

## **Policies against "left-behindness" and counter-marginalization: the Italian case of SNAI in Lake Como area**

#left behind places #inner areas #marginalization #regional policies #rural policies

*Elia Vettorato – Politecnico di Milano, PhD student*

SNAI (National Strategy for Inner Areas) is an Italian policy that aims to counteract peripheralization processes and demographic negative trends in the most far and rural areas of Italy. In 2014, national authorities set up a classification of municipalities based on distance (minutes by car) from services provision's centers (hospitals, schools, main railway stations). Some areas are selected among others after an application from the local communities to national authorities; the former need to establish some sort of union between municipalities. As a result, the selected areas eligible for funding show more institutional capacity than others, among the more fragile parts of the country.

Particular attention had been given to participatory processes in the policy design: local actors and stakeholders are entitled to build a shared strategy, and funded projects need just a confirmation from national and regional authorities. As the policy itself declares, decisions about local projects and funds are the consequence of political decisions and negotiations between the different actors. This gives great responsibilities to the collective authorities, and makes the policy completely bottom-up as approach. The territory itself, as a "project area" comes up with a shared Strategy (which is the official document's name) and then with the APQ, the document that describes all the interventions linked with the Strategy commitments. SNAI has been, since the beginning, praised by academics and institutions as one of the main examples to follow to counteract regional and territorial disparities (as in ESPON 2017). Nevertheless, the first Strategies were written and signed in 2017/2018, so deeper evaluations are possible in the last few years only.

The selected case study (Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario) is located in Lombardy region, on the northern side of Lake Como, far from tourism hotspots. The area is characterized by high slopes that host numerous villages and agricultural activities (both in decline), while other small towns are localized within the narrow strip of the lake shore. The area is fragile mostly because of the mountain municipalities, who are losing population and whose citizens need more time to reach out for basic services and are more car dependent. On the other side, municipalities on the lake shores are demographically stable and attract families from the mountain villages. Furthermore, the area is split in two sides by the lake: the east side is connected with a relatively fast railway to Milan, while the west side relies only on the main coastal road. The shared Strategy focuses on linkages and connections: linking the two sides of the lake, linking the mountaineer villages with the coastline, linking know-hows between job market and education.

Given the purposes of SNAI and its local approach against peripheralization, one might think that projects and funds are directed towards the more fragile parts of the area; the same applies with the topics: investments on transportation, equity, education.

In this work, part of my ongoing PhD thesis, two approaches were pursued: on one side an extensive research and mapping of all the investments funded by SNAI and location of public meeting for the writing of the Strategy, on the other side interviews to regional and local authorities. Paperworks related to the policy stretch a timespan of 8 years, with the long process

of candidate area status, the public meetings, the operative and final agreements. Interviews were collected among local and regional actors in 2023.

As a result, the policy tends to invest more funds on stronger areas and on topics that are not strictly related to territorial fragilities. In particular the following points are worth noting:

- Investments on transportation are stronger in the east side of the area, the one already connected with the railway system. According to local authorities and to evidence, it's easier to strengthen and link a fragmented situation, than almost creating a transportation network from scratch. Bus connections were needed in the east side as they are needed in the west side, but given limited resources the outcome could have been more fair.
- Investment on tourism are quite even between the two sides, but the allocated sum is way higher than expected, according to the Strategy: tourism seems to be like a “way out” of the problems, with the old-fashioned idea that tourism distributes wealth and gives even and fair opportunities to citizens. This happens in an area very close to the most famous towns of Lake Como, where mass tourism has become a problem and an obstacle for local residents, who are leaving because of property value and overcrowding. Some towns of the selected area began to experience the same problems, but these did not find a proper place in the Strategy.
- A huge percentage of funds are allocated to firms, with the purpose of pursuing digitalization, enhancing competitiveness, helping traditional agricultural activities. These direct allocations are linked with the Strategy, but they are also the result of the presence of these categories to the meetings, when the Strategy was being written. Lobbying activity was not confirmed by interviews, nor denied.
- In most of the funds' sectors, more resources were given to the east side than to the west side. Among the possible reasons, one consequence is the stronger institutional capacity of the east side: this area, linked together by a “Mountain Community” (a kind of municipality union) has been able to win some other regional and national calls, and one of its municipalities (Taceno) is the representative of the whole project area (both sides) for the relationships with the regional authorities. Besides, the Mountain Community on the east side has a better relationship with the regional authorities and it has been able to include all its municipalities in the project area, while the mountain community on the west side is basically split up.

The research aims to fill the existing gap between institutional capacity in bottom-up policies and the ongoing experience in the SNAI context. Institutional capacity has a great influence for the good outcome of a policy, yet it's extremely hard to grasp its existence and its power.

The preliminary results show a “replica effect” of national dynamics in the inner area. Coastlines and bigger centers drain resources and human capital from the “inner” areas at national level, and this also happens in the case study, at a smaller scale: bigger towns and lake shores are expected to grow more, while mountain areas and slopes are facing a strong decline. The policy is bottom-up, but its practical outcome is the consequence of political and economic decisions that are taken by dominant groups of power, which are located in the growing areas.

In this context, the concept of left behind place seems even more fuzzy than before: is it possible that a policy intended to counteract marginality is enhancing peripheralization processes within the area itself? Which is the future of place-based policies, if their local application replicates problems at larger scale? And which is the role of institutional capacity, seen not only as a positive factor, but also as an engine of exclusion, given a limited amount of resources? The interviews with local institutions showed a general “falling out of love” of place-based policies, and particularly of place-based responsibilities. Local actors complain about a freedom of action that becomes overwhelming, and the need for a more strict structure where to stick at. These policies

enhance territorial responsibilities and triggered very positive outcomes, as the ability of compromise and constant dialogue. On the other side, institutions were generally left alone waiting for instructions. This is one of the reasons why the policy was so slow at its early stage.

For the new investment cycle (2020-2027), a new reform is likely to change and enhance the role of the regions, and the previous experience should hopefully be able to pave the road for a better policy implementation.