

Regional place-based policies: the quality of governance of local policies adopted by the regional government of Sardinia.

Alice Scalas

Università degli Studi di Cagliari
Dipartimento di Scienze Economiche e Aziendali
E-mail: alice.scalas@unica.it

Chiara Orrù

Università degli Studi di Cagliari
E-mail: c.orrù49@studenti.unica.it

Stefania Aru

Regione Autonoma della Sardegna
Centro Regionale di Programmazione
E-mail: starn@regione.sardegna.it

Sandro Sanna

Regione Autonoma della Sardegna
Centro Regionale di Programmazione
Università degli Studi di Sassari
Dipartimento di Architettura, design e urbanistica
Email: ssanna@regione.sardegna.it

Alessandro Spano

Università degli Studi di Cagliari
Dipartimento di Scienze Economiche e Aziendali
E-mail: spano@unica.it

Abstract

The integrated territorial development policies launched since the 2014-2019 Regional Development Plan of Sardinia Region promote the involvement of territories in the definition of local development strategies, characterised by the adoption of a place-based approach, by the enhancement of local peculiarities and the identification of a link between economic issues and territorial dynamics within an innovative approach in the implementation of the development strategy for interior areas.

This work intends to support the activity of the regional administration through the elaboration of an evaluation tool of the public policies concerning the governance dimensions in the implementation of participatory and integrated local development projects that analyses the Programme that has just ended and orients the new 2021-2027 Programme towards an optimisation of its strategies, with regard to the dimension of multi-level governance and of the relationship between institutions, organisations and private and public operators. Through the results collected from a survey involving a selected sample of policy implementation actors, we analyse the link between territories and public policies and propose a multidimensional system of analysis of the quality of governance of local development processes. The research methodology adopted, of a qualitative-quantitative type, is reinforced by the training-active and participatory observation work during the design, management, and execution of the survey on the implementation of the Territorial Development Projects. An evaluation proposal for the territorial development projects is constructed through the analysis and articulation of the dimensions identified for the measurement of the quality of governance of public policies. The research conducted highlights some of the critical issues that have arisen in the process of implementing the integrated territorial programming supported by the Region of Sardinia from the 2014-2020 period and focuses on the needs and, in part, on the tools to overcome them. The fundamental issue remains the long-term timeframe for strategy-related transformations and the fact that these timeframes, as well as the needs, change from territory to territory. The approach promoted in Sardinia by the local integrated policies, however, introduces important methodological innovations that, although they can be improved through processes of optimisation, first of all of the administrative capacity of the territories to overcome the issues identified in the implementation phase, to the benefit of the valorisation of the dimensions of efficiency and effectiveness of governance, find the stakeholders agree in appreciating the process and the support to the local development.

Keywords: governance, local development, European policies

1 | The role of the European Structural Funds in the development of non-competitive place-based policy models in the 2014-2020 programming of the Region of Sardinia

The integrated territorial development policies, initiated by the Region of Sardinia (RAS) as part of the implementation of Strategy 5.8 of the Regional Development Programme (in Italian "Programma Regionale di Sviluppo "or PRS"¹ 2014-2019², promote the involvement of territories in the definition and co-planning of local development strategies through the unified programming of regional, national, and European resources³.

These policies, characterized by a place-based approach (Angelini & Bruno, 2016; Barca, 2009), find support in the 2014-2020 ERDF Regional Operational Programme (ROP ERDF) as one of the financial instruments for implementation, the valorization of local specificities, and the identification of a link between economic development and territorial dynamics. The "Programmazione Territoriale" (PT)⁴ approach goes beyond viewing the territory merely as a "resource" and instead recognizes it as a spatialized sphere of social, economic, and cultural relations (Dematteis & Magnaghi, 2018; Magnaghi, 2020). Involving beneficiaries in the construction of local development strategies represents an approach that enhances a «multidisciplinary knowledge of the territory» and its «rules of transformation» in conjunction with «the place consciousness of local communities» (Dematteis & Magnaghi, 2018, p. 15).

The Regional Strategy for Interior Areas (SRAI), implemented in the PT by the RAS⁵, complements the similar National Strategy (SNAI)⁶ with its own adaptation for the development of inland areas. It implements the priorities expressed in the PRS in a non-competitive manner, addressing depopulation, concentration of resources, and identification of priority themes. The prominence of new institutional entities identified in the concurrent Reform of the Local Authorities⁷ ensures equal access opportunities for Unions of Municipalities (or their aggregations) and Mountain Communities, not limited to the areas of strategic interest initially identified in the ROP⁸. This anticipates the European Commission's indications for inclusive cohesion during the 2021-2027 programming period (Aru & Sanna, 2019a). The "Programmazione Territoriale" contributes to the objective of a "Europe closer to the citizens" (European Commission, 2022) by strengthening multi-level governance processes in terms of efficiency and effectiveness, promoting local development actions inspired by the constitutional principles of vertical and horizontal subsidiarity and loyal cooperation (Articles 118, 114 of the Italian Constitution). The PT introduces a methodological innovation characterized by the concentration of financial resources and territorial specialization based on common objectives, aiming to provide an effective response to local issues and integrate funds on a thematic and territorial basis.

To realize their development project, focusing on identified growth drivers, implementing entities are obligated to use resources in accordance with the rules of the relevant funds, particularly those governing the use of the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF Funds). This policy shifts the connection between the identification of territorial areas and the objectives of European Programming in favor of⁹Territorial Development Projects (in Italian "Progetti di Sviluppo Territoriale" or PST), which are expressions of local needs and desires with Community funds acting as a lever for implementation. The "Programmazione Territoriale" is implemented through a combination of administrative-procedural tools and participatory approaches. The planning document representing the territories' development priorities is the PST. From an administrative perspective, each PST is an integral part of a Framework Programme Agreement signed by the relevant parties following a negotiation phase and approved through a Regional Council Resolution. The transfer of funds to the implementing entity is regulated by a subsequent Implementation Agreement, based on the procedural and financial schedules of individual operations. The project idea is developed within these two formal acts, aligning strategy with defined and fundable actions.

The key elements of the entire process are the utilization of participatory techniques for co-designing and the ongoing support provided by the RAS through the Regional Planning Centre (in Italian "Centro Regionale di Programmazione "or CRP"¹⁰). The external territorial governance of the PST lies with the RAS, with the CRP responsible for the Territorial Framework Programme Agreement and involving the relevant departments. The implementation and achievement of objectives are entrusted to the implementing entity, whether it is a Union of Municipalities or a Mountain Community. To demonstrate their technical-administrative capacity in managing the allocated resources, these entities establish an

1 From now on, it will be referred to in the text as its Italian transcription "Programma Regionale di Sviluppo" or "PRS" for short.

2 Introduced by Regional Law no. 11 of 2/08/2006, the PRS of the XV Legislature is approved by the Regional Council with Resolution no. 6/5 of 24/02/2015

3 Deliberation Regional Council no. 9/16 of 10.03.2015 "Guidelines for the implementation of the Governance model for the 2014-2020 Joint Programming".

4 "Programmazione territoriale" is defined as a unified approach to programming resources in support of the local development strategies of the Sardinia Region. From now on, it will be referred to in the text as "Programmazione Territoriale" or "PT" for short.

5 Deliberation G.R. no. 9/22 of 10.03.2015 "Guidelines for the implementation of spatial planning".

6 For more details see (Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale, 2023)

7 Regional Law No 2 of 04.02.2016 "Reorganization of the system of local autonomies in Sardinia".

8 G.R. Resolution No. 19/9 of 27.5.2014

9 From now on, it will be referred to in the text as its Italian transcription "Progetto di sviluppo territoriale" or "PST" for short.

10 From now on, it will be referred to in the text as its Italian transcription "Centro Regionale di programmazione" or "CRP" for short.

internal coordination structure known as "Ufficio Unico di Progetto"¹¹.

This is an ongoing process that is integrated and modified by additional Acts: The Additional Act to the Implementing Agreement for the remodulation of Funds and integration of actions and the Additional Act to the Framework Programme Agreement that introduces corrective measures to update and optimize the original territorial strategy.

2 | A proposal for evaluating the governance of territorial development projects.

The evidence reported originates from a survey on the implementation of the "Progetti di sviluppo territoriale"¹² conducted on a sample of seven out of the twenty-two territories covered by the Regional Strategy for Interior Areas SRAI (Figure 1). These territories were selected based on their representativeness of recurring attributes including the enhancement of territorial uniqueness, activation of autonomous participatory processes, top-down approaches, areas of strategic importance, and involvement of economic operators.

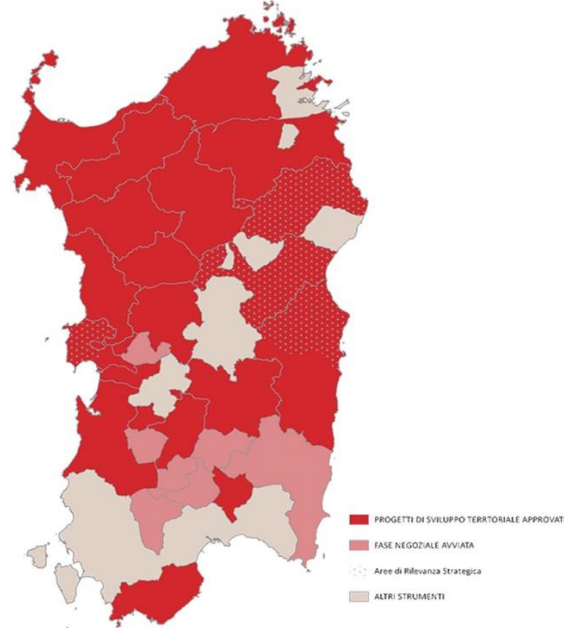


Figure 1 | Map of Territorial Development projects approved by the Regional Council Source: Sardegna Programmazione website.

Starting from the analysis of the signed Framework Program Agreements, the regulatory processes and significant steps that characterize them are highlighted. This analysis aims to reconstruct the planning path of each PST and identify elements of correlation or dissimilarity between the different territories in their approach to co-designing.

The research methodology employed is a qualitative-quantitative approach, implemented through semi-structured interviews directed at key actors of the PT¹³. These stakeholders include territorial referents, RAS-CRP officials, local administrators, and business incubation entity (Figure 2).

11 It is the Italian translation for "Single Project Office." It is the structure responsible for coordinating all interventions of PST. From now on, it will be referred to in the text as its Italian transcription "Ufficio Unico di Progetto".

12 Please see note 9

13 The survey was conducted as part of the activities of the Master's Degree Course on Multilevel Governance at the university of Cagliari in the A.A. 2021-2022

INVOLVED INSTITUTION	INTERVIEW TIMEFRAME	DURATION	INTERVIEW CHANNEL	ROLE OF THE INTERVIEWEES
UNIONE DI COMUNI DEL PARDO E BASSO CAMPIDANO	2023, JANUARY	53 MINUTES	ONLINE TEAMS MEETING	INTERVIEWEE 1: LOCAL ADMINISTRATOR
		15 MINUTES	PHONE INTERVIEW	INTERVIEWEE 2: RESPONSIBLE COORDINATOR OF UFFICIO UNICO DI PROGETTO
		43 MINUTES		INTERVIEWEE 3: PARTNER TECNICO
UNIONE DEI COMUNI VALLE DEL PARDO E DEI TACCHI OGLIASTRA MERIDIONALE	2023, JANUARY	25 MINUTES	ONLINE TEAMS MEETING	INTERVIEWEE 4: RESPONSIBLE COORDINATOR OF UFFICIO UNICO DI PROGETTO
UNIONE DEI COMUNI ALTA GALLURA	2023, JANUARY	60 MINUTES	ONLINE ZOOM MEETING	INTERVIEWEE 5 RESPONSIBLE COORDINATOR OF UFFICIO UNICO DI PROGETTO
UNIONE DEI COMUNI PARTE MONTIS	2023, JANUARY	36 MINUTES	ONLINE TEAMS MEETING	INTERVIEWEE 6 RESPONSIBLE COORDINATOR OF UFFICIO UNICO DI PROGETTO
		70 MINUTI		INTERVIEWEE 7 LOCAL ADMINISTRATOR
UNIONE DEI COMUNI DEL MONT'ALBO	2023, JANUARY	60 MINUTES	ONLINE TEAMS MEETING	INTERVIEWEE 8 COORDINATOR WITH THE FUNCTION OF LIAISON FOR UFFICIO UNICO DI PROGETTO
COMUNITÀ MONTANA NUORESE GENNARGENTU SUPRAMONTE BARBAGIA	2023, JANUARY	60 MINUTES	ONLINE TEAMS MEETING	INTERVIEWEE 9 RESPONSIBLE COORDINATOR OF UFFICIO UNICO DI PROGETTO
UNIONE DI COMUNI COSTA DEL SINIS TERRA DEI GIGANTI	2023, JANUARY	60 MINUTES	ONLINE TEAMS MEETING	INTERVIEWEE 10 RESPONSIBLE COORDINATOR OF UFFICIO UNICO DI PROGETTO
REGIONE AITONOMA DELLA SARDEGNA CENTRO REGIONALE DI PROGRAMMAZIONE	BETWEEN NOVEMBER 2022 AND JANUARY 2023	4 MEETINGS OF ABOUT 15 MINUTES	IN-PERSON MEETING	INTERVIEWEE 11 REGIONAL OFFICIAL
		4 MEETINGS OF ABOUT 15 MINUTES	IN-PERSON MEETING	INTERVIEWEE 12 REGIONAL OFFICIAL
		10 MINUTES	IN-PERSON MEETING	INTERVIEWEE 13 REGIONAL RESPONSIBLE FOR RELATIONS WITH THE TERRITORIES
		10 MINUTES	IN-PERSON MEETING	INTERVIEWEE 14 RESPONSABLE OF GDL

Figure 2 | Description of the interview sample and interview characteristics

To identify integrative elements for the re-engineering of TP interventions for the new 2021-2027 programming period, an evaluation system of TSP implementation for the 2014-2020 cycle has been constructed. This system is based on a combination of:

1. Analytical dimensions of governance derived from relevant literature.
2. Quantitative assessment of implementation, which includes administrative, physical, and financial monitoring of the utilization of ESIF funds in support of PST interventions.
3. Findings from a survey of actors involved in PST implementation.

These three components influence each other in an autopoietic relationship to build an evaluation system that incorporates governance dimensions, related sub-dimensions, and analysis elements identified through interviews. This combination allows for a preliminary assessment that requires further investigation, not only through the development of specific measurement tools (indicators), but also through the adoption of a research approach as a "cognitively open path" (Calandra, 2023).

The conceptual frameworks from the literature on measuring the quality of governance are considered in their general aspects and adapted to the analytical needs. Although originally applied to specific fields such as "policies concerning environmental resources in rural areas on a local scale" (Franceschetti, Da Re, & Secco, 2012), they convey an approach that emphasizes the multidimensionality of governance, incorporating key elements (Bezzi, 2007) such as "effectiveness, sustainability, capacity and responsibility, efficiency, participation, and transparency" (Franceschetti, Da Re, & Secco, 2012:2-3).

<i>GOVERNANCE DIMENSION</i>	<i>DESCRIPTION OF THE SPHERES OF ANALYSIS</i>
EFFECTIVENESS	The links between set goals and achieved results, the ability to activate multilevel processes, the effectiveness of the actions conducted in terms of the changes produced, and the availability of financial resources are investigated during the implementation of Territorial Development Projects (PST)
SUSTAINABILITY OF INTERVENTIONS	Attention is given to measuring the environmental, social, and economic impacts of interventions, as well as investigating the ability of PST to achieve economic sustainability and foster the durability of interventions beyond the support provided by "Programmazione Territoriale Integrata" during the implementation of PST
CAPACITY AND RESPONSIBILITY	Investigations are conducted to explore how to support and/or integrate the skills and professionalism provided by the implementing entities during the realization of PSTs. Additionally, the impact of administrative organization on the outcomes of local development projects is examined.
EFFICIENCY	The administrative capacity of territories, in relation to the tools provided by Regional "Programmazione Territoriale," is investigated during the implementation of the PSTs. Specifically, the work of the Ufficio Unico di Progetto is examined in terms of its characteristics and tools. The ability to allocate resources, the relationship between costs and results, and the timing of the PSTs' implementation are considered
PARTICIPATION	The ability of implementing entities to activate participatory processes, foster stakeholder involvement (local actors and businesses), create and manage territorial networks, and facilitate conflict resolution in decision-making processes during the implementation of PSTs is investigated
TRANSPARENCY	The ability to conduct effective internal and external communication on PST, collect feedback from local stakeholders, and clearly document the entire process during the implementation of the PSTs is investigated

Figure 3 | The dimensions of governance analysis taken from the literature and adapted to the case study.

The proposed evaluation system is part of the ongoing debate on the subject (Martini et al., 2006; Spina & Espa, 2011; Canto & Sperti, 2021) and serves as a tool for analyzing territorial policies by increasing the involvement of stakeholders in decision-making processes. It recognizes the complexity of multi-level processes and the interconnections between institutional and non-institutional actors (EC, 2002) within the context of a trend towards decentralization of state functions along the "state-society" axis (Piattoni, 2015). Lastly, it contributes to the introduction of tools to support public administration actions, considering the link between "legitimacy and administrative effectiveness," which is not only reflected in the implementation of programming but also in the ability to meet "collective needs" (Martini et al., 2006).

3 | The findings of the survey: the suggestions from the key players involved in the implementation of territorial development projects for optimizing the governance of the PSTs.

The 2021-2027 Partnership Agreement highlights the recurring critical issues in Italy, as identified by the European Commission, regarding institutional-administrative capacity. It emphasizes the significant disparity between regions (EC, 2017). The comparison with implementing entities of the PT 2014-2020 reveals certain criticalities that hinder the implementation of the TSPs:

- Lack of administrative capacity in territories, particularly in Unions of Municipalities without their own staff or newly established.

- Prevalence of parochial logic instead of the need to strengthen a supra-municipal territorial strategy with shared benefits.
- Difficulties in ensuring effective participation of territorial actors, especially local enterprises and municipal technicians.
- Inadequate internal communication between political and technical sides, and a lack of activation of territorial promotion processes by implementing entities.

According to those interviewed, the difficulties in implementing the PSTs are primarily linked to administrative capacity. They emphasize the impact of regulatory limitations on staffing in Unions of Municipalities. The “Ufficio Unico di Progetto” primarily consists of technical-administrative staff from local authorities on loan to the Union for a limited number of hours per week, which often does not align with the number and complexity of interventions. Regulations do not allow Unions to have their own establishment plan unless previously provided for. This limitation on recruitment capacity negatively affects the implementation and management of the PSTs.

There is a need to address the ratio of the number of PST interventions to the shortage of human resources, particularly in terms of technical figures with specific skills (project, program, and communication managers) and cross-functional skills (legal experts, territorial animation experts) to support the “Ufficio Unico di Progetto”.

Corrective measures being developed at the regional level¹⁴ demonstrate the RAS's awareness of the critical issues outlined. The implementing entities themselves have a proactive approach to optimizing implementation and provide some suggestions regarding the analysis dimensions of TSP governance.

Some proposals, focusing on general aspects and the concrete functioning of the “Ufficio Unico di Progetto”, include:

Moving away from a punctual intervention logic in favor of a systematization of interventions in promotion and marketing.

Prioritizing a lower number of interventions and conducting feasibility checks in relation to the assets involved during the design process.

Decreasing the percentage of interventions aimed at public works in favor of investments in services and intangible actions (promotion).

Introducing constraints on public administrations that intend to implement the PST solely through the realization of public works.

Involving technicians from offices responsible for implementing the interventions in the planning and definition phases of PST objectives and actions.

Analyzing the implementation of interventions, assessing their impacts, identifying the correlation between objectives and results, and monitoring the progress of the strategy.

Introducing precise and measurable forecasts of results (benchmarks) to be achieved through interventions, quantified through a shared codified system integrated with impact assessment.

Creating supra-municipal offers to enhance the environmental, cultural, and historical heritage of the territories.

Planning financially sustainable interventions.

Supporting territories in feeding monitoring systems, making them more intuitive, and fostering their evolution towards greater standardization and interoperability.

Regarding the composition of the “Ufficio Unico di Progetto”, additional elements have emerged as corollaries to the specific skills that should be present:

Providing the minimum necessary figures (planning, monitoring, reporting experts; experts in calls and tenders), flexibly integrated in each territory with figures calibrated according to the specific characteristics of each STP.

Including cross-functional figures to monitor the actual implementation of interventions in the field and on-site, collecting and analyzing up-to-date numerical data on projects.

Providing administrative support staff (Category C) to avoid overburdening the RUPs (Responsible Units of Procedure) and extending timeframes.

These considerations have already been considered by the RAS, as evidenced by consultations with the partnership and civil society for the definition of the Regional Sustainable Development Strategy (SRSVS) a process closely aligned with

the preparation of the 2021-2027 Programming. They were also considered during the preparation of the Administrative Regeneration Plan (PRigA)¹⁵, which accompanied the preparation of the 2021-2027 ERDF Regional Programme. Within the CRP (Regional Planning Center), reflections have arisen on the most suitable ways to improve the organizational structure to achieve more efficient and effective governance of the PSTs and strengthen the administrative capacity of the territories and the regional structure.

4. | Conclusions

The “Programmazione Territoriale” has introduced methodological and approach innovations in the planning, management, and implementation of local development processes, which find agreement among implementing parties in appreciating the path towards the construction of supra-municipal territorial strategies.

The results of this policy extend beyond the timing of the programming cycle. At the regional level, the challenge of building a strategy goes beyond funding logic and aligns with the programming of funds and the Regional Sustainable Development Strategy, extending until 2030 and, thanks to the Green Deal, until 2050. The challenge of the 2021-2027 Programming will be to implement this approach at a sub-regional scale, at the territorial level, involving administrators for operational and political management, fostering dialogue with local communities, and considering different territorial dynamics than those previously considered.

The survey has demonstrated how the territories under analysis have embarked on a path of change towards the implementation of supra-municipal policies. The collected analysis elements have allowed for a multidimensional assessment of the quality of governance of the PSTs.

In its intentions, Territorial Programming incorporates the indications outlined in the White Paper on European Governance and the Charter of Participation, aiming for higher quality and effectiveness of public action that supports policy implementation and recognizes the complexity of multi-level governance processes.

In the upcoming programming period, the construction of medium- and long-term territorial strategies will depend on optimizing administrative capacity and facilitating processes. The survey highlights the Region's awareness of critical implementation issues, including timing, needs, and the tools required to overcome them.

From the perspective of the territories, there is a positive assessment of the approach introduced by Territorial Programming, which represents a professional challenge for implementing parties and brings significant resources to small territories in the context of an integrated development strategy for inland areas (SRAI).

However, this instrument is not without its challenges. The non-competitive approach, which provides resources for territorial development to all territories, does not always yield positive effects. The starting conditions of the territories vary significantly and impact the outcomes of PST implementation. To support the innovativeness of a participatory and inclusive policy, corrective measures will be necessary, as well as a deeper adaptation of instruments to local specificities, even more so than in the 2014-2020 programming period.

Therefore, the conducted survey has highlighted the willingness of the Region and the Territories to make improvements in an ongoing process of change that cannot and should not be overlooked, in order to promote long-term, sustainable, and enduring territorial development strategies.

Attributions

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