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Dealing with areas ‘that don’t matter’ in Europe: the relevance of filling the gap in multilevel governance processes in the case of the northern Lazio Region in Italy

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This paper discusses the results of research carried out in a “neither metropolitan nor peripheral” area in the northern Lazio Region, which is similar to many other areas in Europe labelled as “areas that do not matter”. The in-depth study about the implementation of two different policies (the Inner Areas National Strategy and River Contract), both of which called for territorial governance changes to deal with the challenges faced by non-metropolitan territories, suggests strategies to address the multilevel governance gaps revealed by the OECD.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

In “The Revenge of Places that Don’t Matter”, Rodríguez-Pose (2018) criticised the public policies of the past 20 years that have favoured investment in the largest and most dynamic agglomerations, which already possessed significant competitive advantages in the knowledge economy. These policies favoured superstar cities and prosperous places while neglecting non-metropolitan areas in economic and demographic decline (Martin et al. 2021). According to Rodríguez-Pose, these widespread trends would produce great discontent throughout Europe and thus foster the rise of populism (Dijkstra, Poelman, Rodríguez-Pose 2020) as an almost direct consequence in precisely those territories that have been “neglected by spatial policy in the last two decades” (MacKinnon et al. 2022: 40).

On the one hand, this interpretation and the ensuing debates have had the merit of drawing attention to these territories – very substantial areas in geographical terms spread throughout Europe but hitherto studied less than metropolitan areas (see the concept of “metrophilia” in Barbera 2022) – by generating a number of labels and descriptions providing insight into their peculiarities and problems.

On the other hand, Rodríguez-Pose’s work has highlighted the need to promote new spatial policies for these territories, including some experiments and innovations aimed at “the revamping of these places” (Rodríguez-Pose 2018).

Within this framework, the research analysed what happens in a non-metropolitan area in the Lazio Region that:

- is considered here as a “territory that does not matter” based on the economic and demographic decline data (Agenzia di Coesione Territoriale 2020; Censis 2020),
- has been recently targeted by two innovative territorial policies such as the “Alta Tuscia-Antica Città di Castro” Inner Area and the “Mar-ta-Bolsena-Tarquinia” Lake, River, and Coast Contract.

From the analysis of these two implementation processes, well-known “gaps in the Multilevel Governance practices” have emerged: those gaps have been highlighted for years as crucial to the implementation of policies carried out in non-metropolitan and declining territories by the responsible OECD Commission. Accordingly, the research question was specifically focused on how to fill the gap in Multilevel Governance in areas such as these, arriving at conclusions aimed at better implementation of innovative policies for these “territories that do not matter” in the future.

Thus, the paper is structured in three parts. The first concerns the theoretical framework of “territories that do not matter” in the EU and the significance of the multilevel governance gap in territorial policies highlighted by the OECD evaluations and the monitoring Commission. In the second part, the case study as a “territory that does not matter” is presented; the challenges of multilevel governance in the area are brought into focus by the field and desk research. In the third and final part, findings and conclusions are presented, underlining the weakness of the multilevel governance, making recommendations and giving directions, emphasising how overcoming the gap is

not only desirable but absolutely essential for the “territories that do not matter”. Indeed, they may never subvert the laws of density but may be able to reduce the gap by improving the quality of relations among the actors involved in spatial policies, where these exist.

1.2 Methodological approach

A qualitative and mixed methodological approach has been adopted to explore the research question. Firstly, the case study is framed within the theoretical interpretative keys of “territories that do not matter” in Europe and related territorial policies (cf. section 2). Secondly, desk and field research was carried out on the area and the two processes. Firstly, the desk research included the local documents relating to the implementation of the two policies and the documents and guidelines produced at both regional and national levels. Secondly, the field research was conducted for almost a year on how the process had worked, the relationship between the documents produced, and the expected outcomes. Furthermore, the fieldwork prompted reflections on the interesting overlap of different stakeholders, both local and institutional, which led to greater consideration of the role of reciprocal actions and their commitments. Indeed, these relations represent a key factor in these processes to stimulate territorial transformation to counteract stagnation by reshaping the existing institutional relationships.

In this framework, participatory observation made it possible to keep track of the process by considering stakeholder involvement and relationships. In addition, a deeper understanding of this territorial context emerged. Last but not least, the interviews investigated stakeholders’ perceptions of territorial needs, critical issues of implementation processes, and how to improve them. Informal conversations and semi-structured interviews involved the project manager (the same for both policies)¹, the technical and administrative actors, decision-makers, local experts, members of the steering committee, and mayors. These exchanges made it possible to understand each role and point of view, and participants’ goals.

Finally, the shadowing of the project manager was designed to observe in detail the interactions with the technical and administrative actors, members of the steering committee, and mayors.

2 Non-metropolitan areas: theoretical framework and the gap of multilevel governance in policies applied

2.1 “Territories that do not matter” in the EU

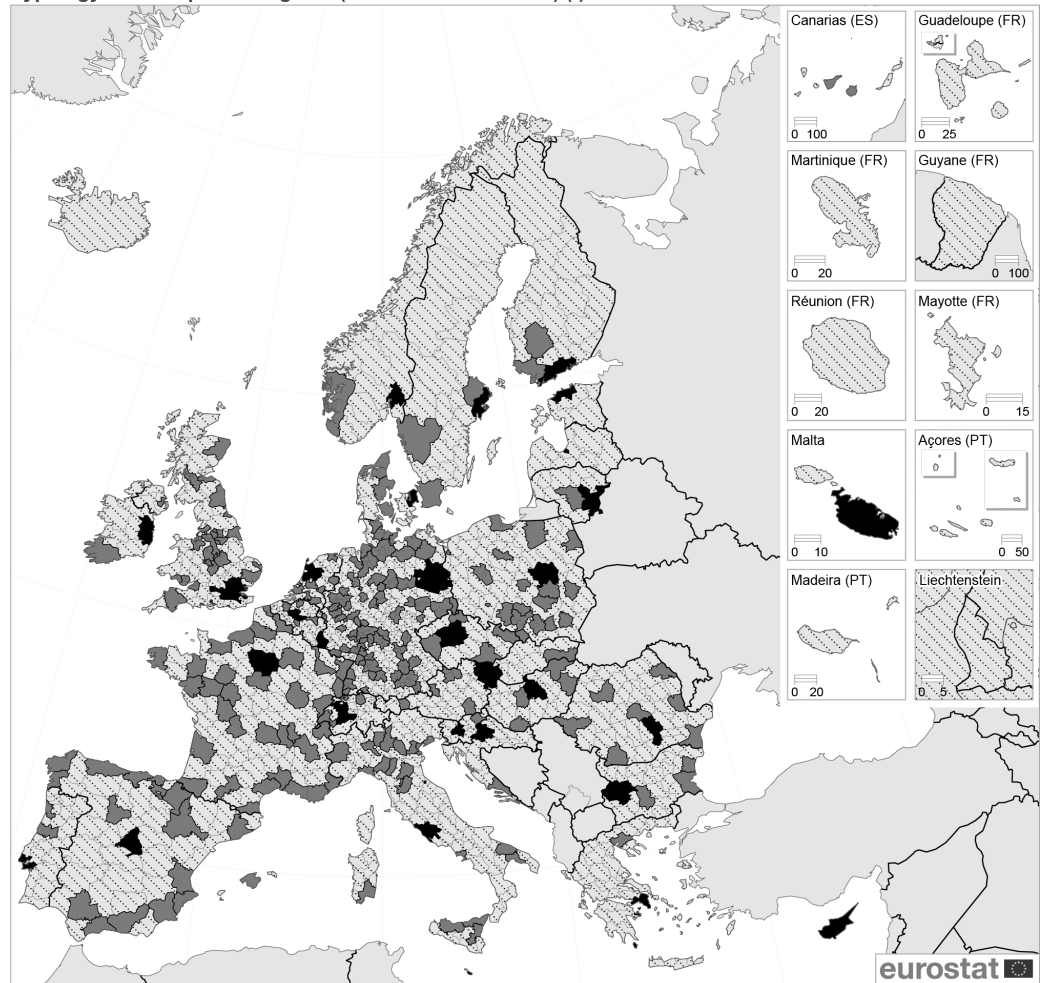
Non-metropolitan areas constitute a considerable part of Europe and include areas neither metropolitan nor extremely peripheral or “simply” rural (Monsson 2014). The extent of these territories in Europe (Fig. 1), combined with the demographic forecast indicating an increase in the rate of urbanisation as well as population living in suburban areas in the coming decades, makes the debate more urgent than ever (Piorr et al. 2011; EUROSTAT 2016; Shaw et al. 2020). Within a political and economic perspective, Rodríguez-Pose (2018) named these territories “places that do not matter”, sketching out a “geography of discontent” (Guilluy 2019; McCann 2020) that he linked to the spread of populist movements in Europe. Rodríguez-Pose and other scholars have defined “places that do not matter” as those territories that have experienced long periods of decline while poorly targeted by policies and investments (Krzysztofik et al. 2019; Dijkstra, Poelman, Rodríguez-Pose 2020; Gluckler 2020; Bourdin, Torre 2021). This condition made them (feel) “left behind” (Rodríguez-Pose 2018; MacKinnon et al. 2022).

The idea of “left behind” places extended beyond the economic to encompass social, demographic, political and cultural spheres. It represents a multi-dimensional concept which includes varying combinations of lower living standards, population loss/contraction/low growth, a lack of infrastructure and public services, a decline of former industrial regions, a general decrease in agricultural land value as well as economic disadvantage².

In the international debate, Wandl et al. (2014) have selected several studies which describe a consistent part of Europe characterised by low-density discontinuous development in non-metropolitan territories³. Albeit in fewer numbers, as an upshot of the ‘metrophilia’ that has characterised public discourse, research and policy for a long time (Barbera 2022), interpretative keys include “hybrid spaces” between rural and urban (Ulled et al. 2010), “peri-urban areas” (Allen 2010) and “in-between territories” (Wandl et al. 2014) to indicate territories whose characteristics go beyond dichotomous urban-rural definitions.

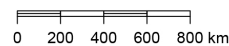
Recently in Italy, in line with the work on the “territories that do not matter”, some scholars

Typology of metropolitan regions (at the level of NUTS 3) (*)



Administrative boundaries: © EuroGeographics © UN-FAO © Turkstat
Cartography: Eurostat - GISCO, 08/2016

- Capital metropolitan regions
- Metropolitan regions
- Non-metro regions



(*) Based on population grid from 2011 and NUTS 2013.
Eurostat, JRC and European Commission Directorate-General for Regional Policy

Fig. 1: Non-metropolitan areas in Europe.
(Source: Eurostat-GISCO, 2018)

have focused on “intermediate territories” or a “middle land” (Marchigiani, Cigalotto 2019; Lanzani et al. 2021), linked to more peripheral areas, to highlight a large part of the territory often neglected by policies⁴. According to these interpretative keys, intermediate territories are in the shadow of big cities and suffer from economic crises and abandonment while they battle demographic decline and lack of services, however challenging. In addition, the increase in environmental risks makes them particularly vulnerable to contemporary challenges (Bonfantini 2010; Béal 2012). Moreover, these terri-

tories are often undermined by fragile environmental resources (i.e., in terms of food, water, etc.) and require as much attention as the big cities. Despite the fact that these areas possess significant ecological and historical assets, they are hampered by difficulties in coordination and management (Marchigiani 2020; De Leo 2022).

“Territories that do not matter” are dogged by long-standing processes of decline or stagnation related to poor territorial planning and lack of transformation projects/investments. These territories are at risk of planning neglect

or disinterest, both at the municipal level and on a larger scale. They suffer from stagnation and immobility; transformative policies and practices barely take root. A prolonged decline in the socio-economic context often goes hand in hand with weak and inactive government/institutional bodies, inefficient public services, limited capacity to impact societal divides, and scarcity of resources (not only financial but also cognitive) to address the main territorial challenges. Indeed, institutions are frequently unable to make rapid use of funds, they do not have the aptitude to plan or cooperate with others, and so are isolated and, above all, unable to enact transformation practices (Geissler et al. 2019; UCLG 2021).

Nevertheless, despite the difficulty of grouping these numerous but scattered territories, they display a heterogeneity of experiences across Europe and a general tendency to reiterate the dichotomous interpretative key. The analysis of spatial characteristics is as important as the effects and possibilities for action to reverse stagnation processes in these territories. It represents an important challenge and essential learning for territorial planning at the European scale. At the same time, the various efforts of interpretation in the literature demonstrate the need to better understand a Europe-wide phenomenon that requires attention and (above all) adequate territorial planning policies on a large scale (Lanzani 2022).

Since Rodriguez-Pose's work shone a light on the responsibility of policies and policymakers, new experimental interventions are keen to overhaul policies in this significant part of European non-metropolitan territories. A wider and refreshed form of territorial policies, reaching beyond urban cores, is attempting to displace narrow, growth-oriented economic approaches (Rodriguez-Pose 2018; MacKinnon et al. 2022; Lanzani 2022).

2.2 *The gap of multilevel governance in territorial policies*

The concept of multilevel governance⁵ emerges as being key to maximising the efficiency of territorial policies. To quote, “the promotion of multilevel governance to enhance vertical and horizontal coordination with a view to ensure, first, a sufficient degree of coherence between the resources allocated to and responsibilities assumed by local authorities and, second, minimal overlap between the actions taken by various tiers of government” (Rodriguez-Pose, Wilkie 2017: 152).

The multilevel governance concept dates back to the early 1990s, to the works of Hooghe and Marks on European integration: multilevel governance represented a new form of allocating roles and institutional dependence (Marks, Hooghe, Blank 1996). Over the last two decades, the practice of pursuing endogenous, participatory, and integrated planning strategies has moved the focus of public debate on how to improve governance dynamics and achieve changes by re-scaling, re-organising, and re-defining territorial networks (Brenner 1999; MacLeod 1999).

The rise of ever more ambitious policies in this respect has, at the same time, seen the creation of evaluation and monitoring tools. Since 1999, under Fabrizio Barca, the first Chair of the OECD Regional Development Policy Committee, a number of policy implementation assessments have been carried out, focusing not only on the substance of these policies, but also on how to improve and implement them within the diversity of territorial contexts and the coherence of regional strategies at the national level. Consequently, the OECD has tested a variety of public policies (such as public investment, water, and innovation), looking for ways to improve the coordination and cooperation capacity of public actors at different levels of government. In these assessments, multilevel governance emerged as a means to address public challenges and contribute to the implementation of well-functioning territorial policies. In 2011, an OECD working paper (Charbit 2011) identified significant multilevel governance gaps after analysing decentralisation data from 1995 to 2009 and subsequently defining a methodology inspired by OECD regional development work.

Following the growing relevance of a territorial perspective (Albrechts et al. 2003; Healey 2004, 2006; Stead 2014), multilevel governance, shared knowledge and the interaction – across levels – of local and institutional actors have become parts of the chief policy challenges.

In practice, policy for “territories that do not matter” inevitably goes on to use impacting multilevel governance to address territorial challenges (Fonseca, Ramos 2008; Grävingholt, von Haldenwang 2016; Mattila et al. 2020). The importance of involving a plurality of public and private actors emerged with the increase in responsibility of subnational governments for designing and implementing local strategies and territorial policies (Albrechts et al. 2003; Ascani, Crescenzi, Iammarino 2012). Indeed,

acknowledging the need for intervention based on partnerships between different levels of government, many territorial interventions have encouraged multilevel forms of collaboration, including with non-state actors (Zwet, Ferry 2019; Göransson 2021). In light of that, multilevel governance arrangements have been defined as both vertical and horizontal: they must embrace the local, regional, and national government levels (vertical) and involve the public, the private, and the non-profit sectors in civil society (horizontal) (Barca et al. 2012).

Recently, Charbit (2020) – the OECD expert who produced the 2011 report mentioned above – adapted and synthesised a table of multilevel governance gaps, which is used extensively in a variety of policy fields, stressed the need to address these gaps and suggested possible actions (Fig. 2). In her conclusions, she argues that multilevel governance “gaps” arise “because the expertise and responsibilities of levels of government are mutually dependent” (ibid.: 816). In addition, she suggests modifying the multilevel governance gaps framework to include non-state actors and their effective dialogue with public stakeholders. This, her latest work, finally ignites the hope for a new series of territorial policies so necessary to address multilevel governance gaps.

These multilevel governance gaps have been acknowledged in policies such as LEADER,

which was one of the first European programmes to tackle challenges in non-metropolitan territories, with a specific focus on rural areas. LEADER⁶ has come to attention because of its locally defined objectives and the involvement of several levels of government (Saraceno 1999). Indeed, it supported territorial processes pursuing alternative multilevel governance, public-private partnerships, and community initiatives.

Nevertheless, the work of LEADER has exposed the weaknesses and “problems connected to multilevel governance and in managing rationalisation processes for regional cooperation and networking” (Maccani, Samoggia 2007: 151). Its innovative characteristics were well suited to the OECD evaluation framework which included LEADER+ as a case study chapter in one of the OECD publications (OECD 2014). Despite many difficulties, the LEADER programme had an experimental approach, managing to innovate local and territorial practices and policies (Ingellis et al. 2014). Indeed, apart from throwing light on multilevel governance gaps, the specific focus on rural areas has not been sufficient to draw more attention to a large part of European non-metropolitan or middle-to-small territories and confront their challenges.

Since LEADER, there has been a policy vacuum for non-metropolitan territories, partially

Gap	Description	Actions needed
Information gap	Asymmetries of information (quantity, quality, type) between levels of government (intentional or not)	Incentives to reveal and share information
Capacity gap	Insufficient scientific, technical, infrastructure capacity of subnational actors, in particular to design appropriate strategies	Instruments to build local and regional capacities
Funding gap	Unstable or insufficient revenues undermining effective implementation of responsibilities at the subnational level	Shared financing mechanisms
Policy gap	Silo approaches of sectoral ministries and agencies	Mechanisms to create multidimensional/holistic approaches at the subnational level, and to exercise political leadership
Administrative gap	Mismatch between functional areas and administrative boundaries	Arrangements and institutions to act at the appropriate level
Objective gap	Actors at different levels have different and often contrasting objectives that impede co-operation	Incentives to align objectives
Accountability gap	Difficulty to ensure the transparency of practices across constituencies	Institutional quality measurement; instruments to strengthen integrity at central and local levels; instruments to enhance citizens' involvement

Fig. 2: Multilevel governance gaps from Charbit's work (2020). (Source: Adapted from Charbit 2011 and Charbit, Romano 2017)

filled by a more recent Italian policy for territories “left behind” (Barca 2019). Indeed, in 2013, the Agency for Territorial Cohesion (Dipartimento per la coesione territoriale) and the Minister for Territorial Cohesion, Fabrizio Barca, introduced the National Strategy for Inner Areas⁷ (SNAI; Italian: Strategia Nazionale Aree Interne) specifically designed for ‘left behind’ territories (Barca et al. 2014). The Strategy defies urban-rural dualism, aspiring to a territorial reactivation of 72 selected areas as regards peripheral degrees and the differing levels of accessibility to basic public services (health, mobility, education) (see Fig. 3).

In line with the OECD assessment, the SNAI is part of a conscious effort to pursue new – or alternative – multilevel governance models to implement territorial policies within diverging territories⁸. Even if the strategic role of multilevel governance for territorial policies has been recognised (Pappalardo 2019), this whole range of policies and practices (including sporadic initiatives or informal activities) has had little success in promoting effective forms of multilevel governance. The existing forms of administration somehow remain and are the accepted norm, not producing long-lasting effects in these territories (Albrechts et al. 2003).

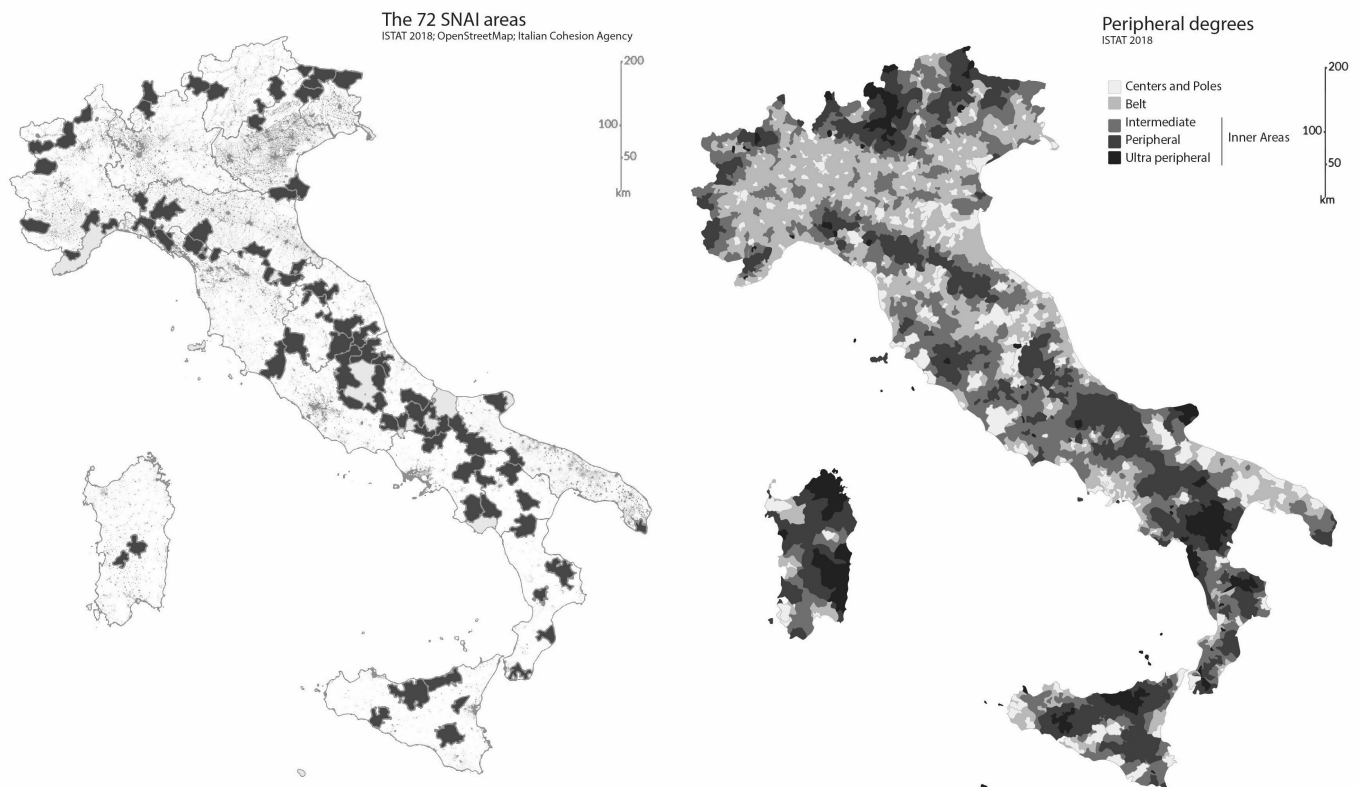
3 The Italian case study

3.1 A case of a “territory that does not matter” in the northern Lazio Region

The research examined the area in the north of the Lazio Region in the context of its historical socio-economic and demographic decline⁹ as an example of the above-mentioned “territories that do not matter” or “left behind” places (Rodríguez-Pose 2018; Barca 2019). Nonetheless, “territories that do not matter” are usually poorly targeted by policies and investments (Krzysztofik et al. 2019; Dijkstra, Poelman, Rodríguez-Pose 2020; Gluckler 2020; Bourdin, Torre 2021) while, in the last 7 years, in this area, two policy processes (De Leo, Altamore 2022, 2023) have been implemented (Fig. 4):

- the “Alta Tuscia-Antica Città di Castro” has been identified as one of four SNAI areas in the Lazio Region within the broader nationwide territorial classification¹⁰ conducted by the Italian Cohesion Agency according to the degree of depopulation and lack of essential services¹¹;
- the “Marta-Bolsena-Tarquinia” Lake, River, and Coast Contract was signed as a voluntary

Fig. 3: The Italian Inner Areas map with the 72 SNAI areas and the related peripheral degrees.



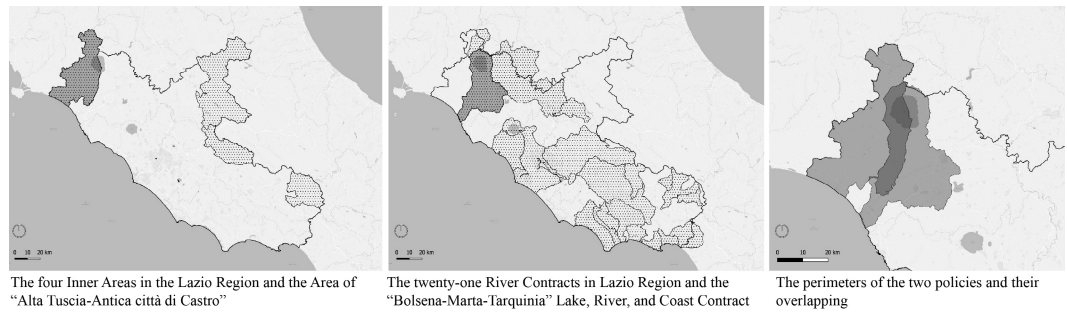


Fig. 4: The perimeters of the two policies in the Lazio Region and their overlapping.

strategic tool to restore and preserve rivers and water basins¹².

Basically, this area presents socio-economic and demographic data¹³, abandonment, absence of services (and then discontent and populism¹⁴) jointly with relevant environmental challenges and risks¹⁵. Depopulation and the rapid ageing of the community are on the increase with a very low population density and a higher percentage of people over 75 than the rest of the region (see Fig. 5). Very small and intermediate cities (only a few major towns slightly exceed 5000 residents) suffer from the departure of the young and most productive segment of the population, while others remain overshadowed by the metropolitan area of Rome¹⁶. The proximity to the capital city challenges some urban centres where poorly organised transport and dispersed schools and health systems contribute to the decrease in quality of life¹⁷.

The area is characterised by passive mobility towards the nearby centres of Umbria and Tuscany, and towards the capital to access the extensive health services. Furthermore, statistics on students' competencies¹⁸ show that

the values recorded are lower than the Italian average with the related risk of educational poverty¹⁹.

On the other side, the area is exposed to hydrological hazards and landslides (Fig. 6). In fact, from the lakes to the coast, the area represents a complex and fragile ecosystem. The lake water turnover is very slow and river water suffers from a quantitative emergency due to a lack of replenishment, especially in the summer period, when extractions for field irrigation increase.

Moreover, the expansion of monoculture agriculture has produced the progressive fragmentation of the rural areas and, at the same time, the increasingly invasive land transfer in favour of photovoltaic systems, with the unremitting construction of energy transition plants. The predictable consequences entail inevitable changes in the agro-forestry landscape, an increase in soil and water pollution, and land consumption (Pileri 2017; Getzner, Kadi 2020; Munafò 2021; Rienow et al. 2022)²⁰. Notwithstanding the fragility of the territory, the area is very rich in historical and natural resources and attractive landscapes.

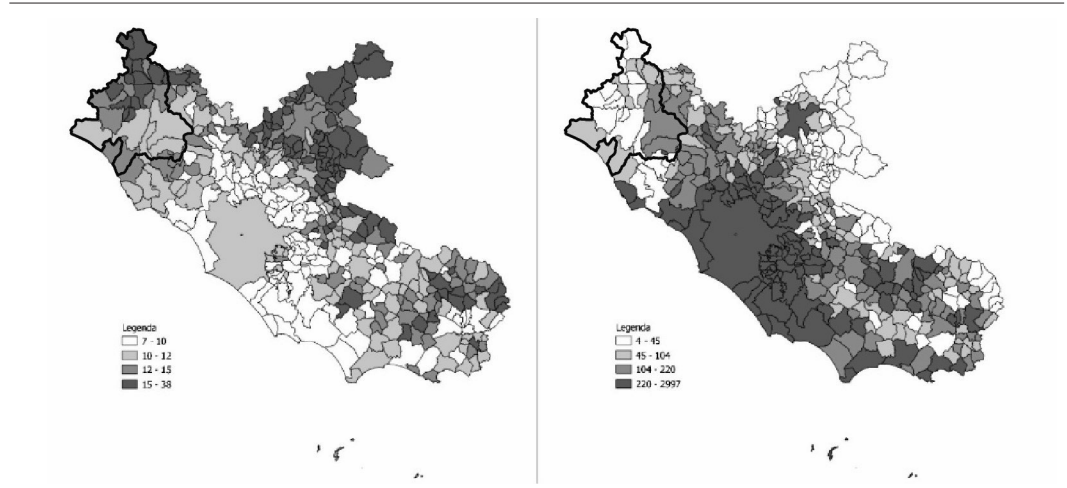


Fig. 5: Incidence of population aged 75 and older, and population density in 2019. (Source: Istat, AR.CHI.M.E.DE Information System)

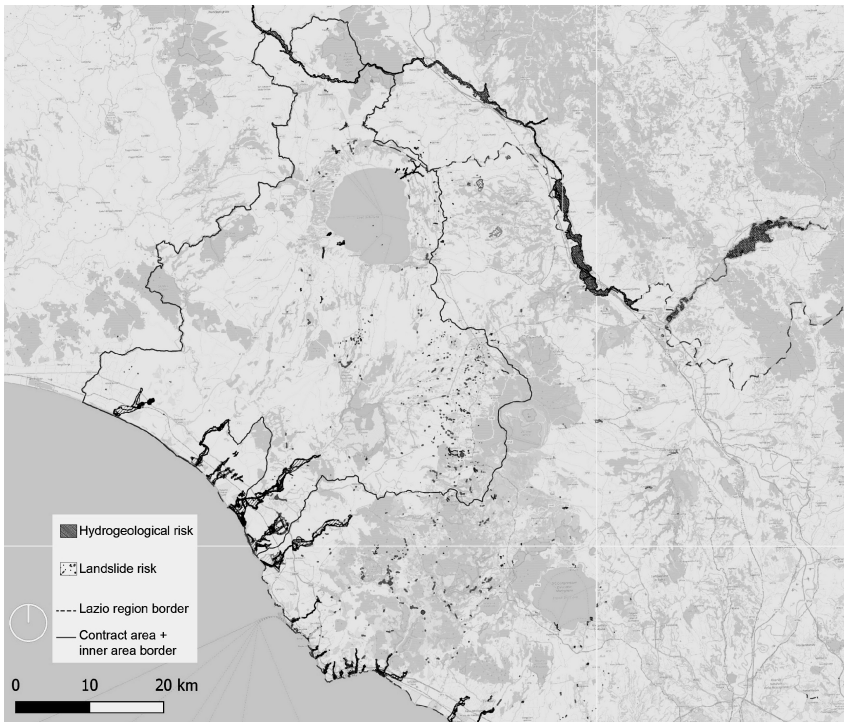


Fig. 6: Hydraulic hazard and landslide risk in the case study area.
(Source: ISPRA, 2018)



Fig. 7: The area is characterised by its volcanic origin with mountains, rivers, lakes, and parks²¹.

Moreover, near the coastal area, there are two Sites of Community Interest (SCIs) with complex natural relationships (hydrological character, sediment supply, botanical population of the river and lake beds, meteorological and marine conditions, etc.) challenged by the anthropogenic pressure which affects the entire coastline.

Nevertheless, the Strategic Document of the innovative national policy (SNAI) specifically designed for “forgotten territories” (Barca et al. 2014) has not yet translated the agreed actions and plans into practice. At the same time, the Strategic Document within the formal underwriting of the River Contract has not yet been approved and many pressing issues concerning environmental risk have not been managed as well as necessary.

3.2 The multilevel governance in the implementation of the two policies

Within this framework, the in-depth study about the implementation of these two different processes suggested focusing on the multilevel governance as a key issue of the two policies for figuring out how innovative territorial policies should work in future in “territories that do not matter”.

The official website of the Territorial Cohesion Agency in Italy states that SNAI “has developed new ways of multilevel local governance aimed at addressing, through the adoption of an integrated approach geared toward local promotion and development, demographic challenges and responding to the needs of territories characterised by signif-

icant geographic or demographic disadvantages”²². A number of public and private actors were involved in the “Alta Tuscia-Antica Città di Castro” Strategy Document: the 21 municipalities situated in the Inner Area, the National Energy Authority (ENEL), the Local Health Authority of Viterbo, the Regional School Offices of the province of Viterbo, the State Technical Institute for Agri-food, and the Institute for Business Services. With regard to the school system, the Inner Area has signed a framework agreement with the University of Tuscia – which is not actually situated in the Inner Area but plays an important role in the education network – to activate transversal collaboration between all the sectors of educational, academic, scientific, and economic interests in the area.

As usual in the SNAI processes, the Lazio region initiated the selection and proposed project areas on the basis of the national criteria, even though it has been almost absent during the “Alta Tuscia Antica Città di Castro” inner area process²³.

As part of the national strategy, the national Technical Committee for Inner Areas²⁴ (CTAI) was set up to provide central guidance and monitoring. It is coordinated by the Department for Cohesion Policies of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, with responsibility for selecting the areas, defining area strategies, and monitoring timeframes, while at the same time creating a local management unit aimed at systemic government reform. The first step of the process is the Draft Strategy, which, on a national level, is considered as a commitment by the municipalities. Subsequently, meetings and roundtables were organised to define the content of the Draft more precisely and write the Strategy.

Likewise, the River, Lake, and Coast Contract is a tool for experimenting with a new model of multilevel governance. In fact, to quote from the Italian National Charter on River Contracts: “River Contracts are, moreover, tools that can effectively contribute to experimenting with a new system of governance for sustainable development, which inevitably passes through an integrated approach between development and environmental protection policies”²⁵. In Italy, the spread of River Contracts started in 2007 with the foundation of the National Round Table of River Contracts²⁶. It introduced the River Contract as a form of voluntary cooperation required by European directives and guidelines to implement integrated management of water exceed-

ing the limits of sectoral plans. The instrument defines priorities through a participatory process, in line with the prospect of creating opportunities for the activation of and connection between various levels of planning with different themes, actors, and citizens. The perimeter of the River Contract encompasses the hydrographic basin, which exceeds administrative boundaries (Carter, Howe 2006; Kidd, Shaw 2007) and as a tool of voluntary agreement defines the appropriate perimeter with a plurality of actors (not only institutional ones) and interests existing along the river at different levels (Kaika 2003). What is particularly relevant here is the ecological perspective, which acts as a link between environmental and socio-economic issues.

The participatory governance of River Contracts requires the involvement of public administrations and experts in water management, flood risk and hydrological disruption; the productive sector that uses water and may contribute to pollution or conflicts in usage; and citizens who can contribute to the development of a strategic vision. The procedure provides for a document of intent, drafted by participants from the group, and containing preliminary information on the main issues. An initial integrated cognitive analysis requires the activation of the management bodies and the involvement of local stakeholders. The participatory procedure is finalised with the drawing up of a strategic document that defines medium- and long-term scenarios. The implementation documents include the action programme and plan with schedules, responsibilities, timeframes, and financial resources.

The actors involved in the Lake, River, and Coast Contract of “Bolsena-Marta-Tarquini” include: 19 municipalities, the province of Viterbo, 18 different grassroots associations, the two universities, a local action group, 3 private companies, and a number of private citizens. Moreover, two Universities in the Region²⁷ supported the methodology of the integrated analysis in defining objectives and directives for the subsequent phases. The process started with the signing of the Bolsena Lake Contract by the Promoting Committee in 2015. In 2017, the first Manifesto of Intent for the Lake, River, and Coast Contract of “Bolsena-Marta-Tarquini” included the entire hydrological area of the river Marta up to the Tyrrhenian coast.

4 Findings and conclusions

4.1 The weaknesses of multilevel governance

In light of the analysis above, the research investigated how a “territory that does not matter” has implemented two territorial policies, both of which challenged its territorial governance in dealing with problems. In this context, the so-called multilevel governance gaps (see Charbit 2020: 811) emerged with particular reference to the:

- *information gap* among the different levels of government
- *capacity gap* in the training of mayors/politicians and administrations in collaborative practices
- *mismatch in functional and administrative tasks* within and between the two processes
- *lack of sharing objectives* across different levels and responsibilities at the cost of transparency.

The findings of the qualitative research are shown below, divided by multilevel governance gaps, first with reference to SNAI and then with reference to the River Contract.

Information gap

According to project manager interviews, “some politicians did not fully understand the meaning of the Inner Area, considering that closer to a temporary and contingent “associative” form rather than a permanent collaborative administrative network”²⁸. In addition, the project manager observed that “sometimes Mayors simply competed among themselves for local advantage, sacrificing whatever cooperative spirit may have existed”²⁹.

Furthermore, in interviews, mayors lamented a lack of sharing information and knowledge: “not all mayors consider themselves properly informed”, some of them said³⁰, also with respect to the possibilities offered by those planning tools and processes.

With regard to interactions with the national central level, some mayors or administrative staff did not find advisors at the national level sufficiently aware of local conditions. Accordingly, the relationship between members of the national technical committee and local actors has not always been constructive. Similarly, while the Committee emphasises the values of and needs for cooperation and linkage, mayors often conceal their fear of losing power and evade such endeavours³¹.

During fieldwork for the River Contract, the observation of public meetings revealed the near absence of local government actors, resulting in insufficient information about the national policies at the level of the institutional stakeholders involved. The pandemic of the last few years has certainly exacerbated the scarcity of information, hindering the customary exchange of ideas within a shared working environment. However, it is worth mentioning that this phenomenon is more telling in the context of a poor governmental culture where “the ‘habit’ of always working in the same way normally prevails over experimenting with different practices”³².

Capacity gap

As concerns capacity gaps, according to interviews with functionaries, local institutions and administrations are seriously understaffed, faced with impending retirements and poor motivation, as well as the lack of managerial skills to handle the demands of both the everyday and the exceptional. With reference to SNAI, local administrators have complained about the limited hours available to explore these kinds of policies. Some expressed the “need for a dedicated office where (they) could meet with officers from other municipalities”³³ in order to have a space to share work and information. Others cited the problem of understaffing, which favoured working on daily administrative tasks³⁴. This confirms the limited capacity of local governments both to mobilise resources and to invest in long-term projects.

The shadowing activities revealed the crucial role of the project manager both for the Inner Area and the River Contract. She has been the indispensable link between the actors, the institutions, and the policies of the area: this has drawn attention to the very limited change at governance level, owing to the lack of shared knowledge and responsibilities.

As happens in many other territories at a national level, all coordination and collaboration skills have remained concentrated among people from outside the institutions (project managers, visionary retirees, and third-sector actors) and have not enriched technical expertise in public administration. This has limited institutional capacity building in the practice of durable wide-area governance models sufficiently robust for complex issue management.

At the same time, from the River Contract side, it is clear that the intentionality and voluntary nature of the agreements influence public

action, while the administrative level struggles to maintain a role within the process. Moreover, the technical staff's lack of involvement within the administrations means that internal staff skills cannot be strengthened. As a result, the processes exposed weaknesses at the administrative level on the territorial scale without improving the capacity of local, political, and institutional actors to share power, knowledge, responsibilities and information. Hence, the capacity of the territory to develop shared future strategies, visions, and integrated actions to deal with natural, environmental, and anthropic heritage challenges did not improve, and in some cases, even materialise.

Mismatch in functional and administrative tasks

Although this area finally received funds for these territorial policies, it generated only a group of actors and stakeholders with very little collaborative potential for the effective integration of long-term strategies. Even though these two policies provide economic support, clear procedures, definitions of operational actions, definite timeframes, and schedules, they do not impact public administration structures, and thus governance. Indeed, the inadequate administrative and institutional organisation goes hand in hand with a lack of motivation, specific expertise, and the prioritisation of uncomplicated solutions instead of visionary long-term planning. The aforementioned issue of understaffing makes the task organisation weaker. The frequent absence of any ordinary planning practices³⁵ has led administrators and politicians to adhere to well-established routines.

In addition, they often do not go beyond the level of reporting tasks and costs and, therefore, ignore the goal of producing transformation. The lack of influence on reconfiguring the variable geometry of governance leads to the need for different dynamics of power and representation as distinct from a purely statistical appraisal.

Lack of sharing objectives

The sporadic use of these policies has not really encouraged the development of goal sharing nor the building of a common territorial vision (along with the objective and accountability gaps).

Moreover, the marginal involvement of institutions in these public policies means that

they have difficulties in developing long-lasting engagement with those on the margins of the civic process. The widespread and predatory activity in the absence of public control was visible in the River Contract participatory process. All this, together with the absence of the Province and low level of participation of the Local Municipalities in the public meetings feeds a very low level of public trust in local institutions, and, not surprisingly, civic participation remains low.

In conclusion, very limited circulation of information and a certain widespread political factiousness (visible above all in the privileged or adverse relationship with the province and region) have conditioned the virtuousness of the processes, also because:

- both local interests and opportunistic decisions have prevailed, once again illustrating the deep-rooted divisions in the country of “100 bell towers” (Banfield 1958; Putnam 1993),
- the absence of credible long-term strategies has hampered opportunities for rethinking and seriously relaunching territorial transformation.

The research highlighted that the failure to achieve the goals intrinsic in these kinds of policies can be attributed to limited governance innovations, and yet are crucial to the dynamisation and transformation of “territories that do not matter”.

4.2 Conclusion and recommendations

The area analysis depicts a “territory that does not matter” in which, in spite of the introduction of two innovative territorial policies to deal with their decline and risks by reforming the existing multilevel governance, institutions, politicians and decision-makers have been perpetuating their pre-existing leadership and power relationships.

The in-depth process analysis showed that local institutional actors did not redefine interaction between the state, market actors, civil society, or other stakeholders: in other words, they did not change territorial governance (Tippet et al. 2005; Bobbio, Saroglia 2008; Gailliard et al. 2014; De Leo, Forester 2017) due to the complex brokering of mayoral meetings and, above all, the absence of the local institution (e.g., the Province in the case of the Lake, River and Costal contract). This is crucial, especially for places that “do not matter” and that are usually less able to act independently, or to co-operate effectively with others (Mattila et al. 2020; Lanzani 2022).

In view of the findings from the case study, it is possible to argue that territories that struggle to overcome decline and stagnation (Barca, McCann, Rodríguez-Pose 2012; Rodríguez-Pose 2018) need to construct permanent arenas for an ongoing transformative process capable of:

- reconfiguring the institutional dynamics of relationships and cooperation by modifying their routines of action and intervention within the dynamics of collaboration and exchange,
- creating the critical mass to escape the persistent dictatorship of numbers (of residents), and different dynamics of political representation by improving the quality of decision-making and participation processes.

To revitalise these “territories that do not matter”, the research also indicated further ways to transform territorial governance:

- (1) it is a priority to increase the capacity of institutions to collaborate with each other, both at different levels, and with civil society (organised and non-organised)
- (2) revising the allocation of public responsibilities (also for the environment and landscape areas) within the territory is crucial for positive territorial changes (Healey 1997; Hajer, Wagenaar 2003)
- (3) promoting collaborative engagement with social, cultural, economic, and environmental groups is necessary; the risk of marginalisation remains high until they are able to collaborate and reach a critical mass, sharing knowledge, skills, capabilities, and responsibilities.

Finally, within the framework of “places that do not matter”, the study expands the theoretical insight to cover a territorial perspective and provides indications about how to improve policies for dealing with these territories. Firstly, the territorial description of the Italian case study helps to enrich the interpretation by showing the heterogeneity of the social, economic, cultural, and ecological features. Secondly, the overlapping of two different policies and instruments reveals that not many extraordinary policies are needed, but *different* policies (Keil 2006; Kronsell, Mukhtar-Landgren 2018) with permanent effects on the government and governance structure by:

- structuring permanent learning and training processes for the actors involved (administrators, institutions, project manager, etc.) enhancing their skillset by spreading knowledge and sharing responsibilities,
- creating a local network based on mixed actors with heterogeneous skills at different levels, thus being effective/efficient by avoiding concentration of knowledge and power,

- considering planning as an everyday and shared practice among different local institutions and with residents and associations.

All things considered, multilevel governance is confirmed as a key element for territorial policies which should support the reconfiguration of institutional dynamics along with the creation of a vibrant and critical arena. That means promoting a governance model where planning practices are sensitive to local potential and opportunities. In this way, policy implementation will not be a result of unconnected, sporadic, or episodic practices, but an opportunity for institutional and territorial transformation to revitalise “territories that do not matter”.

Notes

- 1 The project manager is a professional figure hired to support project writing and execution and is at the core of the network of actors.
- 2 Key identifying characteristics include: economic under-performance and decline, expressed in below-average earnings, employment and productivity; lower levels of educational qualifications and skills; higher levels of poverty and disadvantage (compared to national averages); out-migration, ageing and demographic shrinkage; poor health; limited connectivity and investment in social and economic infrastructure; reduced service provision; political disengagement, neglect and discontent; and a lack of civic assets and community facilities (Davenport, Zaranko 2020; Tomaney et al. 2019, 2021).
- 3 See for example: Sieverts 2003; Frijters et al. 2004; Louis 1936; Passarge 1968; Webber 1998; Campi, Bucher, Zardini 2000.
- 4 These Italian studies followed earlier ones on peripheral and inner areas stimulated by the launch of the National Strategy for Inner Areas promoted by Fabrizio Barca in 2013 – the Minister for Territorial Cohesion at the time. Further discussion of this policy follows in the next paragraph.
- 5 In public policy, the concept of governance has been deployed to emphasise renewed levels of interactivity among tiers of government (national, regional, and local) and it became crucial in the context of cross-sectoral and multilevel networks of actors in decision-making processes (Holley, Gunningham, Shearing 2013).
- 6 Before being launched by the European Union in 1991, LEADER originated as a Community Initiative Programme and was introduced with the reform of structural funds implemented in 1988 through EC Reg. 2052/1988. It was followed by a number of programmes – Leader I, Leader II and Leader+ – and it represented one of the most distinctive methods of the so-called new rural paradigm (OECD 2006). LEADER fo-

- cused on rural areas. In the 2014–2020 programming period, the LEADER method was extended to cover coastal and urban areas under the community-led local development (CLLD) funding approach. The community-led local development approach promotes development in rural, coastal and urban areas of EU member countries at the local level by involving relevant local actors, including local organisations and associations, as well as individual citizens.
- 7 SNAI aims to tackle fragmentation, economic decline, and social marginalisation by developing a strategy for socio-economic development based on a) the strengthening of essential public services; b) the promotion of local development projects for the reactivation of territorial capitals.
 - 8 In general, even the most advanced transformative policies do not land equally in different territories. European policies and practices reveal diversity in the implementations of territorial strategies depending on geographical contingencies and institutional factors such as the administrative structures, vertical or horizontal hierarchies, strong or weak regional autonomy, and interdependence within policy networks. Last but not least, obstacles facing main planning challenges in these territories are linked to the narrative around marginal and remote areas (Membretti et al. 2022), which are treated as homogeneous and residual areas, merely “compensated” in public policies.
 - 9 The Deliberation of the Regional Council no. 477 of 17 July 2014 identified four distinct areas among which is the area called ‘Alta Tuscia Antica città di Castro’ in which the demographic and socio-economic indicators present the greatest criticalities with respect to the Lazio Region and the Country as a whole.
 - 10 The study was conducted within the SNAI national process: the classification into peripheral degrees includes a breakdown of the definition into poles and inter-municipal poles. The municipalities not included in the breakdown have been classified as Belt, Intermediate, Peripheral, and Ultra-peripheral according to their distance from the Pole in terms of actual road travel time (see Fig. 3). An Inner Area is classified as the combination of contiguous Intermediate, Peripheral, and Ultra-peripheral areas. For more details on the policy and statistics, see the English Website of the Italian Territorial Cohesion Agency: <https://www.agenziacoesione.gov.it/strategia-nazionale-aree-interne/?lang=en> (last access: October 2022).
 - 11 For example, in 2011, the percentage variance in population reached -2.75% , and rose briefly in 2012–2013. Since 2014, the decrease has been steady with a loss of more than 13 000 residents that, in practical terms, almost corresponds to the population of one of the most populous cities in the case study area. All the statistical data come from Istat, National Institute of Statistics, available also at <https://www.agenziacoesione.gov.it> (last access: October 2022).
 - 12 In 2015, the Lazio Region adhered to the National Charter for the River Contracts and, with the 2017 Stability Law (l.r. 17/2016), recognised River Contracts as having a strategic role in achieving the objectives of environmental challenges and risks.
 - 13 The main reference data are collected in the OpenCoesione portal, the national open government initiative coordinated by the Department for Cohesion Policies. The initiative collected and systematised nationwide a large amount of data also used for this study, available at: <https://opencoesione.gov.it>. Moreover, these territories have a difference, compared to the country as a whole, of more than 9000 euros of added value per capita (Censis 2020: 109) with a minimal number of local units per resident and much lower than in many other regions. Finally, the contraction of enterprises per resident here is a frictional contraction (-0.6) in a regional context of considerable proliferation ($+9.0\%$ is the average figure for Lazio) constituting a differential element compared to the rest of the country (ibid.).
 - 14 Even though populism is not the key point for the case study and paper aims, research about populism in the area is available, see: Mancosu 2018; Di Matteo, Mariotti 2020; Varcesi 2021.
 - 15 These data are collected by the Italian Institute for Environmental Protection and Research (ISPRA; Italian: Istituto Superiore per la Protezione e la Ricerca Ambientale) whose databases can be accessed at: <https://www.isprambiente.gov.it/en/databases>.
 - 16 Among the various difficulties, the municipalities of the selected area are weak because they are largely understaffed and with a very low profile of competencies due to depopulation and slowdown in the public sector turnover. For further details, see: Fregolent 2006; Gabellini 2018.
 - 17 The so-called “Attraction Index” usually consider flows entering a certain area for study or work; flows leaving the area for study or work; and residents working or studying in the area.
 - 18 The INVALSI (National Institute for the Evaluation of the Educational System of Education and Training) Tests, conducted nationwide to monitor learning in Italian, mathematics and English, were one important indicator for the SNAI areas definition.
 - 19 For more information, reports on educational poverty and spatial gaps in inner areas are available at: <https://www.invalsiopen.it/poverta-educativa-aree-interne/>.
 - 20 Despite these issues, agriculture remains the leading economic sector in the area with the largest number of companies and employees, followed by commerce, construction compa-

- nies, and manufacturing activities. Nevertheless, the agrifood industry remains weak. All sectors have suffered decreasing activity, except tourism and its related economic activities.
- 21 The historical and cultural heritage is marked by a distinctive medieval urban layout with churches, ancient walls, towers, and castles. Every municipality in the area boasts Etruscan necropolises, tombs, and prehistoric archaeological sites. In addition, the territory celebrates traditional festivals, mostly dedicated to typical agricultural products including some recent additions such as organic lavender.
- 22 In the original version the sentence reads: “(che) ha sviluppato nuove modalità di governance locale multilivello volte ad affrontare, attraverso l’adozione di un approccio integrato orientato alla promozione e allo sviluppo locale, le sfide demografiche e dare risposta ai bisogni di territori caratterizzati da importanti svantaggi di natura geografica o demografica”. See: <https://www.agenziacoesione.gov.it/strategia-nazionale-aree-interne/> (last access: October 2022).
- 23 Moreover, within the SNAI process, regions manage the Regional Operational Programmes and Rural Development Programmes and, therefore, are the primary financiers of the shared Strategy initiatives. For further details see *Accordo di Partenariato 2014–2020*, pp. 56–57.
- 24 The committee is also composed of: the Agency for Territorial Cohesion, Ministry of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policies, Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport, ANPAL, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Environment and Protection of Land and Sea, Department for Regional Affairs and Autonomies and Department for Planning and Coordination of Economic Policy of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, ANCI – IFEL, CREA, INAP, UPI, and the relevant Autonomous Region/Province.
- 25 The original text: “I Contratti di Fiume sono, inoltre, strumenti che possono fattivamente contribuire a sperimentare un nuovo sistema di governance per uno sviluppo sostenibile, che passa inevitabilmente attraverso un approccio integrato tra politiche di sviluppo e di tutela ambientale”.
- 26 The National Round Table is a working group with the aim of sharing experiences and promoting River Contracts in Italy.
- 27 Sapienza University, located in Rome, and Tuscia University, located in Viterbo.
- 28 From interviews with the project manager between October 2021 and January 2022: “Too often the politicians involved in the process did not understand, for example, what the inner area was or did not want or know how to imagine the possibilities of transformation and development related to the River Contract.”

- 29 Project manager interview, 2022.
- 30 Interviews with local decision-makers, 2021.
- 31 Project manager interview, 2022.
- 32 Interviews with local decision-makers, 2021.
- 33 Interviews with local administrative officers, 2021.
- 34 Interviews with local administrative officers, 2021.
- 35 In this context, ordinary planning refers to the routine mandatory planning practices for land use governance. In Italy, even if mandatory, ordinary planning is often obsolete, especially in small municipalities.

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