

# INFOLIO 40

RIVISTA DEL DOTTORATO DI RICERCA IN ARCHITETTURA, ARTI E PIANIFICAZIONE  
DELL'UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI PALERMO - DIPARTIMENTO DI ARCHITETTURA

## INNER AREAS

# INFOLIO

RIVISTA DEL DOTTORATO DI RICERCA IN ARCHITETTURA, ARTI E PIANIFICAZIONE

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*Il borgo di Gangi, Luisa Lombardo*



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**DOTTORATO DI RICERCA  
IN ARCHITETTURA,  
ARTI E PIANIFICAZIONE**  
DIPARTIMENTO  
DI ARCHITETTURA DI PALERMO

## La Rivista

**In folio** è la rivista scientifica di Architettura, Design, Urbanistica, Storia e Tecnologia che dal 1994 viene pubblicata grazie all'impegno dei dottori e dei dottorandi di ricerca del Dipartimento di Architettura (D'ARCH) dell'Università di Palermo (UNIPA).

La rivista, che si propone come spazio di dialogo e di incontro rivolto soprattutto ai giovani ricercatori, è stata inserita dall'ANVUR all'interno dell'elenco delle riviste scientifiche dell'Area 08 con il codice ISSN 1828-2482. Ogni numero della rivista è organizzato in cinque sezioni di cui la prima è dedicata al tema selezionato dalla redazione della rivista, mentre le altre sezioni sono dedicate all'attività di ricerca in senso più ampio. Tutti i contributi della sezione tematica sono sottoposti a un processo di *double-blind peer review*.

Per questo numero il tema selezionato è:

### ***"Inner Areas"***

Inner areas, as defined in the Italy's National Strategy (SNAI), are part of the territory that plays a central role in the cultural and social fabric of our communities, are an essential component of our society, economy, and environment. However, they are still often neglected and overlooked, resulting in deterioration, abandonment, and social exclusion. For this reason, it is crucial that the fields of architecture, restoration and architectural history and urban and territorial planning are committed to revitalizing and enhancing inner areas. These disciplines have the knowledge, skills, and tools necessary to create sustainable and innovative solutions that can transform these territories into vibrant and liveable communities. Moreover, inner areas are an excellent laboratory for innovation in these disciplines. These areas provide a unique opportunity to experiment with new approaches and techniques that can then be applied to larger-scale urban and territorial planning projects. The challenges posed by inner areas require innovative thinking and creative solutions, making them an ideal testing ground for new ways. The papers presented in this special issue of *Infolio* are the result of the conference "Inner areas' cultural, architectural and landscape heritage: study, enhancement and fruition. Potential driver for sustainable territorial development?" held in July 2022 at the University of Palermo. The conference brought together experts in the fields of architecture, restoration, and urban planning to discuss the central role of inner areas in our society and the need for innovative and sustainable solutions to revitalize and preserve them, being sometimes critical and some other prepositive. The papers explore a range of topics, including the use of technology in restoration, the importance of architectural history in urban planning and the role of

community engagement in revitalization projects.

The reflections that emerged at the conference highlighted how inner areas are a crucial part of our territory and society, and their revitalization is essential for the well-being of our entire community and the preservation of our cultural heritage.

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*Opening image: Rural landscapes of south-east Sicily (photo by the author).*

# Exploring the Rural within the Italian local development policy

Ignazio Vinci

*The countryside has a major role in Italy's territorial identity and organization. The way agriculture has shaped the Italian territory and society, however, is a very complex historical process, marked by different political and economic purposes. By looking at the national territory under such an evolutionary perspective, and the changing approaches to rural development due to the influence of EU policies, this paper describes the main policy instruments that have been implemented across the Italian regions in recent decades. After this overview, the paper concludes with a critical discussion on the limits and potential of rural areas in the country's development process.*

*Keywords: Rural development; Inner areas; Local development policies; Italian regions.*

## **The countryside in Italy's territorial structure: a brief historical overview**

The countryside is a building block of Italy's cultural identity and territorial organization. The fascination generated by the landscape or the reputation the country has gained in the food sector (just to mention Italian excellence in the collective imagination) are a reflection of the role agriculture has played over the centuries. The formation of 'rural Italy', however, is a very long and complex historical process. In fact, the way agriculture has shaped the Italian territory and society itself is through the overlapping of different stages of civilization, with their own political and economic aims. This process as a whole has been thoroughly investigated by Emilio Sereni, one of the leading historians of Italian agriculture. According to Sereni (1961, 1972), the evolution of agriculture in Italy is marked by different periods of development and decline, with production and territorial organization affected by factors that include political stability, the organization of powers, and technological innovation. Behind these factors is the role played by the diversity of the Italian territory in terms of landform and fertility, which are the reasons (not the only ones) of the strong

divide between Northern and Southern regions, as well as between coastal and inner areas of the country. Limiting our observation to the historical periods with greatest impact on the social and environmental structure of rural Italy, we firstly need to refer to the Roman colonization.

The Romans started to see the countryside as a territorial dimension not completely separated from urban areas. Their effort to divide the land through *centuriation* – what Goethe has described as a 'second nature' created for civil purposes – ended up having a major impact both on the rural and suburban areas, able to structurally modify the landscape and to influence the location of human settlement [Sereni, 1961].

After a long decline that started with the fall of the Roman Empire, the new millennium brought a renewed attention to the rural world. Between the 11th and 13th centuries, the growth in population had the effect of increasing the demand for food and agricultural products, bringing the demography of rural areas back to the values of the Roman period.

This later period, however, is characterized by a more marked territorial differentiation, due to the fragmented political situation across the country. In some Northern regions (e.g. Lombardy, Veneto, Tuscany), rich in

plain and fertile areas, the rural economy started to benefit from structural interventions (irrigation) and from a more efficient organization of farming. By contrast, in many Southern regions the development of new agricultural products and techniques (such as those brought by the Arabs and Byzantines) was not accompanied by significant innovation in the social and territorial organization of farming, paving the way to landlordism.

The consequence of the late industrialization of the South of Italy was to further slow down the penetration of scientific principles within the overall process of farming and the emergence of the food industry. With few exceptions in the largest urban areas (i.e. Naples, Palermo, Catania), often under the impulse of external investors, in the late 19th century the industrialization process still had a weak relationship, or none at all, with the transformation of agricultural products, with clear effects on the rural economy as a whole and the life conditions in the countryside. Looking at the national territory as a whole, the industrialization process and the transition towards a modern agriculture has resulted in the emergence of various – and contrasting – development patterns.

The first of these contrasts is between the Northern and Southern regions of the country. Although regional disparities in Italy cannot be limited to the performance of the agricultural sector, the slow modernization process of farming in a large part of the *Mezzogiorno* offers a key perspective to understanding the shift in the rural world that has taken place in recent decades. A second conflict we can historically perceive across the country is that seen between the valley and the mountain areas, the coastal and the inner areas. It is a contrast between the “flesh” and “bones” areas, according to the brilliant metaphor used in the late Fifties by Manlio Rossi Doria (1958), another prominent historian of the Italian rural economy in the 19th century. In his studies, Rossi Doria was among the first to highlight the decline of inner areas throughout the country, the cause and effect of depopulation, abandonment of soil, isolation, socio-economic distress, and emigration.

The last, but not the least, dichotomy through which we can analyze the rural dimension in Italy lies in the conflict between the cities and the countryside. This relationship – so relevant in the Marxist interpretations of the spatial effects of capitalism – is marked in Italy by the extremely polycentric character of the national territory. To some extent, this makes less relevant the contrast between urban and rural areas, which in many regions of the country are spatially and economically

intertwined.

Through the perspective adopted in this introduction, ‘rural Italy’ can be described as an archipelago of various socio-territorial structures, whose variety is relevant to understand the transition taking place with the most recent local development policies.

## From agriculture to rural development

The complexity of the Italian territorial structure is thus a key element to understand the changes that have taken place in the rural economy (and landscape) during the last four decades. At the same time, we have to take into consideration the paradigms dominating Italian agricultural policy after the Second World War, the crisis of which is among the reasons for the emergence of alternative ways to rural development in the country.

Agricultural policy in the Fifties was widely inspired by a sectoral approach based on large infrastructure projects and incentives to mass production. This approach is perfectly represented by two major reforms, both of which started in the climate of post-war reconstruction: the last Agrarian Reform, that promoted a redistribution of land (especially if abandoned) to small farmers and the creation of cooperatives to reach a critical mass in production to enter the market, and the ‘Intervento straordinario’, which started a massive infrastructure plan in the Southern regions, not limited to rural areas, to develop irrigation, roads and rural settlements in the countryside [Martinico and Nigrelli, 2022].

The limits of these policies were clear already in the Eighties, when the failed modernization of rural areas was recognized in many regions and globalization also started to affect the agricultural sector. Most Italian farming companies, in fact, had no size and organization to compete in the emerging international markets, with the consequence that their economic potential was reduced and, in the worst cases, businesses closed down. Even the EU Agricultural Policy in that period proved to be ineffective to protect most Italian agriculture products, putting great emphasis on the production volumes of each country and less on product quality and origin.

In the same period, however, there were also cultural processes that started to re-conceptualize the role of agriculture in contemporary society, attributing new values to the countryside that would be of critical importance for its future prosperity. In the context of the sustainability concept, the rural space started to be perceived not only as being in a position of subalternity to urban areas, but rather the source of increasingly



sophisticated products for city-dwellers (quality food, rural culture, alternative hospitality, etc.). In the geography literature there are works – see, for instance, Charrier (1991) and Ilbery (1998) – that perfectly represent the structural changes that took place in the countryside as a result of the consumption models emerging in the urban areas. Rural economists Basile and Cecchi (2001) have described this process as the ‘post-industrial transformation of the countryside’, highlighting the analogies with the process that – in the urban areas – was replacing manufacturing with the service sector.

This new perception of agricultural resources, strictly bound to the cultural economy of cities, started to have an influence on the rural communities closer to (or embedded within) the largest urban regions in Western countries. At the same time, due to its relevance for territorial development as a whole, this view ended up also contaminating the debate around regional development across Europe, preparing the ground for the renewed attention to rural areas we find in the structural funds reform the European Community started in 1987 [Bryden, 2019]. Here, experimental approaches to rural development are promoted through a dedicated community initiative – LEADER – which would later become the most successful local development project of the EU, going through five programming cycles and transferred into thousands of local action plans across Europe.

The key element of the LEADER approach is the promotion of a multidimensional perspective on local development, where agriculture is only one driver of the rural economy. As a result, action plans combine material and immaterial interventions and different kind of beneficiaries, trying to implement within rural areas the ‘integrated approach’ the EU was promoting at various territorial levels. Furthermore, and no less importantly, projects are designed and implemented by Local Action Groups, i.e. partnerships between local institutions and stakeholders being involved through participatory processes.

In the light of the policy innovation achieved in Europe, but also with an eye to the progress still needed in many developing countries, in 2006 the OECD started a campaign to promote a ‘New Rural Paradigm’ (NRP) with the power to drive local development policies for rural areas across the globe (OECD, 2006). According to the OECD, this paradigm includes a “new, multi-sector, place-based approach to rural development that claims a need for closer linkages between the rural and urban economy, and to see rural development as a close interplay with regional

development more generally” [OECD, 2006]. A key element of this paradigm is that the countryside is no longer exclusively tied to food production, but rather the place where a variety of amenities and products, linked to regional assets and identities, are provided [Horlings and Marsden, 2014].

From a policy perspective, the New Rural Paradigm implies, for instance:

- a shift from an approach based on subsidies to declining sectors to one based on strategic investments to develop the most productive activities of rural areas;
- a focus on local specificities, such as amenities (environmental or cultural) or local products (traditional or labelled) able to generate new competitive advantages;
- a shift from a sectoral to a territorial policy approach, to integrate various sectoral policies at regional and local levels and to coordinate them as much as possible at national level;
- an increased use of partnerships between public, private and voluntary sectors in the development and implementation of local and regional policies.

### **Rural areas in the local development policies: two examples**

The policy challenges set out in the OECD’s New Rural Paradigm may appear not totally relevant to some European countries, where they have been widely implemented through EU or even national policies. The EU’s LEADER initiative, as we said, has played a major role in spreading these principles across various European countries since the beginning of the Nineties, and Italy is no exception.

A recent report by the National Rural Network [RRN, 2022] illustrates to what extent the LEADER initiative has impacted on the Italian regions from a quantitative point of view. After the inaugural programming cycle (1989-1994), when the number of local action groups on the national territory was just 29, projects grew up exponentially in the following years, reaching a total of 203 in the 1994-1999 period, approximately the number of projects approved in the 2014-2020 period (200). In financial terms, such a huge number of local action plans has meant investments of around 3.5 billion, 70% of which was spent in the last two programming cycles (2007-2013 and 2014-2020).

The impact of the LEADER initiative on regional development, however, goes beyond this quantitative data. If we look at the territorial distribution of LEADER action groups, in many rural and inner areas they represent the first, and sometimes only, attempt to experiment a place-based approach to local

development. Moreover, if we overlap the project areas throughout the programming cycles, we discover how many LAGs have survived for a long time and how many are still in operation after being started in the early Nineties. In many cases, these networks have operated beyond the implementation of the LEADER action plans, becoming a kind of 'cognitive infrastructures' for the design of local development strategies, as well as to attract other external investments.

The 'geography' deriving from the LEADER implementation across the country is of key importance to understand the latest policy experiment in reducing underdevelopment of marginal areas in Italy, namely the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI, to use the Italian acronym). The project was initiated in 2013 by the national Agency for Territorial Cohesion as part of an overall strategy to address territorial inequalities in the country [Barca, Casavola and Lucatelli, 2014].

Despite the intrinsic rural nature of most inner areas in the Italian regions, the SNAI approach conceptualizes marginality as the coexistence of factors such as demographic decline, lack of basic services for the residents (first of all health and education facilities), and poor accessibility to the transport networks. As a result, the identification of the SNAI's territorial targets differs from the LEADER approach in respect of the lower consideration given to the economic structure of the territory and the application of more selective criteria.

According to the latter, inner areas are classified by their distance, in terms of travel time, from the urban poles where primary public services – such as hospitals with emergency departments, secondary schools, railway stations – are located. The action plans funded by the SNAI, in particular, must be within 'peripheral' or 'ultra-peripheral' areas, which means being at least 40 minutes away from the above-mentioned service infrastructures. If we include the so-called 'intermediate' areas, separated from the urban poles by at least 20 minutes' travel time, the national territory covered by internal areas amounts to 60% of the total, corresponding to 23% of the country's population, and to a half of the municipalities.

After the selection made among the classified inner areas, and a consultation process with regional and local stakeholders, the first 72 target areas were identified in 2020 to start the planning experiment. The action plans of these networks, involving around a thousand municipalities across the whole country, are firstly directed towards working for the 'precondition' for local development, i.e. removing

the main drivers of depopulation and spatial marginality.

Example of these actions include, for instance:

- projects on public health services, to strengthen local assistance through telehealth, mobile health, and home care;
  - actions on the school system, aimed to improve infrastructures, on the one hand, and to promote innovative models of education, on the other;
  - actions on mobility, with projects on conventional transportation systems to reduce travel time, but also on innovative mobility models (shared and on-demand).
- Besides working on the local development precondition, the SNAI also stimulates local partnerships to identify actions to fully exploit the endogenous potential of these territories, generally characterized by relevant landscape and cultural resources. At the same time, action plans are required to consider projects to deal with the environmental risks due to hydro-geological or seismic conditions, as well as innovative energy projects (smart grid, decentralized energy storage) to reduce dependency on the urban areas.

After a slow start due to the complexity of the planning process, local action plans are now accelerating their implementation. The value of the initial investment in the SNAI was around 1.14 million euro, 60% of which was derived from EU funds. Paradoxically, the pandemic has helped in further strengthening public investment in the strategy: in fact, an additional 300

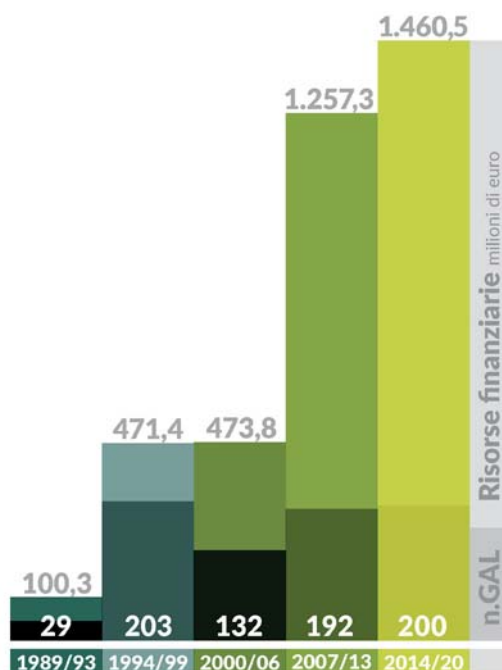


Fig. 1. Number of Local action groups and LEADER financial investment in Italy in the last five EU programming cycle (from RRN, 2022)

million was allocated in 2020 to widen SNAI's targeted areas, while 2.1 billion will come from the Italian Recovery Plan to project the policy into the 2021-2027 EU programming cycle.

### Future perspectives for rural development and inner areas

The aim of this paper was not to provide a complete overview of the various policy instruments that may have affected the development process within rural areas in Italy, nor an exhaustive evaluation of the impact of these policies across the national territory. Instead, the focus has been placed on the two planning experiences that best represent the shift of the policy approach over the years, in the context of a country where rural areas reflect an extremely complex archipelago of territorial identities. From this more limited perspective, however, there is a series of questions and processes that, in conclusion, can be critically scrutinized to drive territorial policy-making in the near future.

The first question that must be addressed when we deal with rural areas in Italy is recognizing the polycentric nature of the Italian territory, which makes it extremely hard to separate what is rural from what is not. In many Italian regions, polycentric spatial structure is the legacy of a very long-lasting development process (with small towns networking

with each other), but it is also true that recent trends in urban growth are rapidly disrupting the equilibrium between cities and countryside. Evidence suggests that soil consumption is unstoppable throughout the country [ISPRA, 2022] with low consideration of the environmental risks deriving from improper land use in the most fragile territories. This process has clear implications also on the socio-economic structure of the rural areas closer to large urban systems, where agriculture is gradually abandoned and replaced with second homes or tertiary activities.

Looking on the bright side of such a hybridization between urban and rural areas, this interplay is increasingly recognized as a source for reciprocal advantages and new perspectives for sustainable development [Vinci, 2015, 2020]. There are at least two dimensions that are worth considering in the light of some planning experiments taking place in the country. The first one relates to the potential of peri-urban rural areas in providing the ecosystem services that most densely populated built-up areas are lacking. For instance, spatial and strategic plans at the metropolitan level are increasingly exploring urban-rural linkages for a variety of purposes, from the enhancement of rural landscapes to the implementation of sustainable mobility through large-scale greenways. The second dimension concerns the role agriculture can play in the protection of peri-urban ecosystems and, at the same time, in shortening the supply chains in the provision of

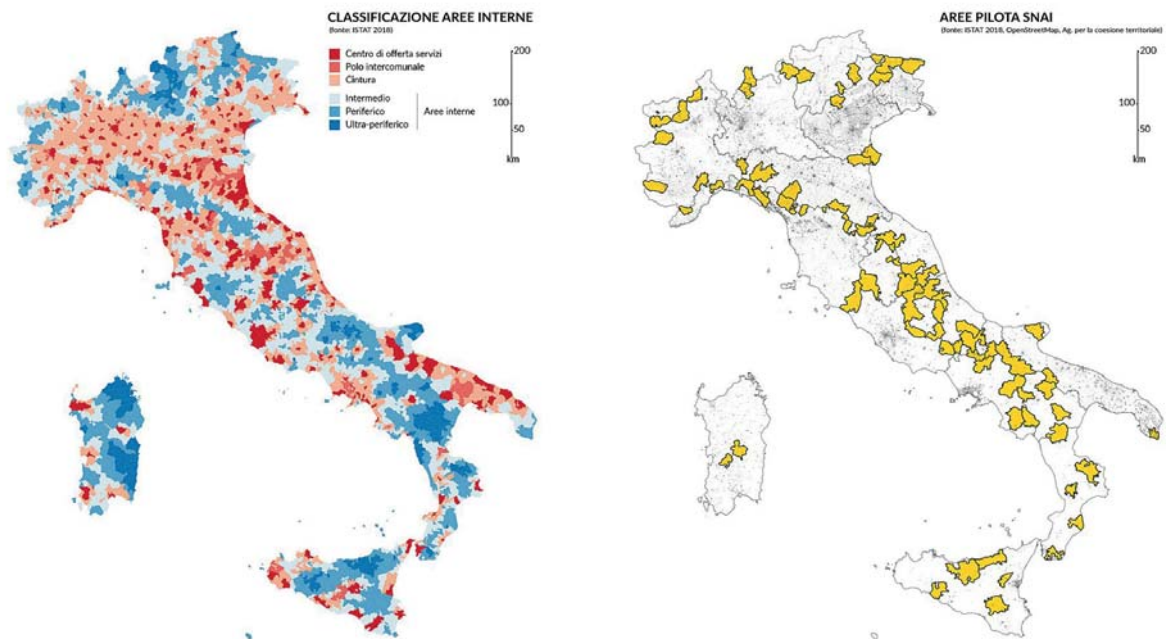


Fig. 2. Classification of SNAI's inner areas and distribution of action plans (from Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale, 2022)

quality food to metropolitan dwellers. In this direction, there are food policies being implemented within various Italian urban regions, proving that agriculture can greatly help to keep environmental preservation not separated from social and economic sustainability. The function of rural areas in providing wider environmental benefits for the core regions is even more relevant if we look at the potential these places can have in the production of clean energy. This perspective is particularly relevant for the most remote (and internal) rural areas, where agricultural activities are less competitive and conventional local development policy seems to have played a limited role in fighting depopulation and territorial marginality.

This strategic perspective, however, is still highly controversial, not being supported by policies and regulations able to equally distribute the benefits of energy production among strong and weak areas, and between private and public players. Just to give an example, in the face of the quick spread of renewable energy plants in many rural regions there is no legal system to recompense local communities for the impact on landscape and natural resources made by energy infrastructures. The larger benefits remain in the hands of energy operators and landowners, while no (or very weak) compensation measures are provided for other local stakeholders. Additionally, in the Italian inner areas there is still an untapped potential due to the enormous availability of biomasses, which are not turned into sources for the sustainability of both urban and rural areas because of limited production and distribution systems.

The two questions just raised, among many others, suggest that rural development (particularly in remote areas) should not be approached without a full awareness of the many interdependencies the social and economic structure of these territories may have with urban areas. There is evidence across Europe [OECD, 2013] that urban-rural partnerships are a key instrument to address the development issues of agriculture and the countryside, because it is within the culture of cities that the added value given to rural products is created and reproduced. On the other hand, in order not to reproduce ancient urban-rural dependency mechanisms, public policy must be aware that local development policy cannot be successfully implemented without a wider environmental equity. This means creating more effective governance relations across institutions and, most importantly, legal mechanisms to compensate for territorial disadvantage.

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**DOTTORATO DI RICERCA  
IN ARCHITETTURA,  
ARTI E PIANIFICAZIONE**  
DIPARTIMENTO  
DI ARCHITETTURA DI PALERMO

## RIVISTA DEL DOTTORATO IN ARCHITETTURA, ARTI E PIANIFICAZIONE DELL'UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI PALERMO – DIPARTIMENTO DI ARCHITETTURA

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