

Environmental protection and national strategy for inland areas: the “Alta Irpinia”

Pilot Area

The expression **inland areas** refers to those territorial portions, smaller small towns, which characterize a large part of the Italian territory. These areas, which make up about 60% of the national territory, are home to a quarter of the Italian population.

The distinguishing features refer to: 1) Significant distance from the main centers offering essential services; 2) Important environmental heritage (natural landscapes, water resources, agricultural systems); 3) Extremely diversified cultural background deriving from the peculiar and centuries-old process of anthropization and depopulation.

These areas, which make up about 60% of the national territory, are home to a quarter of the Italian population. It is a dense network of very small municipalities (which do not exceed 5 thousand inhabitants) extremely differentiated. It is well known that a significant part of the inland areas has progressively undergone a process of marginalization since the Second World War.

Exceptions are municipalities that have cooperated in the production of essential services and in safeguarding the exceptional natural, cultural and historical heritage. These initiatives make the economic organization of these portions of the territory sustainable and unique.

Despite these worthy examples, the depopulation of inland areas is a growing phenomenon and a serious problem of political governance as it causes devastating effects on the territory. An imbalance that generates terrible consequences for the areas concerned, the serious losses refer to the memory and identity of the communities and to the disappearance of peculiar activities, fundamental for the sustenance of local economies and for the sustainable revival of entire territories.

To redevelop these small towns in the inland area, the National Strategy for Inland Areas (SNAI), coordinated by the Agency for Territorial Cohesion, has been developed for several years. The intervention sees the convergence of the synergistic action of all levels of government. The protagonist of the strategic interventions is the territory.

In 2020, the crisis triggered by the spread of Covid-19 shone a double spotlight on the "inland areas" of the country, often coinciding with mountain areas or with a strong rural vocation. In fact, the pandemic has made the fragility of these territories more evident.

At the same time, however, the pandemic crisis has also been an opportunity to bring out the many opportunities that can be generated in favor of a recovery that starts from inland areas. Areas in difficulty but also full of extraordinary socio-economic and environmental opportunities. In fact,

these are areas exposed to particular temperatures and atmospheric conditions, with agricultural diversity, capable of offering the market rarities and products of extraordinary quality.

The renewed attention to inland areas is therefore based on the idea of an economic and social revival and a sustainable development policy, which can start from those places that are now becoming strategic for the purpose of re-orienting economic models and the social and territorial organization of the entire country.

The National Strategy for Inland Areas (SNAI), in fact, stems from the idea that specific policies dedicated to them are needed for these territories. At the time of its inception (2014), cyclical plans were planned with a fixed deadline of 2020.

Currently, 71 project areas have been selected, covering 16.9% of the national territory and 3.46% of the national population (about 2.1 million). The budget has reached €190 million.

SNAI's goal is to rebuild communities starting from the reversal of demographic trends and the improvement of social inclusion. Making the territories at risk of abandonment attractive again for citizens allows, in fact, to create new demand and new job supply and to encourage the development of the area.

To make this possible, action is mainly taken on basic services, i.e. those that define the right to citizenship, which are often lacking, if not absent, in the selected municipalities: greater educational offer, education levels in the Italian average, widespread health facilities, increase in transport and internet connections.

SNAI operates in two directions: local development projects, to be financed mainly with European funds; interventions on essential services, to be financed with national funds.

The individual projects on the territories are developed following a defined procedure:

- 1) selection of areas, starting from a mapping of the country and the subdivision of the areas into intermediate, peripheral, ultra-peripheral;
- 2) approval of the Area Strategy by the Department for Cohesion Policies;
- 3) signing of the Framework Program Agreement, through which Central Administrations, Regions and Territories undertake to carry out the agreed projects, in order to implement the objectives set out in the Area Strategy.

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The fundamental organ of the strategy is the Technical Committee for internal areas, which is responsible for selecting internal areas, is responsible for defining area strategies and verifying

compliance with the project time-schedule and is coordinated by the Department for Cohesion Policies.

During the 2014-2020 programming period, the Strategy includes: 72 inland areas, 1,060 municipalities, about 1.9 million inhabitants.

For these, interventions worth more than 600 million euros have already been allocated, only partially used.

In continuity with what was experienced in the 2014-2020 cycle, the SNAI 2021-2027, also following the constitutional amendments in favour of the environment and biodiversity, will continue to strengthen citizenship services and promote initiatives for the economic development and employment of the selected inland areas.

The interventions will be supported by the European Structural Funds of the 2021-2027 programming, but also by national resources mainly linked to the Development and Cohesion Fund. On the basis of the application dossier, the Department for Cohesion Policies verifies the consistency of the characteristics of the area with the predefined criteria: 1) prevalence in the 2021-2027 map of peripheral and ultra-peripheral municipalities; 2) existence of a defined and recognisable historical-social identity and/or geomorphological system (valley, etc.); 3) demographic difficulties, with systemic risks of depopulation; 4) organization of essential services (e.g.: fragmentation of school complexes, inadequate organization of territorial health, particularly internal nature of the area, etc.); 5) willingness and aptitude of local administrations to work together and pursue a goal of associationism.

Among the 72 inland areas selected, **the territory of Alta Irpinia** represents the model in which direct action is promoted in support of territorial competitiveness through a sustainable development program, as a tool to counter demographic decline and the abandonment of local practices.

Located in the southern Apennines of Avellino, Alta Irpinia is the innermost and most peripheral of the three Inland Areas of the Campania Region. It is a fragile territory both from a socio-economic point of view and from a seismic and hydrogeological point of view. For decades it has had a strong demographic involution, a high rate of aging and a low employment rate, but it preserves countless and little-known natural, landscape and historical-cultural resources that can represent opportunities for the development of diversified and innovative entrepreneurial and employment realities.

The area finds in its landscape mosaic a wonderful synthesis of the relationship between man and natural and environmental resources.

The 41.8% of the territory is mainly used for agriculture (arable and cultivated), forests occupy 32.5% of the territory, to which is added 13.8% of heterogeneous natural areas. The naturalistic complexity is evidenced by the presence of 3 Regional Parks, (concentrated in the area of the *Picentini Mountains* and at the mouth of the *Sele River*), 10 Special Areas of Conservation and 2 Special Protection Areas.

The so-called. **Alta Irpinia Pilot Area**, born in 2014 from the Memorandum of Understanding between 25 Avellino municipalities, is characterized by a decision-making body, called "City of Alta Irpinia", which is entrusted with the unitary representation of the project area towards the Campania Region and the National Committee for Internal Areas.

It is part of the SNAI, launched in 2014 with the 2014-2020 European Programming, using the EAFRD, ERDF and ESF funds, to which are added the national resources allocated by the 2014, 2015, 2016 Stability Laws and the Budget Laws for 2018 and 2020, in addition to the 2021 PNRR (Next Generation EU) which, through an agreement between Regions and Local Authorities, finances 15 billion euros for the maintenance of secondary roads, for interventions aimed at making the extra-urban road network resilient and to improve the safety of bridges and viaducts. In this framework, an economic agreement between Coastal and Inland Areas will allow the latter to be included in the industrial development system through logistics.

Alta Irpinia signed the Framework Programme Agreement (APQ) on 13 September 2017 as the only pilot area of the Campania Region, thus starting a governance process for the achievement of development objectives in the environmental and agro-forestry and pastoral sectors, at the same time as local development, tourism and health.

Among the planned interventions, for the 2021-2027 cycle, the establishment of a "Forestry Agency" for Alta Irpinia has been included, to respond to the need for unitary enhancement and promotion of one of the main endogenous resources of the Irpinia territory: the forest heritage.

This, in fact, closely linked to the cultural and landscape identity of the territory, is recognized as a strategic element for the sustainable development of the area itself and constitutes one of the main areas of experimentation on which to measure the capacity for innovation and improvement in methods and tools related to the economic, environmental and tourist-cultural protection and enhancement of the territory.