potential newcomers, hindering the critical mass needed to initiate local development processes.

The SNAI identifies five areas for local development interventions: protecting the territory and local communities, enhancing natural and cultural resources and sustainable tourism, promoting agri-food systems, implementing energy efficiency measures and local renewable energy projects, and supporting craftsmanship and traditional knowledge. Although not explicitly stated, these five areas encompass various aspects of the landscape, including its natural and cultural components, economic activities, and energy resources.

The integrated nature of the Strategy encompasses not only the collaborative synergy among different types of integrated actions to achieve the ultimate objective but also the coordination of various governance levels and development perspectives. SNAI's multilevel governance proposal is structured at the central level by the State represented by the National Technical Committee for Inner Areas (CTAI for its acronym in

Italian), which acts as an 'exogenous actor' or 'destabilising agent' and plays an essential role in the participation and scouting phase, approves the Strategy and is responsible for measuring and evaluating its implementation. The Region is crucial in making available and articulating regional-managed EU funds for local rural development actions. Finally, the inner area Local Team is formed by the referent mayors and professionals. Other institutional and non-institutional actors flank them, like school principals or health authorities.

The SNAI also integrates the EU funds during the 2014-2020 period (allocated for local development types of actions allocated through the regional rural development plans) with the resources designated by the National Budget Legislation, intended explicitly for essential service types of action.

As illustrated, the SNAI allows the selected inner areas to formulate an integrated landscape and rural development project. It is, therefore, a unique occasion to reflect on what degree the institutions in the inner areas manage to leverage the territorial resources through local mobilisation, how the multilevel governance supports local communities in interpreting their potential, and in general, how the institutions in the inner area get to mobilise knowledge and capacities for implementing projects actions that are coherent with the premises of the SNAI and place-based approach.

2. Case study context: Bormida Valley

The Bormida Valley is one of the first three pilot project areas of the SNAI in the Nord-

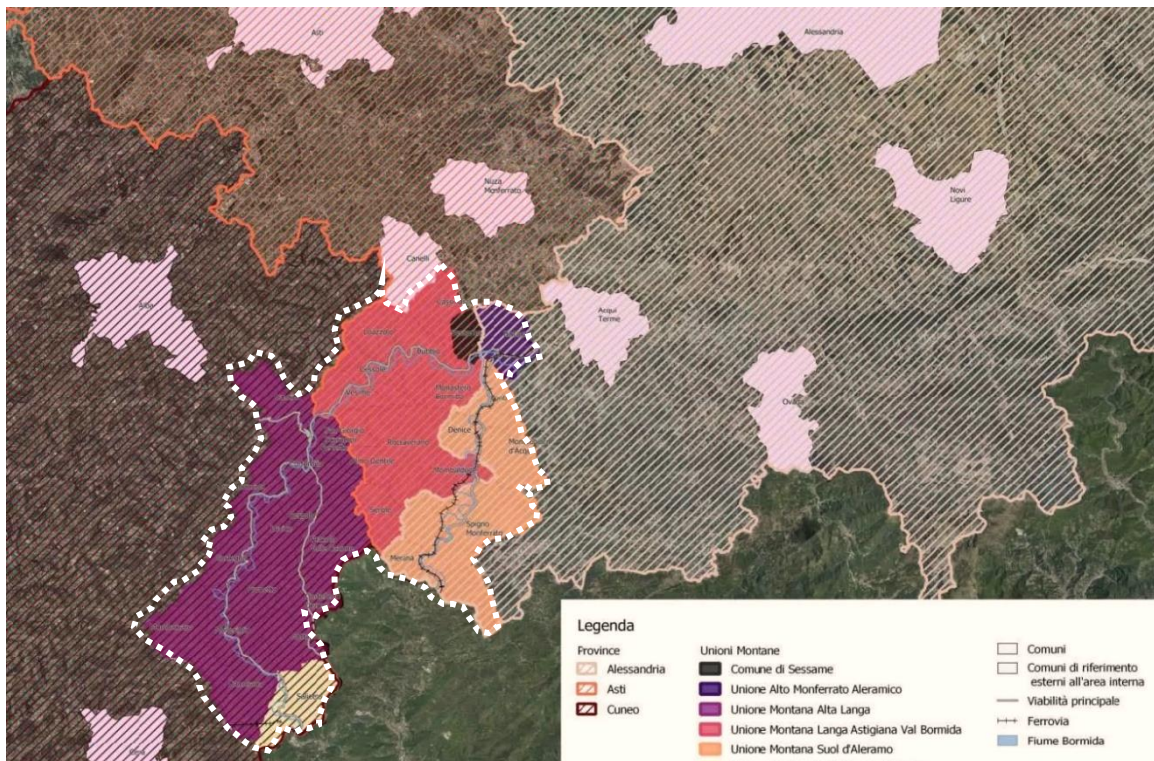


Figure 1. Delimitation of Bormida Valley Inner Area

west Piedmont Region. The Bormida Valley is known for its rich cultural and landscape heritage, with various natural resources, including forests, rivers, and hills. Economic and social issues, including depopulation, youth migration, and lacking essential services, impact the area's potential.

The boundaries of the inner area of Val Bormida (figure 1) involve 33 municipalities and a resident population of approximately 16,800 inhabitants. Of the 33 municipalities, 32 belong to 5 different Mountain Unions, while one municipality does not belong to any aggregation figure (Sesame). In addition, the territory is spread across three provinces (Cuneo, Asti, and Alessandria). The management of healthcare services is the responsibility of four Local Health Authorities, while the education sector involves three Comprehensive Institutes and one Higher Institute. The Landscape Commissions approve and evaluate landscape projects in the Mountain Unions, and the recently created Archaeology, Fine Arts and Landscape Superintendence for the Provinces of Alessandria, Asti, and Cuneo supervise them.

It is necessary to consider the initial scenario to reflect on the effects on the actors' network that the SNAI process may generate. The Val Bormida is a valley historically

united in the fight to restore the Bormida River against the pollution caused by ACNA (Aziende Chimiche Nazionali Associate, later becoming Azienda Coloranti Nazionali e Affini). This struggle has led them to undertake programming processes born from the



Figure 59. Generalities of the Area Strategy: Administrative Structure, Timing and Territorial Data

bottom up, such as attempting an integrated project entrusted to some municipalities in the Valley (Cortemilia, Torre Bormida, Levice, and Bergolo). The integrated project stayed in draft form. The Region’s intentions to restore the Valley through a River Contract with all municipalities also went unimplemented.

Despite being a territory that shares a common past, institutional fragmentation makes it challenging to have a single territorial representation capable of making project decisions. For example, the stalemate of the River Contract can represent a missed opportunity to build a local governance "platform". On the other hand, specific programming tools promote the protection and enhancement of the landscape, such as the Local Action Groups - GAL - Borba and Langhe Roero Leader, Interreg program projects, and Alpine space, which generally involve only part of the project area but can constitute partial scenarios of encounter.

2.1 Area Strategy approbation process

The process of formulating the Area Strategy was particularly lengthy, taking almost seven years between the first meeting with the Ministry of Cohesion and Development and the approval of the APQ. The first draft of the Strategy was drawn up at the end of

2014, after which the process was suspended due to lack of funds until the 2018 budget law allowed its resumption in July, 2018. The Local Team was structured and formed by the president and the general Secretary of Alta Langa Mountain Union (lead authority), one mayor representing the Langa Astigiana side, and a professional in charge of the technical consultation.

Between July, 2018 and March, 2019, the CTAI organised thematic working tables with key actors. The Consultant Professionals animated the meetings. The meetings aimed at collecting information on issues, needs, and proposals for constructing the preliminary Strategy.

During the meetings, the role of the CTAI as an "exogenous" agent was quite active in both the organisation of the meetings and the revision of the preliminary strategy drafts. It oversaw the inclusion of the identified needs in the meetings in defining the strategy action proposals.

The strategy design process was completed with its approval in November 2020 and the signing of the APQ in July, 2021. It became one of the last area strategies approved in Italy during the 2014–2020 programming period.

The complexity of the administrative network in the Valley inspired the concept of the Area Strategy: to restore unity to a fragmented territory but homogeneous in its identity. The Bormida River itself became the element that represents a 're-appropriation' by the local population of its own identity and links the restoration and the enhancement of the territorial values. The Area Strategy is titled "*Ritroviamo il Fiume*" (Let us rediscover the river). The operational program is structured along the two types of project action established by the SNAI guidelines (table 1).

Table 1. Projects of the Area Strategy

	Project Actions		Funding	Budget (€)	Institution in charge of the action
Type 1: Essential Services	Healthcare				
	A.1	Activation of home care service	Allocated by Italian Budget Legislation 2018	350,000	Asti Local health agency - ASL AT
	A.2	Development of tele-assistance and tele-medicine systems		350,000	Cuneo Local health agency - ASL CN2
	A.3	Establishment of widespread medicine centres			
A.3.1	Bubbio health centre	195,000		Alessandria	

					Local health agency - ASL AT
	A.3.2	Spigno Monferrato health centre		213,000	Alessandria Local health agency - ASL AT
	A.3.3	Ponti health centre		50,000	Alessandria Local health agency - ASL AT
	A.3.4	Cortemilia Health centre		200,000	Cuneo Local health agency - ASL CN2
Education					
B.1	Enlargement of the educational offer				
	B.1.1.	Colloquiando con il mondo, il potenziamento delle lingue straniere		209,926	Institute Cortemilia-Saliceto
	B.1.4.	Servizi per la prima infanzia: asili nido di valle		94,675	
	B.1.2.	Star bene insieme con la musica, il teatro e lo sport		99,690	Institute 4 Valli
	B.1.6.	Formazione insegnanti		29,929	
	B.1.3	Il futuro siamo noi ! Conoscenze tecniche innovative	Allocated by Italian Budget Legislation 2018	268,682	Institute Spigno
	B.1.5.	Tartufaia didattica dell'area interna. Sperimentazione di laboratori didattici		30,670	
	B.1.7.	Attività extracurricolari propedeutiche all'inserimento/qualificazione professionale		30,000	IISS Piera Cillario
B.2	Renovation of school facilities				
	B.2.1.	Ampliamento del plesso scolastico di Bistagno per la realizzazione di ambienti didattici polifunzionali		234.000,00	Municipality of Bistagno

	B.2.2.	Adeguamento di locali scolastici esistenti ai fini dell'apertura di un Micronido a Cortemilia		57.700,00	Municipality of Cortemilia
	B.2.3.	Adeguamento locali Scuola dell'Infanzia di Monesiglio ai fini dell'apertura di un Micronido		52.728,00	Municipality of Monesiglio
	B.3	Requalification of laboratory for learning activities in presence and online		416,000	Institute Cortemilia-Saliceto
Mobility and Transport					
C.1		Mobility study and proposal of reorganisation of mobility in the area	Allocated by Italian Budget Legislation 2018	90000,00	Alta Langa Mountain Union
C.2		Flexible collective public transport service		310000,00	Alta Langa Mountain Union
Rural development					
Type 2: Local Development	D.1	Rural Development	EAFRD - European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development	2,500,000	Funds allocated through calls for tenders managed by Alta Langa Mountain Union
	E.1	Digital tourism services		278,000	
	F.1	Incentives for development of Non-agricultural activities in agricultural domains	FSC - Development and Cohesion Fund	750,000	
	G.1	Energy efficiency in public buildings		556,000	
	H.1	Bicycle and pedestrian path along the Bormida River		1,250,000	
	H.2	Enhancement of local heritage		1,875,000	
	I.1	Improvement and support of the socio-economic context	European Social Fund (ESF)	450,000	
	L.1	Consultancy for Technical assistance	Allocated by Italian Budget Legislation 2018		

2.2 Research design

The focus of this research design is on the implementation of the SNAI strategy in the Bormida Valley inner area. Data were collected in situ. Research activities included direct observation, dialogues and informal exchanges with local actors and officers. The researcher position provides a privileged point of view of the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing the SNAI. The analysis of collected material examines the decision-making processes and strategies employed by local actors during the implementation phase. The investigation looks to identify timelines, actors, and criteria for project formulation and implementation.

The research activities were developed in 12 months inside the Leading institutions of the Area Strategy: Municipality of Cortemilia.⁶ and Unione Montana Alta Langa⁷. The direct observation of Local Team meetings proved essential for the research. In implementing the Strategy, collaboration among the various local authorities is crucial for the project's success. Moreover, the area is characterised by great complexity and diversity of actors and implementing entities that can influence the project's success differently. Therefore, the observation of meetings was an opportunity to understand the internal dynamics of the local authorities and the measures adopted to deal with the challenges and opportunities of the project.

The research material collected is qualitatively analysed to discuss in what manner are the central aspects of the place-based approach translated into actionable projects and their subsequent execution by the local institutions?

3. The translation of place-based in Bormida Valley

As discussed in section 1.3., the SNAI place-based approach calls for local mobilisation and multilevel governance to leverage the territorial resources and strengthen institutional capacities. Therefore, the analysis of research findings in the translation of the place-based approach in the Bormida Valley considers three main aspects: i.

⁶ The mayor of Cortemilia, himself president of Alta Langa Mountain Union, acted as the area's contact person for the research and as a liaison point with other local actors.

⁷ The Unione Montana is an Italian administrative unit created to address the challenges faced by mountainous regions in Italy. It is a group of municipalities collaborating on common issues and challenges, such as economic development, infrastructure, and social services. The Unione Montana allows smaller municipalities in mountainous areas to have a louder voice in regional and national decision-making. It is often responsible for managing and implementing regional development programs, coordinating services, and promoting the cultural and natural heritage of the area.

stakeholder engagement, ii. territorial governance, iii. leverage of local resources.

Firstly, in this case, stakeholder engagement was mainly promoted by the national actors themselves and involved the active participation of key actors chosen by the same local leaders. The Bormida Valley area has implemented mainly one public consultation moment, organised in six thematic tables and inviting specific target groups. There have been no other moments of public participation to involve local communities and stakeholders in the design and implementation of the local development plan during the implementation phase.

The involvement of institutional actors' part of the inner area, such as mayors and officials, has been difficult. Several mayors and officials have changed since the strategy process started back in 2014. The "Local Team" realises efforts to maintain a coordinated action between the different institutions in charge of project actions. The local team decided to resume mayoral involvement during the implementation phase.

Secondly, territorial governance involves the coordination and collaboration among different levels of government, such as regional, provincial, and municipal, in the planning and implementation of territorial development policies. In the case of the Bormida Valley, the local team has been playing a crucial role in the coordination and communication among the different levels. During the implementation phase of rural development interventions, the interaction between different levels of government is limited to meetings with the Region. This interaction is only related to issues concerning the disbursement of funds and administrative authorisations.

Thirdly, as previously described in Section 2., local project actions following a place-based approach refer to the identification and prioritisation of strategic objectives and actions for the territorial development of the area. The Bormida Valley has developed an Area Strategy titled "Ritroviamo il fiume" (Let us rediscover the river) that aims to enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the area around its main geographical element, the one they identified as a common identity for such administrative fragmented territory. The plan includes several strategic actions related to landscape enhancement, such as restoring historical buildings, creating cycle and pedestrian paths, and promoting ecotourism.

The following sections detail how these aspects intersect the reality of Bormida Valley. Each section identifies the issues in formulating and implementing project actions in the Inner Area.

3.1 Decision-making in project formulation

Local institutions have played a crucial role in the decision-making process for project actions. The final decisions were primarily in the hands of the public administrators.

They considered the inputs from consultation and listening activities conducted by the project team. During the writing phase of the Area Strategy, they provided indications on the specific projects to be pursued, prioritising certain initiatives while leaving others behind.

The selection of projects followed budgetary, technical, and political criteria. Some projects were left behind due to their relative immaturity compared to others. For example, a project proposal for a coworking space was strongly advocated at the meetings. While this idea had support from consulted groups, the complexity of implementing such a project, including finding someone to manage it, led to its exclusion in favour of other more prioritised initiatives.

There were larger-scale guidelines. At the national level, sectoral offices established guidelines for the projects that could be included in the Strategy. The National guidelines regarded interventions related to public services such as mobility, education, and healthcare. Projects related to rural development objectives depend on the regional level since the funding is within their jurisdiction.

The Piedmont Region canalises the funds for the Inner Areas through the Regional Rural Development Plan (PSR)⁸. The Region also establishes the rules and criteria for eligible expenses, project lines and priorities. The local level has the mission to choose the specific projects to be financed based on their territorial specificities.

The team planned to refine and decide on the interventions in the coming months. For accomplishing that task, there were several proposals. Initially, the local team considered it necessary to reconnect with stakeholders and develop other consultation moments (there was never a program in place). By re-establishing contact, the local team aimed to ensure active participation when the calls for proposals were published. When calls for proposals are open to privates (agricultural-related) or associations, there is a need to align the guidelines in the call for proposals with the demands and priorities of the local territory to ensure the engagement of interested parties. For example, the local team engaged the consortia responsible for protecting and promoting local products, such as the consortium for Robiola di Roccaverano, Toma di Murazzano, wine, hazelnuts, and potatoes. The idea was to involve these stakeholders in defining the details of the projects related to their specific industries.

On a second moment, the local team proposed organising technical roundtables

⁸ The Rural Development Plan is typically implemented at the regional level and is supported by funding from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and national resources. It serves as a framework for allocating resources and coordinating interventions that contribute to the overall development and revitalization of rural areas.

involving the project's consulting professionals. These roundtables aimed to establish the eligibility criteria for the planned interventions collaboratively. The team aimed to leverage their extensive knowledge of the local territory by focusing on internal decision-making processes to make informed judgments.

Lastly, when faced with a time constraint for funds allocation, the responsibility of preparing the tenders was delegated to the consultancy professionals with the local team supervision, thereby abandoning the potential for participatory meetings.

Several actors expressed concerns regarding the challenges associated with implementing participatory initiatives. The potential scope of the interventions was significantly constrained due to the stringent criteria mandated by the regional authority, primarily the requested adherence to the regional Rural Development Plan for any proposed call for tenders (section 3.2).

3.2 The Role of Multilevel Governance in supporting local interventions

As mentioned in the previous section, the Region plays an essential role in shaping the implementation of the Strategy within the local context. The research made evident that decisions regarding specific projects were influenced by both internal considerations and external obligations imposed by the Region. For instance, while buying minivans for a flexible collective public transport service (C.2.) was a shared decision, the regional authorities mandated the feasibility study (C.1.). This illustrates the interplay between local decision-making and regional directives in project selection.

The local actors also discuss the required adaptation of the project actions to the PSR as challenging. The discussion emphasised balancing the freedom to shape local development strategies and compliance with regional guidelines. An example cited was the "*bando borgate*" measure, originally designed for mountain municipalities, which posed difficulties in application for territories that were not strictly considered high-mountain regions, as in Bormida Valley. While the SNAI allows for formulating a strategic approach and action plan, aligning these initiatives with the requirements and criteria set forth by the PSR is crucial.

In addition, the Region is also in charge of ensuring the effective utilisation of funds allocated for rural development. However, local actors contended that the Area Strategy could have merely become a conduit for the PSR funds, albeit with the distinction that these funds are specifically designated for the municipalities within the inner area.

Finally, the Regions play an essential role in defining time horizons. The local team expected that the Region would initiate internal procedures to facilitate allocating and utilising the funds. Nevertheless, key actors noted that the Region faces challenges managing multiple funding priorities and ensuring timely execution.

The complex nature of EU funds and the respective timelines managed by the Region lead to delays in the project implementation at the local level. Therefore, effective coordination and prioritisation are vital to ensure that funds are allocated efficiently and used to develop projects that effectively leverage regional resources while addressing rural development's unique challenges and opportunities.

3.3 Local knowledge activation during implementation

The implementation of rural development projects, as established in the approved Val Bormida Strategy, requires the activation of specific competencies at the local level, which, although not explicitly indicated in the documents, would be closely connected to the overall objective of the SNAI to leverage territorial capital for a successful place-based project.

The execution of actions D.1. and F.1. (Table 1) required the construction of a 'cooperation group'. The group should be formed by public entities part of the Inner Area (municipalities, mountain unions) and local private stakeholders (associations, consortiums, local businesses, farmers). The partnership should work to identify the actions based on critical issues and needs. In this case, the Leading Mountain Union should play a role in facilitating territorial animation activities to develop project ideas. Qualified support is expected to assist the organisation in scouting and drafting the project proposal during the initial phase.

The actions H.1. and H.2. (Table 1) hold a significant value regarding landscape enhancement. The proposed cycle path along the Bormida River is not only valuable in terms of identity (as the river was the key element for the leading concept of the Area Strategy), but it also serves as a physical connection to the Inner Area. The execution of this action is complex and challenging. Creating a bidding process to select professionals for the design and execution phases is a singular opportunity for the Inner Area. The project will require the valuation of local landscape commissions and careful consideration of environmental regulations. Consequently, local actors have already considered creating *ad hoc* discussion scenarios with relevant commissions and environmental authorities to gather feedback and obtain approval for the project.

Local institutions are crucial in coordinating and managing the project development and implementation phases in these cases. They must navigate complex procedures, engage with stakeholders, address environmental concerns, and seek necessary approvals to ensure successful project outcomes.

Nevertheless, good intentions are currently jeopardised by the deficiency in technical proficiency within the governing bodies, alongside the pressures of adhering to stringent timelines and criteria that transcend the local jurisdiction.

4. Closing Considerations: Challenges and lessons learned

This paper aimed to explore the implementation of integrated territorial projects in the Inner Areas of Italy, specifically focusing on landscape enhancement and rural development initiatives. By examining the case study of the Bormida Valley, one of the pilot project areas under the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI), the research shed light on the challenges faced by local administrations and the activation of place-based approaches in the context of limited technical capacities.

The findings of this study highlighted several key concepts and insights. Firstly, it was evident that the SNAI, as an experimental policy rooted in the place-based approach, has the potential to address the needs and promote economic growth and development in areas that have been traditionally left behind. However, the effective implementation of the Strategy still needs to be improved, particularly in terms of adaptability to specific context needs.

The case study of the Bormida Valley revealed the significant role played by local institutions in formulating and implementing these initiatives. By employing empirical research, participatory observation, interviews, and first-hand experience, the research provided valuable insights into the operational translation of the project and discussed the specific role of local institutions and knowledge activation.

The case study highlighted the significance of the local team in facilitating communication and decision-making among regional, provincial, and municipal authorities. However, limited technical capacity and expertise within governing bodies, alongside stringent timelines and criteria imposed by regional authorities, posed challenges to effective territorial governance.

The activation of local knowledge proved crucial for identifying and prioritising strategic objectives and actions. However, concerns about technical proficiency and dissemination of participatory initiatives to local stakeholders still need to be addressed.

The findings emphasised the importance of activating local knowledge and engaging stakeholders in the decision-making process to ensure the success and sustainability of the projects. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research. The study focused on a single case study, the Bormida Valley, within the Piedmont Region of Italy. While the findings contribute to the understanding of the challenges and opportunities in this specific context, they may not be fully generalisable to other regions. Further research should aim to expand the scope and include a broader range of case studies to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the implementation of integrated territorial projects in Inner Areas.

Considering the limitations and findings of this study, there are several avenues for

future research. Firstly, a comparative analysis of different Inner Areas could provide insights into the contextual factors that influence the effectiveness of the SNAI and place-based approaches. Additionally, exploring the role of stakeholders and the mechanisms for their active participation in project formulation and implementation would enhance the inclusivity and sustainability of such initiatives. Furthermore, investigating the long-term impacts of landscape enhancement and rural development projects on Inner Areas' social, economic, and environmental aspects would provide valuable knowledge for policymakers and practitioners.

In conclusion, this paper has contributed to understanding the challenges and opportunities in implementing integrated territorial projects in Inner Areas, with a specific focus on landscape enhancement and rural development. While the strategy project has shown some promising results, some challenges still need to be addressed to ensure the effective and sustainable implementation of territorial development policies in the inner area. These include difficulties in strengthening territorial governance, limited institutional capacity and expertise, and limited dissemination of participatory initiatives to local stakeholders.

The case study of the Bormida Valley highlighted the importance of context-specific approaches, local knowledge activation, and stakeholder engagement. However, further research is needed to broaden the scope of analysis and explore the replicability, inclusivity, and long-term impacts of such projects.

References

- Barca, Fabrizio (2009) 'AN AGENDA FOR A REFORMED COHESION POLICY A place-based approach to meeting European Union challenges and expectations. [Independent Report prepared at the request of Danuta Hübner, Commissioner for Regional Policy]'. Commissione Europea. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/archive/policy/future/pdf/report_barca_v0306.pdf (Accessed: 6 August 2021).
- Battaglia, Massimo, Annesi, Nora, Pierantoni, Ilenia and Sargolini, Massimo (2019) 'Future perspectives of sustainable development: An innovative planning approach to inner areas. Experience of an Italian alpine region', *Futures*, 114, p. 102468. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2019.102468>.
- Becattini, Giacomo (2000) *Dal distretto industriale allo sviluppo locale: svolgimento e difesa di una idea*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.
- Borghi, Enrico (2017) *Piccole Italie: Le Aree Interne e la Questione Territoriale*. Roma: Donzelli Editore.
- Calvaresi, Carlo (2015) 'Le aree interne, un problema di policy', *TERRITORIO*, (74), pp. 87–90. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3280/TR2015-074015>.

- Carrosio, Giovanni (2020) 'Teoria e pratica di un modello di policy placebased: la Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne', *Urbanistica Informazioni*, special issue.
- Cavazzuti, Francesco (2004) 'Sebastiano Brusco e le politiche per lo sviluppo locale', *Economia e politica industriale* [Preprint], (121). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1400/64356>.
- Coppola, Alessandro, Fabbro, Matteo Del, Lanzani, Arturo, Pessina, Gloria and Zanfi, Federico (eds) (2021) *Ricomporre i divari. Politiche e progetti territoriali contro le disuguaglianze e per la transizione ecologica*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- De Fano, Giovanna and Mantino, Francesco (2015) 'Sviluppo rurale, innovazione sociale e politiche per le aree interne', *TERRITORIO*, (74), pp. 91–96. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3280/TR2015-074016>.
- De Rita, Giuseppe and Bonomi, Aldo (1998) *Manifesto per lo sviluppo locale: dall'azione di comunità ai patti territoriali*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.
- Dente, Bruno (2011) *Le decisioni di policy: come si prendono, come si studiano*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Ferretti, Maddalena and Favargiotti, Sara (2022) 'COMMONS IN MARGINAL LANDSCAPES. Collective practices for an alternative narrative and use of common spatial resources in peripheral landscapes', *Ri-Vista. Research for landscape architecture*, 19(2), pp. 176–189. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.36253/rv-11412>.
- Ferretti, Maddalena, Favargiotti, Sara, Lino, Barbara and Rolando, Diana (2022) 'Branding4Resilience: Explorative and Collaborative Approaches for Inner Territories', *Sustainability*, 14(18), p. 11235. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/su141811235>.
- Lucatelli, Sabrina and Tantillo, Filippo (2018) 'La Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne', in A. De Rossi (ed.) *Riabitare l'Italia: le aree interne tra abbandoni e riconquiste*. Roma: Donzelli editore.
- McCann, Phillip and Rodríguez-Pose, Andres (2011) 'Why and When Development Policy Should Be Place-Based'. Available at: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/content/component/9789264120983-16-en>.
- Rotondo, Francesco, Selicato, Francesco, Marin, Vera and Lopez Galdeano, Josefina (eds) (2016) *Cultural Territorial Systems*. Cham: Springer International Publishing (Springer Geography). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-20753-7>.
- Servillo, Loris, Atkinson, Rob and Russo, Antonio Paolo (2012) 'Territorial attractiveness in EU urban and spatial policy: a critical review and future research agenda', *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 19(4), pp. 349–365. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0969776411430289>.
- Tomaney, John (2010) *Place-based approaches to regional development: global trends and Australian implications*. Sydney: Australian Business Foundation.
- Triglia, Carlo (2005) *Sviluppo locale: un progetto per l'Italia*. Roma: GLF Laterza.