

Analysing Local Cross-border Cooperation in Fragile Peripheral Areas in Northern Italy

Rodrigo Vielmo Moura

Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Politecnico di Milano, Milan, Italy
rodrigo.vielmo@polimi.it

Abstract

The Italian National Strategy for Inner Areas created a legal and innovative territorial arrangement requiring municipal collaboration for policy and decision-making. This paper aims to verify the strategies, approaches, and projects associated with local cross-border cooperation, discuss the implications and effects, and generate reflections on the defined and unexploited opportunities to interact with municipalities within and outside the inner area's boundaries. The findings indicate that cross-border strategies are linked to healthcare, education, and mobility services. However, all the examined documents fail to make explicit indications that one municipality must cooperate with another to activate such an asset or system. The new local strategy must take advantage of the proximity of the nearby inner areas to boost integrated regional development and better exploit the territorial capital.

Keywords: Local cross-border cooperation, Integrated territorial development, territorial cohesion, National strategy for inner areas, socio-economic development

1. Introduction

Planning systems, territorial policies, models of governance and administrative structures usually change over the years as they need to be updated and coherent to respond to complex and uncertain challenges within the urban, peripheral and rural environment. In this process, a range of concepts and approaches are constantly created, adapted, revised, and implemented. For instance, 'from government to governance', the mix of top-down and bottom-up initiatives, multi-level governance, social and territorial cohesion, integrated regional development, and participatory processes. In the European Union (EU) context, there is the pursuit of a more balanced, integrated and assertive territorial development through democratic processes that respect a sustainable energy transition and innovative strategies that take advantage of the territorial potential (EC, 2022).

Over the years, the EU Regional Policy, also known as the Cohesion Policy, has been adapted, including and raising attention to the territorial cohesion dimension (Faludi, 2018). Policy instruments such as the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) are means of counterattacking the socioeconomic and territorial disparities of member states' regions. The quest for multidimensional cohesion demonstrates the commitment to achieving spatial justice and delivering citizens' rights, especially in fragile and peripheral territories. Another key element within the EU sphere is the devotion to transnational planning and cross-border cooperation for more than 30 years. It is worth pointing out that the EU internal border regions cover about forty per cent (40%) of the EU territory and host about 150 million people (European Parliament, 2022). Research, innovation, conceptual frameworks, priorities, objectives, axes, instruments, mechanisms, tools and funds are all (interconnected) elements that make positive changes possible and feasible in this type of context.

In the sense of European cross-border cooperation, Interreg A assists, encourages, and finances the collaboration between EU regions (NUTS III). Basically, '[i]t aims to tackle common challenges identified jointly in the border regions and to exploit the untapped growth potential

in border areas' (Autonomous Province of Bolzano, 2023, p. 5). Studies such as overcoming obstacles in border regions (EC, 2016) underline, on the one hand, common issues in this type of border (legal, administrative, and language barriers, economic disparity, physical access, sociocultural differences, lack of interest from public authorities working together) and by the other, reasons for crossing borders (leisure, to buy goods and/or services, to visit friends and/or family, employment, business, education and so forth). Nevertheless, despite the relevance and the extensive research and interest in this type of cooperation (EU member states), this paper pays attention to the local (or domestic) cross-border cooperation taking place in Italy due to a relatively new policy requirement.

Linked to EU partnership agreements and programming periods (2014-2020 and 2021-2027) and conceptually and methodologically influenced by multi-level governance, local development projects, and the place-based approach, the Italian government launched the National Strategy for Inner Areas, or *Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne* (SNAI) (Barca et al., 2009; Barca et al., 2014). In sum, the SNAI seeks to reverse demographic trends, foster socioeconomic development, unlock the territorial capital, and deliver better essential public services such as healthcare, mobility, and education, especially to fragile peripheral areas – known as Inner Areas in the Italian context. Barca et al. (2014) state that the Italian territory is covered by about sixty per cent of inner areas and around one-quarter of Italy's population.

Despite the significance of the national goals, what is also relevant about this policy (or programme) and a subject of analysis is the creation of new areas (or boundaries) that comprise numerous municipalities and involve all Italian regions. It requires local, provincial, and regional collaboration. Also, it is important to note that depending on the country or state legislation (law, codes and other formal agreements), this type of municipal cooperation and territorial arrangement is restricted and unfeasible. Legal obstacles and the absence of financial resources (possibly from the regional or central government) discourage and limit this relationship. In this national case, the inner areas, on the one hand, demonstrate a possibility to boost the integrated territorial development and reverse the existing fragility condition (since the central level encourages, creates and facilitates the requirement of funds and demands local cross-border cooperation) and, by the other hand, may create new challenges to the local authorities due to the new attributions linked to the strategy design, time-management, participatory process, definition of goals and projects, monitoring and evaluation.

This national policy has established more than one hundred new areas across Italy in the last decade (Dipartimento per le politiche di coesione, 2023), and several questions emerge due to the possible implications and effects of this type of territorial arrangement which links with spatial planning, governance, regional policies, and socioeconomic and territorial cohesion dimensions.

As related above, this paper is interested in the municipal cross-border aspect. Thus, this contribution aims to answer the following questions: (i) How do the national and local strategies address the aspect of cross-border cooperation? (ii) What are (if so) the indications, approaches, strategies, and projects to bolster integrated development and take advantage of the endogenous and exogenous potential growth that neighbouring and inner area municipalities can offer? (iii) What are the possible implications and effects of this new territorial arrangement at the local level?

In order to address the previous questions, one specific inner area has been selected: the Inner Area of Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario in Northern Italy. Currently, this new arrangement

covers 41 municipalities, is home to more than 50 thousand inhabitants (Comitato Nazionale Aree Interne, 2022), is located in two provinces, Como and Lecco, embraces Lake Como and the mountains, and borders Switzerland.

Therefore, this paper aims (i) to verify what are the intentions, vision, goals, strategies, approaches and projects that can be associated with the cross-border cooperation matter and (ii) generate a critical reflection grounded on the defined but also the unexploited or neglected opportunities to interacting with municipalities within and outside the inner area boundaries in order to address local needs, enhance territorial cohesion, socioeconomic development, and endogenous and exogenous growth.

The qualitative research method, which includes textual analysis and follows methodological studies such as Weck and Kamuf (2020) and Borén and Schmitt (2022), examines four official documents. The first two represent approved strategies from the national to the local level, 'Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne' (Barca et al., 2014) and Strategia d'Area – Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario (Comune di Taceno, 2018). The others, 'Un'Agenda strategica per l'Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario' (DAStU, 2023a) and 'Il ritratto territoriale dell'Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario' (DAStU, 2023b) have been selected because of their complementary aspect and the time span they have been published. They are documents developed from two workshops and a partnership between the scientific and political environment (Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Politecnico di Milano and Regione Lombardia). Still, the latter is the basis for constructing the new Area's Strategy as part of the 2021-2027 PP.

The first section introduces the research topic, questions, aims, and methodology to address such a theme. The second section localises the inner area of Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario geographically and details the area's characteristics and existing fragility (issues, barriers and challenges). The third section examines and presents findings related to local cross-border cooperation. The fourth section discusses the possible effects of local cross-border cooperation and the strategies. It approaches the socioeconomic development aspect and the inner area's strategies to interact within and outside the boundaries. The fifth section concludes the paper and points out future research.

2. The Geography of Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario: Characteristics of the Territory and Recent Dynamics

The Inner Area of Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario currently covers 41 municipalities (2021-2027 PP) and is home to 50,082 inhabitants (Comitato Nazionale Aree Interne, 2022). This new territorial arrangement is located in two provinces (Como and Lecco) in Northern Italy, and both are within the Lombardy Region limits. Ten municipalities from the Province of Lecco have been added to the current PP.

Lake Como is the main natural resource, but there are also the mountains, where several municipalities are located. The economic and productive structure of the area is directly linked with the manufacturing sector (steel processing, engineering and machinery components and textiles) (DAStU, 2023a).

Figure 1 shows the municipalities involved and the new boundaries created due to the SNAI effect. Through this map, it is possible to recognise that Lake Como divides the provinces¹ and

¹ The municipalities of Lecco and Como have a different classification, being considered hubs that offer basic services to the residents of the surrounding municipalities.

municipalities (discussed later), and the capitals of provinces are not part of the inner area. This specific inner area brings an important feature that helps to explain local daily problems, challenges and barriers: the altimetric difference.

The altimetric difference is not in itself a problem. However, one must recognise the existence of global cases in which this factor creates difficulties and obstacles, especially in attracting people, managing and delivering essential services to the population, as well as the interaction and physical connection with other settlements, towns and cities. In fact, the problems are maximised by the existing agreements, arrangements, infrastructure and governance. Low population density combined with altimetric barriers can trigger problems for socio-economic development. Scholars argue that the accumulation of skilled and educated people working together (human capital and agglomeration factor) is usually considered vital to socio-economic growth and explains the city's success worldwide (Glaeser, 2011).

Concerning the inner study area, in addition to low density (more pronounced in the mountain communes), the most common problems are associated with ageing, lack of prospects and opportunities, strengthening the desire to leave the communes or having to travel daily for work, leisure or education, lack of services, infrastructure and accessibility related to local public transport, which enhances, favours and maintains the concept of car-dependency.

Furthermore, there is a lack of educational and health services that cannot cater to an ageing population that demands frequent services and assistance. In the case of this inner area, the geomorphological configuration, a factor responsible for the natural beauty and landscape, is also one of the causes of the lack of connection and the difficulty in implementing better services due to the existing difference in altitude.

In numbers, it is possible to go from 200 to 1,500 metres in a few kilometres. Population density, also among the challenges, is very low, with an average of 87.28 inhabitants per km². More specifically, of the 32 municipal administrations, 68% have a population of fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, and 29% have fewer than 300 inhabitants in the mountain area (Comune di Taceno, 2018). On the other hand, Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario is rich in natural resources, landscape views, gastronomy, architecture, and heritage (Comune di Taceno, 2018). Lake Como, for instance, is an internationally recognised natural resource with natural ecosystems and touristic activities that enhance the quality of life of the inner area's municipalities.

Thus, this section presented central characteristics to understand the study area to address later the strategies, approaches and projects linked to the cross-border matter.

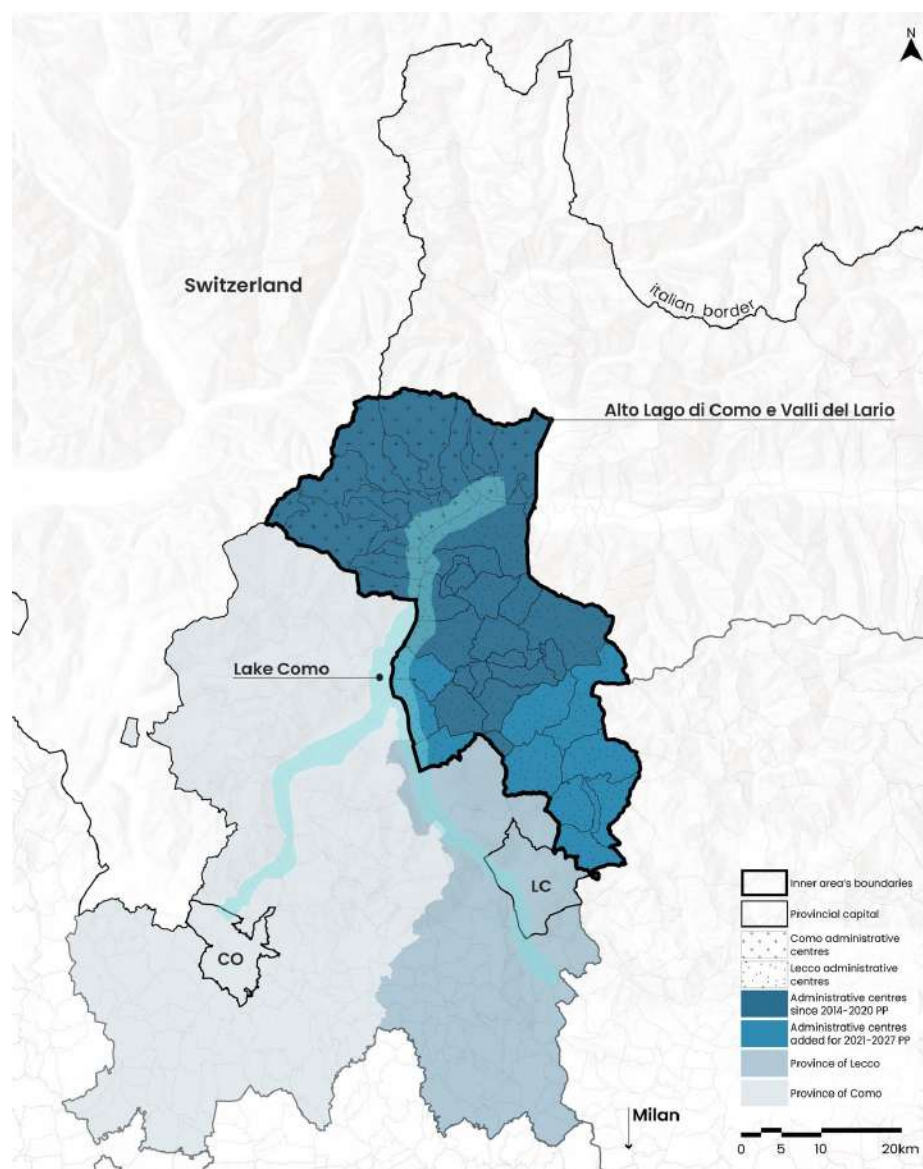


Figure 1. Inner Area of Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario. Source: Author's own elaboration.

3. Reviewing the strategies and projects of Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario

This section examines four official documents with the aim of verifying the intentions, vision, strategies, approaches and projects linked to cross-border cooperation in the context of the Inner Area of Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario strategies and plans. The methodology is based on textual analysis and studies by Weck and Kamuf (2020) and Borén and Schmitt (2022). Although with a more general aspect (due to the nature of a national strategy or plan), the SNAI

will be reviewed to ascertain what guidelines and recommendations exist regarding cross-border possibilities in the context of inner areas. After that, the focus falls strictly on the inner area of study. Thus, three documents strongly connected with the inner area's municipalities (2014-2020 PP) are analysed. It is important to note that the 2021-2027 PP strategy is being developed. However, two workshops have already been held with the local community and actors representing public authorities, the private sector, academics, and experts. The meetings resulted in two interesting documents (DASStU, 2023a, 2023b) that provide updates and original analyses of Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario. These documents will serve to find out what is currently being discussed and what has been new since the national strategy was published in 2014 and the local one in 2018.

The findings are organised and presented by level of government (from national to local) and follow the publication timeline. Given the challenge in transferring the local needs, aims and desired scenarios into projects and interventions for various reasons, the content below depicts not only the defined projects but also (where applicable) the vision, statements, intentions, guidelines, suggestions and recommendations. In other words, the results are not just looking for explicit statements but for everything that can be related to the subject of cross-border cooperation. Although cross-border cooperation intensely links to EU member states and external borders, this paper is also interested in how the group of municipalities (which make up an inner area) are using this innovative territorial arrangement to rationally and intelligently exploit the territorial capital and European and national funds to create a mechanism of cooperation to help reduce disparities and tackle common challenges across their domestic borders (EC, 2024).

3.1. The National Strategy for Inner Areas

The national strategy initially states that the policy created is a work in progress with strict agreement with the regions. It recognises the importance of effective dialogue between the central and regional levels with the municipalities and provinces. In fact, the SNAI place the municipalities as the main actors in the creation of the local strategy. 'The municipalities involved in each project area will create appropriate forms of service partnership (or, where appropriate, associations) that will help to boost the long-term sustainability of the strategy' (Barca et al., 2014, p. 9). In addition, the policy-makers emphasise that the growth of the inner areas in the coming years depends on external factors (exogenous development).

In order to identify internal and external dynamics, it is suggested that the inner areas, through the various local bodies and subsystems, propose realistic scenarios that can be realised by defining tangible objectives and projects that can be implemented. In this scenario, it is possible to recognise the transfer of responsibility through bottom-up initiatives. 'Local communities alone can interpret the variety and complexity of the local society and territorial capital that characterise them, and turn them into projects' (Barca et al., 2014, p. 18).

For the inner area's 'success', the national policy again focuses on the importance of endogenous and exogenous factors. They assume that the endogenous factor may trigger innovation, maintenance and preservation of local identity and internal knowledge about territorial activities. Hence, it would empower the inhabitants, boost the local economy, and attract other people to consume inner services and products.

With respect to (domestic or international) cross-border integration and cooperation, the inner areas, through funding and local development projects, need to become evolving territorial

systems that connect with the other areas of the Italian territory 'in terms of space, relations, economy - and culture (Barca et al., 2014, p. 16). Policy-makers see the inner areas as an issue that influences not only the national level but also the European and global levels.

Although the inner areas themselves are responsible for developing projects (according to local characteristics and future objectives), there are some sectors that SNAI obliges – in an attempt to strengthen and provide basic citizenship rights. Besides combating demographic trends such as depopulation, SNAI focuses on providing essential public services as a crucial means of reducing existing disparities and fragility. Mobility, healthcare, education and virtual connectivity are the basis of this national policy. Municipal cross-border cooperation may be seen in the demand for new forms of governance that require 'new associated management models for municipal activities' (Barca et al., 2014, p. 42).

The central level of government recognises its role in providing essential services to the inhabitants of Italian territory, regardless of geographical position. As a way of improving these services in inner areas, they state that there needs to be a reorganisation of educational facilities as well as health centres (hospitals and smaller units) in order to concentrate (where possible) and guarantee specialised and emergency services for citizens. For these actions to be feasible, mobility projects, especially accessibility, are expressed. Better coordination of transport planning that analyses transport demand and encourages modal shifts towards collective transport (Barca et al., 2014). These issues are vital for adequate flows into and out of the inner area to utilise essential services.

This section has presented possible links and indications of cooperation between municipalities. The national strategy serves as a guide for constructing all local strategies. In the following sections, the documents present findings on cross-border cooperation in the North Lake Como area.

3.2. Strategia d'Area Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario

The local strategy, officially named *Strategia d'Area Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario*, rather than the national one, naturally indicate and points out municipalities. The links with the theme of cross-border cooperation align with intentions, goals, and projects aimed at maximising basic public services such as education, healthcare and mobility. In addition, it details the topics of governance, tourism and entrepreneurship initiatives.

The document begins by reiterating that due to its proximity to influential universities and research centres and its history in specific production sectors (see section 2), the inner area's population has cognitive and social capital and an orientation towards 'doing business'. Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario is located in two provinces, which naturally increases the number of public bodies, facilities, institutions, and authorities, which, in this case (but not exclusively), implies governance challenges.

As for municipal cross-border governance, the inner area shows concrete actions in the legal sphere. There have been several mergers and unions of municipalities and administrative centres in the last decade. For example, the merger between Bellano and Vendrogno, the merger of other municipal centres that gave rise to the Comune di Gravedona and Uniti and, more recently, the Comune di Valvarrone, which was formed through the merger of Introzzo, Tremenico and Vendrogno. The above examples demonstrate the wish to improve the management of services and personal capacity and reduce operating financial costs. It is important to emphasise that these occurrences are related to both provinces, Lecco and Como.

Although there is 'local' centralisation on the part of the two mountain communities in the management of civil protection functions and other social services, technical issues such as the type of interface, the use of different digital systems (software) and also the deficit of administrative and institutional capacity building are points that explain the reduction or limitation of cross-border cooperation in this area. Moreover, the inner area has two different health agencies (ATS), one for each province. On the other hand, local public transport is managed by a single agency – 'Agenzia del Bacino di Varese-Como-Lecco'. The management of navigation on Lake Como competes with 'Gestione Navegazione Laghi', which runs Lake Maggiore and Lake Garda.

In the view of improving the management of local services and consequently local governance, the municipalities defined the subsequent topic of intervention topic and two related projects: 'rationalising functions in associated form, increasing the level of associationism between local authorities' (Comune di Taceno, 2018, p. 23). Shortly, the projects aim to improve the following types of services: civil protection, land register, and seismic regulations. They also aim to implement capacity-building actions in the administrative sector as well as for officials and other professionals linked to local strategy development. In this process, the aim is not only to train local bodies but also to have an integrated organisational model. Together with the above actions, the projects linked to local administrations seek to implement information, awareness-raising and empowerment dynamics for the local community (active citizenship).

With regard to educational projects, the local strategy recognises the difficulty in providing such a service due to financial and organisational issues, geographical position and (low) population density. Thus, the centralisation of services and especially facilities mentioned by the local strategy follows the guidelines of the central level (SNAI). In this sense, essential public services such as education and healthcare are somewhat closely linked to and dependent on mobility, accessibility and virtual connectivity as factors in achieving better performance.

In terms of education, the topic is 'strengthening the educational offer to favour the territorial anchoring of settled populations (and new populations)' (Comune di Taceno, 2018, p. 23). The projects revolve around teaching English language, integrated subjects, and new technologies, as well as having such facilities as hubs for reconciling work and family time by better aligning pre-school and after-school timetables. Offering extracurricular activities for children, parents and residents of the inner area who work outside the inner area or whose schedules make it difficult to manage the situation. In short, the school and primary and secondary centres are planned as meeting points to address and increase knowledge about local, cultural and innovation issues for different people with different needs.

Moreover, in the educational and training sphere, some projects aim to bring students together through exchanges with entrepreneurs and companies from the local area and beyond, as well as educational hubs and research centres. Innovation, mechanics, mechatronics, energy efficiency, and the development of entrepreneurial profiles are at the forefront of these projects.

As regards healthcare, the main topic of intervention is 'increasing services aimed at taking care of people with chronic and frail conditions by the social and health care system and improving conditions for social inclusion' (Comune di Taceno, 2018, p. 25). Local development projects align with the improvement and application of the Territorial Social and Health Centre, or 'Presidio Socio-Sanitario Territoriale' (PreSST) model. In the province of Lecco, the PreSST model will operate in Bellano, serving the municipalities closest to the lake, and in Introbio, serving those in the mountains or valleys. The dynamics for the Province of Como are in line

with services at a hospital located in Gravedona ed Uniti. There are actions to construct an integrated network with telecare and telemedicine services.

The local strategy understands that in order to provide education and health services in person and build a more connected inner area that can develop socio-economically, it is crucial to have good mobility conditions, especially accessibility between municipalities – regardless of geographical location. To this end, the main goal is ‘increasing the level of accessibility of the area in relation to the specific geographies defined by the local public transport system and territorial nodes’ (Comune di Taceno, 2018, p. 24). In this context, the projects seek to strengthen local public transport (LPT) services along the main routes but at the same time on secondary routes – improving accessibility to the main routes through better management and encouraging people to opt for LPT rather than private individual vehicles (usually cars). In addition, the connection and navigation services on Lake Como should be expanded to minimise the existing natural barrier aspect.

Conclusively, the local level believes that a new multidisciplinary arrangement made up of companies in the tourism field is essential for connecting the territory. The lack and the need for a logic of networking and making growth in local partnerships are competencies of a managerial and entrepreneurial nature. To this end, the expected outcome is to ‘increase the tourist offer's integration level for an integrated and distinctive communication of the area and a systemic organisation of reception services and accommodation proposals’ (Comune di Taceno, 2018, p. 28). Thus, tourism appears as a way of connecting the mountains to the lake, bringing more people from within the inner area and tourists with the assumption of developing the socio-economic and cultural environment of the inner area.

With regard to international cross-border cooperation, the local strategy only mentions the existence of projects between Italy and Switzerland (Interreg Italia-Svizzera). There is no project in this PP that strengthens this link or opens up new windows of cooperation.

3.3. Un'Agenda Strategica per l'Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario

Considering the need and objective of reversing demographic trends, the strategic agenda raises noteworthy points about this factor and makes direct links with essential public services. The absence of educational and health personnel is notable and severe, especially in the sparsely populated communes located in the mountains. In this sense, it is stated that even with the implementation of incentive policies (free rent and salary increases), this event is not being reversed. A few points help explain this situation: the attractiveness in terms of quality of life, services and financial remuneration found in Switzerland and some nearby towns. In addition, the inefficiency of public transport, difficulties due to high prices, lack of options or the poor state of repair of flats and houses reinforce this situation. As a result, the level of education is compromised and often interrupted. It leads to differences in learning between students from other locations - reinforcing the fragility of the inner area.

The existing fragmentation in terms of governance is once again exposed. In fact, these problems are related to basic public services. However, this time, they include the cultural sphere, which reduces the supply or even deprives citizens of services and activities linked to cinema, theatres and bookshops, for example. On the other hand, governance has been upgraded according to the strategic agenda. DASTU (2023a) points out that the communes, despite challenges and barriers, are moving towards greater cooperation. They use the case of the Riserva Naturale Pian di Spagna e Lago di Mezzola, where 11 communes, the two provinces

(Lecco and Como), the two mountain communities and the Lombardy Region are involved. However, the authors mention that the processes of associationism and the merging of the communes have not made as much progress.

As mentioned in the previous sections, mobility is undoubtedly a key dimension in the progress or decline of these communes. In this sense, although some improvements have been made in recent years in matters of soft (active) mobility and public transport connections, the document argues that the lack of integration, infrastructure and quality of access between the two shores of Lago di Como diminishes endogenous development and reinforces the employment and service dependence of the residents of the inner area on the external poles (Lecco, Menaggio and Morbegno).

After presenting some existing issues that partly explain the fragility of the inner area of Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario, some strategic lines of action that will most likely guide the definition of local development projects will be presented. They have been constructed based on the results of meetings with various local actors and following stakeholder processes. Basically, they are organised into three points that are segmented according to the nature, detail or need of the intervention area.

‘Abitare l’Alto Lago’ raises the issue of housing in terms of favourable conditions and housing options and in terms of keeping or attracting people to increase the number of inhabitants in the inner area. To this end, it is proposed that disused or vacant public buildings be redeveloped and reused. These intended buildings are generally found in the historic centres of the communes bordering the lake and the side valleys. Redeveloping these buildings is an option to offer more affordable (and fair) rents to health, education and public administration professionals, as well as single elderly and disabled people. Still, within this axis of intervention, there is the idea of requalifying private property as a means of directing these spaces towards recreational and tourist purposes. Lastly, bearing in mind that the municipalities bordering the lake, those on the mid-coast and in the mountains are at strategic points for accessing natural parks and trekking and cycling routes, for example, there is a third action that aims to improve people’s enjoyment of the communes by strengthening the small centralities that exist in the mountains where a variety of services and activities need to be improved for both residents and visitors (bars, agro-tourism, coworking spaces, cycle workshops, tourist information offices, appointment centres for health services, among others).

The second strategic line is called ‘Muoversi in Alto Lago’. The agenda begins by recognising the 2014-2020 PP projects but also mentions that more is needed through a different vision. It proposes the development of a Mobility Plan for the area that involves the various actors, institutions and organisations responsible for mobility in Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario at different stages of production. In this sense, the authors suggest that the plan could define an integrated mobility system that complements the current offer, which is considered precarious at different points. In short, the problems remain the same as those identified in the previous PP, but with more detail. The idea is to put a MaaS platform into practice, connecting the two shores of the lake to the side valleys via R-Link and train. There should be more connection points that encourage intermodality (i.e. taking the bike on the ferry), secondary LPT networks and cycle-pedestrian routes. Communication between existing public transport services and private services that mainly serve the tourist sector is also suggested. In addition, Bus Alpin, a system applied in Switzerland, is pointed out as a reference to follow.

‘Dal Lago alla Montagna’ is the third strategic axis. This line emphasises a problematic area sector: the poor connection between the lake and the mountains. Although the difference in altitude naturally imposes some barriers to access, the inner area has a concentrated territorial capital that must be unlocked and exploited sustainably, impacting the socio-economic, cultural and tourist sectors. To this end, the strategic agenda proposes that the lake should have a unitary system for tourist enjoyment and promotion that can, over the next few years, deseasonalise tourism. While most tourist accommodation is concentrated in the municipalities close to the lake, the mountains have a weak and limited infrastructure. In addition, the role of the forest and parks needs to be rethought regarding governance and accessibility.

Currently, the forests and other areas in a strategic position linking the lake to the mountains are privately owned with numerous parcels of land, making it difficult to manage them towards the common good. Finally, the historic trails must be better managed and integrated into routes. The following section looks at this issue of routes and tracks in detail and shows how various itineraries cross different municipalities, provinces, and international borders.

3.4. Il Ritratto Territoriale dell’Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario

The current object of analysis is the result of two workshops and contact with various local actors, following the same conceptual and organisational structure as the strategic agenda (section 3.3.). Many issues linked to cross-border cooperation are repeated in this document. Hence, this section aims to bring new analyses, such as the commuting flow analysis that shows the reasons for travelling/commuting as well as the internal and external flows touching Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario.

The different flows were analysed, taking into account all the municipalities belonging to Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario (2021-2027 PP). In this regard, it was noted that the largest internal flows (those with origin and destination within the inner area) are quite high for occasional reasons. Regarding inward movements (with origin outside the area and destination in the inner area), the data indicate very high flows for occasional reasons and quite high flows for work reasons. Outflows (with origin within the inner area and destination outside the inner area) indicate high numbers for study and work reasons, with work being the main reason for outflows. The scarcity of educational centres (primary and secondary) and the lack of dynamism in the job offer are pointed out as the leading causes for outflows.

However, when analysing the distribution of movements, the rates show that internal and inward flows are greater than outward flows. The authors understand this data in the following way: the municipalities have an internal polarisation in that the population belonging to the inner area, as well as some people from neighbouring municipalities, move to the so-called hubs in the inner area that can offer higher quality services. These centres are the municipalities that border the lake. Colico is the municipality with the highest internal flow rate and high inflow rates. Cortenova registers the highest number of arrivals. On the west side of the lake, Gravedona and Uniti have the highest outflows due to essential services. Regarding dependence on other communes for work, services and education, the most popular centres outside the inner area are Lecco, Menaggio and Morbegno.

Navigation under Lake Como was also analysed. Despite being a vital natural resource (and decisive for the socio-economic development of the southern part), Lake Como is currently seen as a barrier. In short, there is an imbalance in navigation on both shores. The Lecco shore has a discreet offer mainly in the low season months (May-October) with only five daily

weekend departures and eight destinations during the six high season months. Como's shore is far superior in this respect. There are 33 daily weekend departures, and 29 destinations (or options) are offered all year round. Data about the pre-pandemic boarding numbers (tickets bought annually) validates the shore imbalances. There were 20 thousand tickets boarded for Lecco compared to 610 thousand for Como.

Finally, the Area Strategy mentions the importance of upgrading and activating historic routes and itineraries that cross the inner area of Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario. In addition to encouraging tourism and soft mobility, the aim is to enhance cultural, historical, and natural heritage. North Lake Como is a tourism association that helps promote socio-cultural events that encourage internal and external tourism. The association also partners in a European project, *Le Vie del Viandante – trekking senza confini*, co-funded by Interreg Italia-Switzerland. Two important itineraries cross the inner area, Sentiero del Viandante (9) and Via dei Monti Lariani (11). In total, they are 60.5 and 144.8 kilometres long, respectively. They also serve as links to other routes to the south and north. Figure 2 demonstrates the number of existing itineraries that allow one to explore and move around the inner area, other provinces and Switzerland.



Figure 2. Itineraries crossing the inner area and neighbouring municipalities. Source: Adapted from Le Vie del Viandante².

4. Discussion

In this section, the preceding results and findings are discussed in order to answer the research questions related to the Inner Area of Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario, Northern Italy. The content follows the same order pointed out in the introduction.

² https://www.leviedelviandante.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Viandante_mappa_4.pdf

The four public documents examined do not explicitly state local or international cross-border cooperation, indicating that, for instance, such a municipality or administrative centre needs to work with a particular one to strengthen and improve such service or sector. A more in-depth interpretation and reflection was required. Therefore, the previous sections presented issues, problems, and situations to contextualise and elucidate the intentions, desired scenarios, goals, and local development projects.

Firstly, cross-border relations are mostly linked to essential services and governance, although tourism and entrepreneurship are also approached. Yet, it is important to state that as the municipalities in the study area have a low population rate and a shortage of services (mainly in the mountain territory), they naturally depend on others. Thus, there is already an inward and outward flow in near essential service hubs (inside and outside the inner area boundaries) due to the concentration of specific services and for work and leisure reasons. This relationship or necessity applies even before the SNAI was launched in 2014 or the local strategy was approved and signed in 2020.

Most local interventions have been defined to increase the quality of mobility, healthcare and education services and systems. The discourses and projects about interaction and cooperation between the inner area's municipalities follow the same path, that is, focused on improving the LPT infrastructure and services to provide suitable levels of accessibility in order to make use of the hospitals and other healthcare facilities, as well as educational centres. Furthermore, given the fragmented local governance, which is maximised by the inner area comprising two provinces with different interfaces and software for the administrative management of public services, the new administrative capacity-building strategies converge to more municipal cross-border cooperation. The present projects aim to train personnel of different divisions and departments to increase the quality of services and interaction and cooperation between municipalities. Additionally, the recent unions and mergers of administrative centres (found in the two provinces) increase the responsibilities and the demand for a high administrative capacity and municipal cross-border contact.

The health and education strategies and projects that foresee the improvement and centralisation of activities and services in large units prove to be adequate because, on the one hand, there is a lack of workers for the functions and the requirement of financial resources to build new facilities and maintenance and, by the other, there are many municipalities with a low population where the cost-benefit of operations is compromised. Although the SNAI mentions telemedicine and assistance projects, the local strategy has not yet stipulated concrete projects. As a result, for the centralisation of services and activities to have an excellent cross-border effect, mobility and accessibility projects need to result, essentially LPT and creative interventions to attend mountain municipalities more frequently.

The findings show that the central level did not indicate or encourage any strategy or action for collaboration between the inner area's municipalities or from the outside. Although decentralisation of government and tasks is an essential factor that enables autonomy in terms of policy- and decision-making, for example, having guidelines and recommendations from the national and regional level within the context of the inner areas would be ideal not only for the country to have coherence and assertiveness in pursuit of common goals, but also to increase exogenous development, a subject raised and emphasised during the national strategy. In the context of the 'Strategia d'Area' (in effect), the nearby hubs of essential services (Lecco, Como and Menaggio) were rarely considered for projects linked to the inner area. Lecco was cited a few times because its educational centres naturally attract residents and students from

inside and outside Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario. Also, the local strategy did not make direct links with Varenna, Bellagio and Menaggio, cities with a strong tourism sector, in order to activate the northern part of the lake or at least have a synergy and regular contact to improve the navigation of Lake Como and the extension of itineraries and routes that facilitate mobility and accessibility for residents on both shores of the lake.

Clearly, the strategy needs to develop and focuses on its municipalities. Nonetheless, exogenous development is just as crucial as endogenous, considering the proximity to municipalities with better levels of socio-economic development, tourism and basic services. Varenna, for example, has been added to the Inner Area of Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario for the 2021-2027 PP. Yet, all the new documents so far fail to point to municipalities that could be catalysts for this 'second new development opportunity'.

Another striking issue is that at no point did the three local documents mention the existence of another inner area neighbouring to reinforce the area's socio-economic growth. When the first strategy was built, there was the 'Inner Area of Valchiavenna' (a pilot project), and nowadays, there is the 'Inner area of Lario Intelvese' and the 'Inner Area of Valli Lario Ceresio'. Both inner areas border the study area. In this sense, the commuting flow analysis showed high internal and incoming flows in Alto Lago di Como e Valli de Lario to the extent that it is quite probable that the residents of the inner areas of northern Italy and Lombardy cross the boundaries and depend (even minimally) on the municipalities belonging to each inner area. Expanding the analysis and gathering evidence on needs and activities from other inner areas seems fundamental for structuring new projects to strengthen activities, services and systems towards integrated regional development and social and territorial cohesion.

The EU instruments, such as Integrated Territorial Investment and Community-led Local Development, could be applied first because the central level (SNAI) recommended them and second, to take advantage of the financial resources and the mix of possibilities arising from the combination of more than one fund and priority axe, for example, to connect the lake to the mountain better.

The last two documents contain additional points that can be used to discuss cross-border cooperation matters. Although these contents are not projects, the statements and proposals are more coherent and are closely linked to the current problems of the study context. 'Abitare Alto Lago' is an approach that encourages and attracts people to these areas, particularly people in the health and education sectors. In those days where climate change issues are gradually critical, and quality of life has become a relevant factor in choosing where to live (leveraged by the possibility of online meetings and remote working), the natural ecosystems and the landscape of Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario combined with numerous outdoor activities both on the lake and in the mountains, and the relative proximity to Milan and airports may attract new residents and trigger the socio-economic development.

The navigation of Lake Como has undoubtedly received greater attention in recent workshops, resulting in new analyses, data, proposals and potential approaches. The last document points out imbalances to the extent that the western shore (Como) is much more heavily used than the eastern one (Lecco), where LPT is more widely used due to better connections and infrastructure with major urban centres (Lecco and Milan). Moreover, the agency's timetables demonstrate different combinations and destinations for crossing the lake. Hence, innovative projects are expected to advance the number of crossings that allow intermodality (bicycles and other micromobility devices) and stations with services and infrastructure for automobiles to

continue their journey. The lake must be considered the main element for the development and union of the two provinces and municipalities involved. Lakes Project brings interesting standpoints to reconsider this natural resource as a catalyst (ESPON, 2021).

The various itineraries have been treated and considered as relevant elements for cross-border cooperation and socio-economic, cultural, and local identity development purposes. Figure 2 revealed various routes, tracks, and paths for different types of activities that can be linked to tourism, preferably sustainable tourism that does not lead to reducing residents' quality of life due to the high use of local infrastructures and systems. More regular collaboration with the North Lake Como association and existing international projects seems crucial to exploit the inner area territorial capital.

Regarding the possible local cross-border effects and implications at the local level, one can argue that the production of the Area's Strategy and the accumulation of multilevel actors have undoubtedly brought more work and challenges mainly to municipal administrations to cope. It forced them to think more, be prepared and trained, and be in contact with experts, stakeholders, the local community, and companies that may share common interests but also conflicts of interest. Above all, it demanded managing and allocating funds and making critical decisions. The various funds open up opportunities, but the absence of 'Local Action Groups' (LAG) may weaken the desired scenarios (DASStU, 2023a). A suitable and responsive strategy requires technical and community expertise, regular debate, and time to identify local problems and opportunities and avoid political, public or private conflicts.

Contrarily, all these complex activities unlocked new windows of opportunity for the following years. The inner areas represent a new territorial arrangement that combines European, national, regional and municipal funds and allows dialogue and the possibility of taking advantage of the territorial capital and potential of other municipalities legally towards a territorial and social cohesion change.

5. Conclusion

The review of four official documents put into evidence the cross-border strategies, approaches, and projects currently impacting the Inner Area of Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario in Northern Italy.

The conclusions of this paper indicate that cross-border strategies are intensely linked to the provision of (better) essential services (healthcare, education and mobility) and projects to maximise the municipal administrative capacity, tourism and entrepreneurship weaknesses. However, this association had to be inferred because all the documents fail to make explicit indications that one municipality must work or cooperate with another (even on the same lake shore or province) to activate such an asset or system.

Independently of the level of government, the documents could be more emphatic about the theme of integrated territorial development to the extent that neighbouring inner areas could work together. Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario borders two inner areas, and another is quite close. The analysis made it clear that although the goals are mostly consistent with local needs and opportunities when transferred to the project sphere, it is possible to notice how difficult it is to take advantage of the inner area's territorial potential.

In conclusion, there is much to review and consider regarding the potential of each municipality and the Swiss border, where there are already European projects (Interreg). The new local

strategy for the 2021-2027 PP must take advantage of the proximity of the nearby inner areas to boost integrated regional development and better exploit the territorial capital as a way to enhance endogenous and exogenous growth and territorial cohesion.

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