

Italian small islands: a similarity analysis

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Extended abstract

The geographic literature defines islands as “territories smaller than continents, which can be inhabited or not, their main feature being that they are entirely surrounded by water. Therein, insular territories are regarded as individual units, while island groupings are referred to as archipelagos” (Haase and Maier, 2021, p.11). However, this definition is not sufficient to qualify islands in the viewpoint of social and territorial sciences. In this perspective, islands are fragile territories, as the consequences that the transformations have on the territory and on society are more extreme, and the achievement of carrying capacity is more rapid (Staniscia, 2012). Furthermore, while small size implies a structural scarcity and limitedness of resources, when they are part of archipelagos, islands must cope with the “external” distance separating them from neighbouring countries, as well as with the “internal” distance among islands (ibidem). In brief, insularity often means vulnerability, caused by economic specialization, continuous demographic change, and intense exposure to environmental risks (Legambiente-CNR, 2019, 2020, 2021). Specifically, for the Mediterranean small islands, tourism is often the main sector of economic activity, and the main source of anthropic impacts on natural and social equilibria (Staniscia, 2012; Gallia 2012; Salustri, Appolloni, 2021). Consequently, a complex network of maritime routes, while representing an immediate solution to the socioeconomic decline that the islands face, may hinder the sustainability of the territory and insularity itself (Staniscia, 2012).

Within this scenario, the small islands may be considered as laboratories for experimenting new patterns of development, but that requires to turn their geographical disadvantages into new opportunities by means of dedicated strategies (Legambiente-CNR, 2020, 2021), to focus on place-based approaches (Barca, 2009), and to recognize the role of culture as an antidote to marginalization and isolation (Comune di Procida, 2022). Within this transdisciplinary perspective, it is worth noting how the Italian small islands are the recipients of several dedicated policies.

In the ongoing process of recovery and resilience from the Covid-19 outbreak, the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) includes two specific measures for the Italian small islands: the “Green islands” investment⁴ and the action “Connected minor islands”. While the former aims at transforming 19 small islands into “100% green” and self-sufficient territories, the latter provides 18 minor islands lacking fibre optic connections with the continent with ultrafast broadband connectivity⁵.

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⁴ <https://italiadomani.gov.it/it/Interventi/investimenti/sole-verdi.html>

⁵ <https://italiadomani.gov.it/en/Interventi/investimenti/reti-ultraveloci-banda-ultra-larga-e-5G.html>

Also, at national level numerous policies focus on the Italian small islands. At environmental level, MiTE is funding projects within the call for “energy efficiency interventions, sustainable mobility and adaptation to climate change impacts in the smaller islands” of 2017 (15 million euro in funding). Additionally, MiTE has allocated 4.5 million euro to finance measures aimed at mitigating and adapting to climate change in the territories of Italian marine protected areas. A further initiative of MiTE is the “Programme of interventions for adaptation to climate change in favour of municipalities of UNESCO sites and elements of naturalistic interest and in national parks” with the allocation of 75 million euro for the three-year period 2021-2023 (Legambiente-CNR, 2021). Also, during the last years the Ministry of Economic Development and the municipalities of not interconnected Southern small islands have signed seven Protocols to promote energy efficiency measures in buildings and public infrastructures within the “Energy and Territorial Development Programme 2014-2020” (ibidem).

At cultural level, small islands are a substantial part of the Italian landscape (Legambiente-CNR, 2021), therefore, to encourage their culturally sustainable development, the Ministry of Culture developed three strategic actions in 2021. The first aims at transforming the islands of Ventotene and Santo Stefano in the “campus of Europe” (ibidem). The second action involves part of the island of Gallinara, that has been returned to the public for use as an exhibition space and to become a research center for underwater archaeological surveys in the surrounding sea (ibidem). The third is the choice of Procida as the Italian Capital of Culture 2022 (Comune di Procida, 2022). The rationale is that “island culture is seen as a privileged tool for affirming identity and, at the same time, building ‘archipelagos of relations’ that help to strengthen the sense of insularity and to weaken that of isolation (Palmentieri, 2021, p.101).

At territorial level, since 2015 Law n. 221 established for travelers landing on the Italian small islands the obligation to pay a landing fee, instead of the tourist tax normally applied by municipalities (Legambiente-CNR, 2019). Also, a recent Governmental Decree has regulated the criteria for allocating among 56 small islands (40 Municipalities) the resources of the Investment Fund managed by the Department for Regional Affairs and Autonomies (more than 41 million euros) (ibidem). Furthermore, according to the Italian Senate, insularity creates disadvantages that call for measures aimed at restoring territorial continuity, that is, measures designed to develop adequate connections among territories, especially in cases where the supply of transport services is inadequate (Fucito, 2021). Finally, 35 Municipalities of the Italian small islands have been recently included in the National Strategy for Inner Areas and are now forming the 73rd project area of the strategy⁶.

In brief, the Italian small islands call for political actions along multiple dimensions (environmental, territorial, economic, social, and cultural), and their tiny size poses unusual challenges on the epistemological side. Specifically, the effectiveness of public policies seems to be deeply related to their overall “epistemic fairness”, that is, to the ability of policy makers to develop a transdisciplinary cognitive

⁶ <http://territori.fomez.it/content/ctai-ripartite-risorse-statali-nuove-arce-4-mln-euro-ciascuna>

map of the local contexts and to co-design with all local and external stakeholders policies aiming at leaving (and keeping) no one behind. As a prerequisite, that necessitates to dismiss a “silos” approach and to adapt an inclusive, participated, and integrated strategy of local sustainable development. Furthermore, as small islands are often less exposed to global dynamics, disruptive innovations may overlook idiosyncratic forms of cultural, social, economic, and environmental unsustainability, putting social cohesion and people’s quality of life at risk. On the other hand, reforms are necessary to remove the numerous obstacles to a full participation of their inhabitants to the political, economic, and social life of the country. Within this perspective, the research contributes to the ongoing debate on the challenges and opportunities of the digital transformation and of the ecological transition accelerated by the Covid-19 outbreak.

Considering that the aggregate of the Italian small islands encompasses very different contexts, it is then necessary to identify what distinguishes them and to identify those generalizations that may be useful to improve the knowledge of the territory, without ignoring the specific factors of the place (Palmentieri, 2021). Based on these considerations, the research illustrates the results of a horizontal screening of 33 Municipalities located on Italian small islands. Five dimensions are involved in the analysis (Administrative size, Demographic trends, Socioeconomic development, Welfare policies, Environmental risks) and for each dimension an overall score is computed by aggregating the elementary scores computed for a set of elementary indexes. The research also investigates whether, alongside forms of geographical proximity, the development of the Italian small islands may relate to the identification of social, territorial, and economic similarities. The latter may facilitate the spread of good (not best) practices among different insular contexts. Laying on the results of the similarity analysis, a sixth domain is added to the descriptive analysis, that is, “relationality”, intended as an overall score of similarity. The statistical evidence collected is discussed within a theoretical framework focused on center-periphery relations and lying on the results achieved a set of policy recommendations is elaborated. Then, the analysis shifts on the ecological transition of the small islands, consequently data at Municipal level are aggregated and a new horizontal screening involving insular territories is designed and implemented. The focus of the second screening exercise is on tourism, enterprises, circular economy, and green infrastructure. The goal of the second screening exercise is to monitor economic and environmental performances of local actors, to identify potential interlocutors for environmental policies and priority actions to be implemented using national and European funds.

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